

This electronic material is under
copyright protection and is
provided to a single recipient
for review purposes only.



The Ring
and the Book
Robert Browning

edited by
Thomas J. Collins
& Richard D. Altick

Review Copy

THE RING AND THE BOOK

Review Copy

This page intentionally left blank

Review Copy

THE RING AND THE BOOK

Robert Browning

Edited by
Thomas J. Collins
and
Richard D. Altick

Assistant Editor: Wai Ying Lee



broadview literary texts

Review Copy

©2001 Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher—or in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from Cancopy (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), One Yonge Street, Suite 1900, Toronto, Ontario M5E 1E5—is an infringement of the copyright law.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Browning, Robert, 1812-1889

The ring and the book

(Broadview literary texts)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55111-372-4

1. Franceschini, Guido, conte, 1657-1698 – Poetry. 2. Franceschini, Pompilia, 1680-1698 – Poetry. 3. Rome (Italy) – History – 1420-1798 – Poetry. 4. Murder – Italy – Rome – Poetry. I. Altick, Richard D. (Richard Daniel), 1915- . II. Collins, Thomas J., 1936- . III. Title. IV. Series.

PR4219.A2A4 2000 821'.8 C00-932863-7

Broadview Press Ltd. is an independent, international publishing house, incorporated in 1985.

North America:

P.O. Box 1243, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada K9J 7H5

3576 California Road, Orchard Park, NY 14127

Tel: (705) 743-8990; Fax: (705) 743-8353

E-mail: customerservice@broadviewpress.com

United Kingdom:

Thomas Lyster Ltd,

Unit 9, Ormskirk Industrial Park, Old Boundary Way, Burscough Road

Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 2YW

Tel: (01695) 575112; Fax: (01695) 570120

E-mail: books@tlyster.co.uk

Australia:

St. Clair Press, P.O. Box 287, Rozelle, NSW 2039

Tel: (02) 818-1942; Fax: (02) 418-1923

www.broadviewpress.com

Broadview Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Book Publishing Industry Development Program, Ministry of Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada.

PRINTED IN CANADA

Contents

Introduction	vii
Chronology	xiii
Textual Preface	xvii
<i>THE RING AND THE BOOK</i>	
Book I	3
Book II	59
Book III	116
Book IV	177
Book V	235
Book VI	309
Book VII	382
Book VIII	445
Book IX	512
Book X	571
Book XI	647
Book XII	731
Appendix A: General Notes	765
Appendix B: Initial Responses to the Poem	774
Appendix C: Textual Notes and Commentary	800
Select Bibliography	818

Review Copy

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

In June 1860, Browning purchased an “old yellow book” from a bookstall in Florence. This collection of materials included legal briefs, pamphlets, and letters relating to a case involving a child bride, a disguised priest, a triple murder, four hangings, and the beheading of a nobleman. Browning resolved in October 1864 that he would write the twelve books of the poem that would become *The Ring and the Book* in six months, basing his work on the “pure crude fact[s]” (I 35) of his source, but by July 1865 he had completed only 8,400 lines, about a third of the eventual total. When the poem was finally printed in 1868-69, its reception was warmer than that of any other work of Browning’s published to that time. The *Athenaeum* for March 20, 1869 called it “beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time … the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.”

The title of the poem contains multiple associations. It points to the poem’s source, the old yellow book; to the pattern of the monologues, which is circular; to Browning’s initials; and in the ring, to the memory of his wife Elizabeth. In the first book of the poem, the speaker, usually identified with Browning, addresses the British public and describes how he discovered a book concerning a seventeenth-century Italian murder trial in a Florence bookstall. He explains why its subject attracted him, and how he has since imaginatively recreated every moment of the trial of Count Guido Franceschini, which took place in the courts of Rome in January and February 1698. The speaker portrays himself as a master craftsman who will fashion a poem out of the raw stuff of his old documents.

Introducing the participants in the original case, he offers to bring them back to life through a poetic reproduction of their voices. He continually asserts the factual nature of his rendition, likening himself to a skilled goldsmith who shapes the metal (the facts), made malleable by the addition of an alloy (the poet's own fancy), until with the removal of the alloy the ring stands triumphant as a complete work of art. The speaker suggests that it is through the withdrawal of his personality that the truth emerges through the voices of the characters in the drama. While he insists upon the facts, he also indicates that the truth to be perceived by the reader lies beyond the simple factual level. Browning presents the basic material and its meaning three times over in the opening book and says that he has found Guido guilty as charged; consequently, the reader is not to concern himself or herself with who is right and who is wrong but is to examine the ten monologues with a view to understanding why objective reality appears so different to different eyes.

In 1693 Guido Franceschini, a relatively poor nobleman of inferior rank, married the thirteen-year-old Francesca Pompilia, who had been raised in Rome by a couple named Comparini. When the Comparinis visited Guido's home in Arezzo three years after the marriage, they found that Guido had misrepresented his financial condition at the time of the marriage and, consequently, brought suit against him for the return of Pompilia's dowry. Violante Comparini had revealed to her husband that Pompilia was really the daughter of a prostitute, and that she had claimed her as her own in order to gain an inheritance left to them on condition of their having a child. As a result of their action, Guido became an even more impossible husband than he had been previously. Pompilia attempted to flee many times; she was eventually successful in escaping and taking flight to Rome with the

assistance of a young cleric, Giuseppe Caponsacchi. Guido followed, and Pompilia and her companion were captured about fifteen miles from Rome. According to the documents, Caponsacchi was charged with "adultery," and found guilty of "seduction" and of having "carnal knowledge" of Pompilia. Pompilia was sent during further inquiry to a nunnery for penitent women. But she was pregnant, and shortly thereafter was sent to the house of the Comparinis in Rome. Eight months after her flight from Arezzo, she gave birth to a boy, who was named Gaetano. Shortly after, Guido came with four of his henchmen pretending to bear a message from Caponsacchi, murdered and mutilated the Comparinis, and left Pompilia for dead with twenty-two wounds in her body. She died four days later. Guido was captured, charged with the crime, and tried.

There was no question that Guido had committed the deed; the legal quandary was whether a husband should be allowed to kill his adulterous wife and her accomplices without incurring the ordinary penalty. This reopened the question, which the courts had never considered settled, whether or not Pompilia had committed adultery with Caponsacchi. Thus, the conduct and characters of the Comparinis, Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi were examined in order that the court might decide whether Guido was justified in any way whatsoever in his triple murder. In February 1698 the court decided against Guido and condemned him to be beheaded and his fellow conspirators hanged. But Guido, who held a minor office in the church, appealed to Pope Innocent XII to set aside the judgment. The pope refused the appeal, and Guido and his companions were executed on February 22, 1698. Shortly thereafter, Pompilia was declared innocent, and Gaetano was declared the rightful heir to her property.

Browning took these factual materials, cast over them the light of his own imaginative power, and transmuted them into *The Ring and the Book*. Book I serves as the explanatory introduction. In Book II, "Half-Rome," the speaker is the first of three anonymous commentators upon the crime which Guido has committed. He is an older man who is having difficulty with his wife, and his sympathies are with Guido. The speaker in Book III, "The Other Half-Rome," is a younger man with finer instincts than those of "Half-Rome." He speaks on behalf of Pompilia. The speaker in Book IV, "Tertium Quid," pretends to be neutral, but there is bias beneath his apparent sophistication. He sums up, weighs, and arranges the evidence of the two speakers who have gone before him, and of the whole case. Book V, Guido's first monologue, occurs just a few days after the crime. Guido is speaking to his judges and cleverly defends himself by reviewing his life, eliciting the sympathy of the hearers, and blaming the faithlessness of his wife for his present sorry condition. In Book VI, the young priest (see General Note 7, p. 773) addresses the judges about four days after the murders, while he is still in the throes of grief over the slaughter of Pompilia, his hatred of Guido, and his scorn for the judges. Book VII is "Pompilia": in her deathbed monologue, she attempts, with considerable difficulty, to reconstruct the events which have led to her present situation. She tries to explain her life to herself as well as to her confessor, Fra Celestino. Books VIII and IX present the two lawyers, Dominus Hyacinthus de Arcangelis and Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, the former the defender of Guido, and the latter his prosecutor. These monologues provide some humor, striking a note of relief following the intense monologues of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and preceding the monologue of the pope in Book X. It has been generally assumed that the pope speaks on Browning's

behalf, and this is to some extent true. The judgments rendered by the pope on Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi are similar to those offered by Browning's speaker in Books I and XII of the poem. In the eleventh monologue, Guido is given a second chance to defend himself immediately before his death. He sheds the hypocritical mask worn in Book V and reveals that he has, all the time, been motivated by hatred of his superiors, of the church, and above all of Pompilia. The poem's final book, "The Book and the Ring," reintroduces the speaker, who is closely identified with Browning himself. It concludes with important comments on the nature of art and on the uses of indirection and obliqueness in poetry, and proposes that, although the poet employs the facts, the meaning lies beyond them: "So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts, / Suffice the eye and save the soul beside." In the final few lines the poet celebrates his "Lyric Love," Elizabeth, and her gold ring of verse which links England and Italy:

And save the soul! If this intent save mine,—
If the rough ore be rounded to a ring,
Render all duty which good ring shall do,
And, failing grace, succeed in guardianship,—
Might mine but lie outside thine, Lyric Love,
Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised)
Linking our England to his Italy!

As a working title Browning had used the name of "the collection of law-papers" (*The Old Yellow Book*), but when the poem was in type he suggested to his publishers, Smith, Elder and Company, that it be called *The Franceschini*, perhaps by analogy with Shelley's *The Cenci*. An alternative possibility, *The Book and the Ring*, he rejected as "too pretty-fairy-story-like"; Thackeray, one recalls, had published a fairy story entitled *The*

Rose and the Ring in 1855. But poet and publisher ultimately agreed upon a transposition of the two nouns, and it was as *The Ring and the Book* that the poem was published in four volumes between November 21, 1868 and February 27, 1869.

The annotation in this edition has been carried out on a scale which is necessarily extensive but which seeks at the same time to be as economical as possible in face of the twin challenges of Browning's wide range of curious information and his immense and flexible vocabulary. Without the prior labors of A. K. Cook to draw upon, preparation of the body of notes would have been an even more formidable task than it in fact was. Despite all that has been transported to the present site from Cook's *Commentary*, a great deal of ore remains in that capacious mine. Everything that has been transferred has been freshly verified, although it should be added that Cook's references prove to be remarkably accurate. A number of allusions which he left unglossed have been explained.

We would like to acknowledge our indebtedness to those who responded to helpfully to our numerous queries: Dr. John Ayerst, David Bentley, Donald S. Hair, Stefan Hawlin, David E. Latané, Brenda MacEachern (for her splendid cover suggestion), Mairi C. Rennie, Richard J. Shroyer, E. Warwick Slinn, Herbert F. Tucker, and Mary Louise Young. The English Department staff at the University of Western Ontario (Pat Dibsdale, Teresa MacDonald, Anne McFarland, and Beth McIntosh) has been of great assistance, as always. And Eileen Eckert, our book-maker at Broadview, has been meticulous and exceedingly patient.

*Robert Browning:
A Chronology of Important Events*

1812	May 7	Born at Camberwell, suburb of London.
c.1820–26		At school in nearby Peckham.
1826		Discovers Shelley's poetry through <i>Miscellaneous Poems</i> and <i>Queen Mab</i> .
1828		Briefly attends the newly founded University of London.
1833	March	<i>Pauline</i> printed; found few, if any, buyers and was little noticed.
1834	March–April	Journey to Russia and back.
1835	August	<i>Paracelsus</i> published.
1837	May	<i>Strafford</i> published; performed for five nights by Macready.
1838		First trip to Italy.
1840	March	<i>Sordello</i> published; a critical disaster.
1841	April	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> I: <i>Pippa Passes</i> .
1842	March	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> II: <i>King Victor and King Charles</i> .
	November	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> III: <i>Dramatic Lyrics</i> .
1843	January	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> IV: <i>The Return of the Druses</i> .
	February	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> V: <i>A Blot in the 'Scutcheon</i> ; performed for three nights.

1844	March	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> VI: <i>Colombe's Birthday</i> . Second trip to Italy.
1845	January 10	First letter to Elizabeth Barrett.
	May 20	First visit to Wimpole Street.
	November	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> VII: <i>Dramatic Romances and Lyrics</i> .
1846	April	<i>Bells and Pomegranates</i> VIII: <i>Luria</i> and <i>A Soul's Tragedy</i> .
	September 12	Marriage to Elizabeth Barrett.
	September 19	They leave England for Pisa.
1847	Summer	They settle at Casa Guidi, Florence.
1849		First collected edition of poems.
	March 9	Son, Robert Wiedemann Barrett, born.
1850	April	<i>Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day</i> .
1855	November	<i>Men and Women</i> .
1855-56	Autumn-Winter	Visit to London.
1860	June	Discovers Old Yellow Book in a Florentine market.
1861	June 29	Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies.
1862		Settles at 19 Warwick Crescent, London, his home for most of his remaining years.
1863		Collected edition (the so-called third).
1864	May	<i>Dramatis Personae</i> .
	Autumn	Begins writing <i>The Ring and the Book</i> .
1866		Death of his father.

1868-69	November 21 —February 27	<i>The Ring and the Book</i> published.
1871	August	<i>Balaustion's Adventure.</i>
	December	<i>Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.</i>
1872	June	<i>Fifine at the Fair.</i>
1873	May	<i>Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.</i>
1875	April	<i>Aristophanes' Apology.</i>
	November	<i>The Inn Album.</i>
1876	July	<i>Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper.</i>
1877	October	<i>The Agamemnon of Aeschylus.</i>
1878	May	<i>La Saisiaz</i> and <i>The Two Poets of Croisic.</i>
1879	April	<i>Dramatic Idyls.</i>
1880	June	<i>Dramatic Idyls: Second Series.</i>
1881		F. J. Furnivall founds the Browning Society, a Victorian fan club.
1883	March	<i>Jocoseria.</i>
1884	November	<i>Ferishtah's Fancies.</i>
1887	January	<i>Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day.</i>
1888-89		“Fourth and complete edition” of <i>Poetical Works</i> (the last supervised by Browning).
1889	August 29	Departs for Italy.
	December 12	<i>Asolando</i> published; Browning dies in Venice the same evening.
	December 31	Buried in Westminster Abbey.

Review Copy

This page intentionally left blank

Textual Preface

Copy-text

This edition uses as its basic copy-text the sixteen-volume collected edition of 1888-89, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. Volumes one to eight are dated 1888, and volumes nine to sixteen are dated 1889. Browning revised his poems for it, exercised full editorial control over it, and took considerable pains over what was conceived of as his final text. After the first impression appeared, Browning began correcting typographical errors and making revisions for the second impression that the poet and his publisher thought would soon be needed. Before leaving for Italy in August 1889, he revised the first ten volumes (all poems up to, and including, *The Ring and the Book*), and left a record of the planned emendations for these volumes in a copy of the 1888-89 edition belonging to his friend James Dykes Campbell, which is now in the British Library (cited here as the Dykes Campbell volumes). He also recorded alterations on papers now in the Brown University Library (cited here as the Brown University lists). But Browning did not make corrections for volumes eleven through sixteen before his death on December 12, 1889. The 1889 version of the subsequently published text is, therefore, composed of the revised volumes one to ten, and a reprint of the final six volumes of the collected edition of 1888-89. We agree with the editors of the *Oxford Browning*¹ (as well as with Philip Kelley and William S. Peterson²) that the proper copy-text for Browning is the 1888-89 edition, and that “the reprint

¹ See p. 818.

² See “Browning’s Final Revisions,” *Browning Institute Studies* 1 (1973): 87-118.

of 1889 is not a satisfactory basis for an authoritative edition. It was not read in proof by Browning, it does not incorporate all the corrections he provided, its end-of-line punctuation is unreliable, and it contains some glaring misprints not present in the volumes published in 1888–July 1889” (“Introduction,” xlvi).

Review Copy

THE RING AND THE BOOK

Review Copy

This page intentionally left blank

I

THE RING AND THE BOOK

Do you see this Ring?¹

- 'T is Rome-work, made to match
(By Castellani's² imitative craft)
Etrurian circlets³ found, some happy morn,
5 After a dropping April; found alive
Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots
That roof old tombs at Chiusi:⁴ soft, you see,
Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick,⁵
(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device
10 And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold
As this was,—such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear

¹ Some scholars argue that this image is associated with one particular ring, that worn by Browning's wife. Others believe that it was influenced by Browning's general familiarity with ancient Etruscan jewelry and with Castellani imitations. For a detailed discussion, see Appendix D of the *Oxford Browning* (pp. 326–36).

² a firm of Roman jewelers.

³ Etruscan rings.

⁴ a town in Tuscany, noted for its Etruscan ruins.

⁵ The gold-alloy metaphor which begins here and recurs throughout Book I has been the subject of much discussion. See especially Paul A. Cundiff, "The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor," *PMLA* 63 (1948): 1276–82; the exchange by Cundiff, Robert Langbaum and Donald Smalley, *Victorian Newsletter* 15–17 (Spring 1959–Spring 1960); and George R. Wasserman, "The Meaning of Browning's Ring-Figure," *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 420–26. See also ch. I of Mary Rose Sullivan's *Browning's Voices in "The Ring and the Book."* In "Wordcraft and the Goldsmiths: Browning and the Castellani," *Browning Society Notes* 23 (1996): 54–66, Mairi Calcraft-Rennie explains that the manufacturing process is accurately rendered, and that the type of ring Browning had in mind was not the simple kind that has been previously suggested.

4 THE RING AND THE BOOK

- At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow,—
 To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap:
- 15 Since hammer needs must widen out the round,
 And file emboss it fine with lily-flowers,
 Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.
 That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
 With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
- 20 With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
 Effects a manageable mass, then works:
 But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
 Oh, there's reprimand!¹ Just a spirit
 O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
- 25 And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
 While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
 The rondure brave,² the lilied loveliness,
 Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
 Prime nature with an added artistry—
- 30 No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.

What of it? 'T is a figure, a symbol, say;
 A thing's sign: now for the thing signified.³

- Do you see this square old yellow Book,⁴ I toss
 I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
- 35 By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact
 Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
 And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since?
 Examine it yourselves! I found this book,
 Gave a *lira* for it, eightpence English just,

¹ restoration to original state.

² fine or noble roundness.

³ the meaning of the image.

⁴ See General Note 1 (p. 765).

- 40 (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
Across a Square in Florence, crammed with booths,
Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time,
45 Toward Baccio's marble,¹—ay, the basement-ledge
O' the pedestal where sits and menaces
John of the Black Bands with the upright spear,
'Twixt palace and church,—Riccardi where they lived,
His race, and San Lorenzo where they lie.
50 This book,—precisely on that palace-step
Which, meant for lounging knaves o' the Medici,
Now serves re-venders to display their ware,—
'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
55 Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
Samples of stone, jet, breccia,² porphyry
Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
60 In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised!)
A wreck of tapestry, proudly-purposed web
When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,
Now offered as a mat to save bare feet
(Since carpets constitute a cruel cost)
65 Treading the chill scagliola³ bedward: then
A pile of brown-etched prints, two *crazie*⁴ each,

¹ Baccio Bandinella's statue of Giovanni della Bande Nere ("John of the Black Bands," l. 47), father of Cosimo I of Tuscany.

² a rock composed of angular fragments embedded in a matrix of the same or different nature.

³ floor of inlaid stone.

⁴ 1½ d in the money of Browning's time.

Stopped by a conch¹ a-top from fluttering forth
 —Sowing the Square with works of one and the same
 Master, the imaginative Sienese²

- 70 Great in the scenic backgrounds—(name and fame
 None of you know, nor does he fare the worse:) From these ... Oh, with a Lionard going cheap
 If it should prove, as promised, that Joconde³
 Whereof a copy contents the Louvre!—these
 75 I picked this book from. Five compeers⁴ in flank
 Stood left and right of it as tempting more—
 A dogseared Spicilegium,⁵ the fond tale
 O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,⁶
 Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,
 80 The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,
 Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life,—
 With this, one glance at the lettered back of which,
 And "Stall!" cried I: a *lira* made it mine.

Here it is, this I toss and take again;

- 85 Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript:
 A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
 Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
 And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.
 Give it me back! The thing's restorative
 90 I' the touch and sight.

[———]⁷

¹ sea shell.

² See ll. 369–72 and note.

³ Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (*Mona Lisa*).

⁴ companions.

⁵ anthology.

⁶ *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848), popular novel or its dramatic adaptation (1852), both by Alexandre Dumas *fil.*

⁷ Verse paragraph breaks which occur at the bottom of the page in this text are so indicated. See note (1) p. 802.

That memorable day,
(June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square)
I leaned a little and overlooked my prize
By the low railing round the fountain-source
95 Close to the statue, where a step descends:
While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and rose
Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made place
For marketmen glad to pitch basket down,
Dip a broad melon-leaf that holds the wet,
100 And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read
Presently, though my path grew perilous
Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait
Soon to be flapping, each o'er two black eyes
And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas¹ fine:
105 Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,
Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape,
Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear,—
And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun:
None of them took my eye from off my prize.
110 Still read I on, from written title-page
To written index, on, through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge;²
Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi³ by Felice Church,
115 Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth

¹ festival days.

² respectively, the Palazzo Strozzi, the column in the Piazza Santa Trinità, and the bridge of Santa Trinità.

³ the Brownings' home in Florence, 1847–61. It is across the Arno from the center of Florence, near the Pitti Palace, and has, in recent years, been restored and opened to visitors.

Gathered together, bound up in this book,
 Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest.¹
 120 "Romana Homicidiorum"—nay,
 Better translate—"A Roman murder-case:
 Position² of the entire criminal cause
 Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
 With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay,
 125 Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death
 By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,³
 At Rome on February Twenty Two,
 Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight:
 Wherein it is disputed if, and when,
 130 Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape
 The customary forfeit."

Word for word,
 So ran the title-page: murder, or else
 Legitimate punishment of the other crime,
 135 Accounted murder by mistake,—just that
 And no more, in a Latin cramp enough
 When the law had her eloquence to launch,
 But interfilleted with Italian streaks⁴

¹ Actually, only about a dozen of the 262 pages in the Old Yellow Book are written; all the rest are printed.

² exposition, explanation.

³ Although some commentators stress that Guido belonged to an "inferior" order of nobility, the fact is that in 1693 the Franceschinis were recorded as being of the second grade (of eight), based on the age of the family and the number of offices and dignities its members had held. It had risen two grades since 1658.

⁴ All the legal arguments are in the late church Latin employed in the Roman courts, while the testimony of witnesses is in vernacular Italian. ("Cramp": hard to decipher or understand.)

When testimony stooped to mother-tongue,—

140 That, was this old square yellow book about.

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,

Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)

So, in this book lay absolutely truth,

Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,

145 Primary lawyer-pleadings¹ for, against,
The aforesaid Five; real summed-up circumstance
Adduced in proof of these on either side,
Put forth and printed, as the practice was,
At Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber's type,²

150 And so submitted to the eye o' the Court
Presided over by His Reverence
Rome's Governor and Criminal Judge,—the trial
Itself, to all intents, being then as now
Here in the book and nowise out of it;

155 Seeing, there properly was no judgment-bar,³
No bringing of accuser and accused,
And whoso judged both parties, face to face
Before some court, as we conceive of courts.
There was a Hall of Justice; that came last:

160 For Justice had a chamber by the hall
Where she took evidence first, summed up the same,
Then sent accuser and accused alike,
In person of the advocate of each,
To weigh its worth, thereby arrange, array

¹ For a list of these, see DeVane's *Browning Handbook*, pp. 326–27.

² the imprint of the papal press, found on the printed legal documents in the Old Yellow Book.

³ In conformance with Roman practice, there were no courtroom scenes in which the two sides confronted each other. The legal documents were presented to the court in printed form. See ll. 242–44, 1119–21.

- 165 The battle. 'T was the so-styled Fisc began,¹
 Pleaded (and since he only spoke in print
 The printed voice of him lives now as then)
 The public Prosecutor—"Murder's proved;
 With five ... what we call qualities of bad,²
- 170 Worse, worst, and yet worse still, and still worse yet;
 Crest over crest crowning the cockatrice,³
 That beggar hell's regalia to enrich
 Count Guido Franceschini: punish him!"
 Thus was the paper put before the court
- 175 In the next stage, (no noisy work at all,)
 To study at ease. In due time like reply
 Came from the so-styled Patron of the Poor,⁴
 Official mouthpiece of the five accused
 Too poor to fee a better,—Guido's luck
- 180 Or else his fellows',—which, I hardly know,—
 An outbreak as of wonder at the world,
 A fury-fit of outraged innocence,
 A passion of betrayed simplicity:
 "Punish Count Guido? For what crime, what hint
- 185 O' the colour of a crime, inform us first!

¹ The *Advocatus* of the *Fisc* was the official prosecutor, but Browning, probably confusing Roman procedure with Anglo-Saxon, errs in saying he began the pleading. Actually the defense had the privilege of the first argument. Despite his mistake in this line, Browning correctly orders the sequence of Books VIII and IX, where Arcangeli, leading for the defense, is heard before Bottini, the "Fisc."

² aggravating circumstances, much dwelt upon in Book VIII.

³ a fabulous serpent supposedly hatched from a cock's egg and having the power to kill by a look.

⁴ court-appointed defense counsel. Since lawyers on both sides in a Roman trial were provided by the state as a matter of course, there need be no implication that Guido was too poor to afford one of his own, despite Browning's remark in the following lines.

- Reward him rather! Recognize, we say,
In the deed done, a righteous judgment dealt!
All conscience and all courage,—there's our Count
Charactered in a word; and, what's more strange,
190 He had companionship in privilege,
Found four courageous conscientious friends:
Absolve, applaud all five, as props of law,
Sustainers of society!—perchance
A trifle over-hasty with the hand
195 To hold her tottering ark,¹ had tumbled else;
But that's a splendid fault whereat we wink,
Wishing your cold correctness sparkled so!"
Thus paper second followed paper first,
Thus did the two join issue—nay, the four,
200 Each pleader having an adjunct. "True, he killed
—So to speak—in a certain sort—his wife,
But laudably, since thus it happed!" quoth one:
Whereat, more witness and the case postponed.
"Thus it happed not, since thus he did the deed,
205 And proved himself thereby portentousest²
Of cutthroats and a prodigy of crime,
As the woman that he slaughtered was a saint,
Martyr and miracle!" quoth the other to match:
Again, more witness, and the case postponed.

¹ Because it was being shaken by the oxen on Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah sacrilegiously "put forth his hand to the ark of God [the chest containing the ten commandments] and took hold of it"; whereupon an angry God killed Uzzah (2 Samuel 6.6–7).

² This inflected superlative form of an adjective was common in Victorian times. Browning, it will be seen as the poem progresses, was particularly addicted to it, as he was to heavy alliteration within single lines.

- 210 "A miracle, ay—of lust and impudence;¹
 Hear my new reasons!" interposed the first:
 "—Coupled with more of mine!" pursued his peer.
 "Beside, the precedents, the authorities!"²
 From both at once a cry with an echo, that!
 215 That was a firebrand at each fox's tail³
 Unleashed in a cornfield: soon spread flare enough,
 As hurtled thither and there heaped themselves
 From earth's four corners, all authority
 And precedent for putting wives to death,
 220 Or letting wives live, sinful as they seem.
 How legislated, now, in this respect,
 Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code
 Of Romulus and Rome!⁴ Justinian⁵ speak!
 Nor modern Baldo, Bartolo⁶ be dumb!
 225 The Roman voice was potent, plentiful;
Cornelia de Sicariis hurried to help
Pompeia de Parricidiis;⁷ *Julia de*
 Something-or-other⁸ jostled *Lex* this-and-that;
 King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul:

¹ shamelessness.

² All those cited in the following passage are found in the Old Yellow Book.

³ Judges 15.4–5.

⁴ Solon (c.640–c.559 BC) and Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, included severe punishment for adultery in the legal codes of their respective societies. See Plutarch's *Lives*.

⁵ Byzantine emperor (482–565 AD), legal reformer, whose *Pandects* constituted the enduring basis of Roman law.

⁶ celebrated fourteenth-century Italian jurists.

⁷ legal decisions relating to murders contained in the *Pandects*. See note to VIII 574.

⁸ "Something-or-other" is *Adulterii*.

- 230 That nice decision of Dolabella,¹ eh?
 That pregnant instance of Theodoric,² oh!
 Down to that choice example Aelian³ gives
 (An instance I find much insisted on)
 Of the elephant who, brute-beast though he were,
 235 Yet understood and punished on the spot
 His master's naughty⁴ spouse and faithless friend;
 A true tale which has edified each child,
 Much more shall flourish favoured by our court!
 Pages of proof this way, and that way proof,
 240 And always—once again the case postponed.

- Thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month,
 —Only on paper, pleadings all in print,
 Nor ever was, except i' the brains of men,
 More noise by word of mouth than you hear now—
 245 Till the court cut all short with “Judged, your cause.
 Receive our sentence! Praise God! We pronounce
 Count Guido devilish and damnable:
 His wife Pompilia in thought, word and deed,
 Was perfect pure, he murdered her for that:
 250 As for the Four who helped the One, all Five—
 Why, let employer and hirelings share alike
 In guilt and guilt's reward, the death their due!”

So was the trial at end, do you suppose?
 “Guilty you find him, death you doom him to?

¹ Roman proconsul (c.70–43 BC). For the “nice decision” see VIII 914–49.

² For Theodoric and the “pregnant instance” see VIII 483–87.

³ Claudius Aelianus (late second–early third century AD), author of *Variae Historiae, On the Nature of Animals*.

⁴ sinning.

- 255 Ay, were not Guido, more than needs, a priest,
 Priest and to spare!" —this was a shot reserved;
 I learn this from epistles which begin
 Here where the print ends,—see the pen and ink
 Of the advocate, the ready at a pinch!—
- 260 "My client boasts the clerky privilege,¹
 Has taken minor orders many enough,
 Shows still sufficient chrism upon his pate
 To neutralize a blood-stain: *presbyter,*
Primae tonsurae, subdiaconus,
- 265 *Sacerdos*, so he slips from underneath
 Your power, the temporal, slides inside the robe
 Of mother Church: to her we make appeal
 By the Pope, the Church's head!"

A parlous² plea,

- 270 Put in with noticeable effect, it seems;
 "Since straight," —resumes the zealous orator,³
 Making a friend acquainted with the facts,—
 "Once the word 'clericality' let fall,
 Procedure stopped and freer breath was drawn
 275 By all considerate and responsible Rome."
 Quality⁴ took the decent part, of course;

¹ immunity from civil prosecution on the grounds of being an ecclesiastic. The "minor orders" Guido is said to have taken are not specified in the records; those mentioned in ll. 263–65 have no warrant in the Old Yellow Book and are, as Cook remarks, "a strange jumble" (*Commentary*).

² risky (but cunning).

³ probably Ugolinucci, one of the correspondents of Cencini, the Florentine lawyer (next line) who was interested in the Franceschini case and collected the Old Yellow Book.

⁴ "the superior social section" (l. 927).

Held by the husband, who was noble too:
Or, for the matter of that, a churl would side
With too-refined susceptibility,

- 280 And honour which, tender in the extreme,
Stung to the quick, must roughly right itself
At all risks, not sit still and whine for law
As a Jew would, if you squeezed him to the wall,
Brisk-trotting through the Ghetto. Nay, it seems,
285 Even the Emperor's Envoy¹ had his say
To say on the subject; might not see, unmoved,
Civility² menaced throughout Christendom
By too harsh measure dealt her champion here.
Lastly, what made all safe, the Pope was kind,
290 From his youth up, reluctant to take life,
If mercy might be just and yet show grace;
Much more unlikely then, in extreme age,
To take a life the general sense bade spare.
'T was plain that Guido would go scatheless yet.

- 295 But human promise, oh, how short of shine!
How topple down the piles of hope we rear!
How history proves ... nay, read Herodotus!³
Suddenly starting from a nap, as it were,
A dog-sleep with one shut, one open orb,
300 Cried the Pope's great self,—Innocent by name
And nature too, and eighty-six years old,
Antonio Pignatelli of Naples, Pope

¹ See XII 94 and note.

² the spirit of civilization, civilized standards.

³ The Greek historian (c.484–425 BC) who wrote a number of stories illustrating the fall of the proud, wealthy, and mighty—the vanity of human ambitions.

Who had trod many lands, known many deeds,
 Probed many hearts, beginning with his own,
 305 And now was far in readiness for God,—
 'T was he who first bade leave those souls in peace,
 Those Jansenists, re-nicknamed Molinists,¹
 ('Gainst whom the cry went, like a frowsy² tune,
 Tickling men's ears—the sect for a quarter of an hour
 310 I' the teeth of the world which, clown-like,³ loves to
 chew
 Be it but a straw 'twixt work and whistling-while,
 Taste some vituperation, bite away,
 Whether at marjoram-sprig or garlic-clove,
 Aught it may sport with, spoil,⁴ and then spit forth)
 315 "Leave them alone," bade he, "those Molinists!
 Who may have other light than we perceive,
 Or why is it the whole world hates them thus?"
 Also he peeled off that last scandal-rag
 Of Nepotism;⁵ and so observed the poor
 320 That men would merrily say, "Halt, deaf and blind,
 Who feed on fat things, leave the master's self
 To gather up the fragments of his feast,
 These be the nephews of Pope Innocent!—

¹ The heretical school of theology founded by Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), which denied free will on the ground that divine grace was irresistible. In some respects Jansenism had affinities with Molinism, for which see General Note 4 (p. 770).

² dirty, untidy, musty. Browning may be recalling Byron's "a drowsy frowzy poem, call'd the 'Excursion'" (*Don Juan* 3.94).

³ like a peasant.

⁴ peel (a twig of its coating).

⁵ the papal practice of handing rich plums of ecclesiastical office and privilege to relatives and other favorites. Innocent XII did in fact oppose it.

- His own meal costs but five carlines¹ a day,
 325 Poor-priest's allowance, for he claims no more.”
 —He cried of a sudden, this great good old Pope,
 When they appealed in last resort to him,
 “I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt.
 Though Guido stood forth priest from head to heel,
 330 Instead of, as alleged, a piece of one,—
 And further, were he, from the tonsured scalp
 To the sandaled sole of him, my son and Christ’s,
 Instead of touching us by finger-tip
 As you assert, and pressing up so close
 335 Only to set a blood-smutch on our robe,—
 I and Christ would renounce all right in him.
 Am I not Pope, and presently to die,
 And busied how to render my account,
 And shall I wait a day ere I decide
 340 On doing or not doing justice here?
 Cut off his head to-morrow by this time,
 Hang up his four mates, two on either hand,
 And end one business more!”

So said, so done—

- 345 Rather so writ, for the old Pope bade this,
 I find, with his particular chirograph,²
 His own no such infirm hand, Friday night;
 And next day, February Twenty Two,
 Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight,
 350 —Not at the proper head-and-hanging-place
 On bridge-foot close by Castle Angelo,³

¹ A carlino was worth about 4*d* in Victorian money.

² own handwriting.

³ the Mausoleum of Hadrian, on the right bank of the Tiber.

Where custom somewhat staled the spectacle,¹
 ('T was not so well i' the way of Rome, beside,
 The noble Rome, the Rome of Guido's rank)

355 But at the city's newer gayer end,—
 The cavalcading promenading place
 Beside the gate and opposite the church
 Under the Pincian gardens² green with Spring,
 'Neath the obelisk 'twixt the fountains in the Square,

360 Did Guido and his fellows find their fate,
 All Rome for witness, and—my writer adds—
 Remonstrant in its universal grief,
 Since Guido had the suffrage³ of all Rome.

This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,
 365 The untempered gold, the fact untampered with,
 The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made!
 And what has hitherto come of it? Who preserves
 The memory of this Guido, and his wife
 Pompilia, more than Ademollo's⁴ name,
 370 The etcher of those prints, two *crazie* each,
 Saved by a stone from snowing broad the Square
 With scenic backgrounds? Was this truth of force?⁵
 Able to take its own part as truth should,
 Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so—
 375 Yonder's a fire, into it goes my book,
 As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?

¹ an echo of "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2.240–41).

² east of the Piazza del Popolo, near the Porto del Popolo, Rome's northern gate (l. 357).

³ sympathy, support.

⁴ Luigi Ademollo (1764–1849), painter and engraver.

⁵ did it carry conviction, have power?

- You know the tale already: I may ask,
Rather than think to tell you, more thereof,—
Ask you not merely who were he and she,
380 Husband and wife, what manner of mankind,
But how you hold concerning this and that
Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.
The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now,
The priest,¹ declared the lover of the wife,
385 He who, no question, did elope with her,
For certain bring the tragedy about,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi;—his strange course
I' the matter, was it right or wrong or both?
Then the old couple, slaughtered with the wife
390 By the husband as accomplices in crime,
Those Comparini, Pietro and his spouse,—
What say you to the right or wrong of that,
When, at a known name whispered through the door
Of a lone villa on a Christmas night,
395 It opened that the joyous hearts inside
Might welcome as it were an angel-guest²
Come in Christ's name to knock and enter, sup
And satisfy the loving ones he saved;
And so did welcome devils and their death?
400 I have been silent on that circumstance
Although the couple passed for close of kin
To wife and husband, were by some accounts
Pompilia's very parents: you know best.
Also that infant the great joy was for,
405 That Gaetano, the wife's two-weeks' babe,

¹ See General Note 7 (p. 773).

² "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13.2; see also Revelation 3.20).

The husband's first-born child, his son and heir,
 Whose birth and being turned his night to day—
 Why must the father kill the mother thus
 Because she bore his son and saved himself?

- 410 Well, British Public, ye who like me not,¹
 (God love you!) and will have your proper laugh
 At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first.
 Truth must prevail, the proverb vows; and truth
 —Here is it all i' the book at last, as first
- 415 There it was all i' the heads and hearts of Rome
 Gentle and simple, never to fall nor fade
 Nor be forgotten. Yet, a little while,
 The passage of a century or so,
 Decads thrice five, and here's time paid his tax,
- 420 Oblivion gone home with her harvesting,
 And all left smooth again as scythe could shave.
 Far from beginning with you London folk,
 I took my book to Rome first, tried truth's power
 On likely people. "Have you met such names?
- 425 Is a tradition extant of such facts?
 Your law-courts stand, your records frown a-row:
 What if I rove and rummage?" "—Why, you'll waste
 Your pains and end as wise as you began!"
 Everyone snickered: "names and facts thus old
- 430 Are newer much than Europe news we find
 Down in to-day's *Diario*.² Records, quotha?
 Why, the French burned them,³ what else do the
 French?

¹ See note to ll. 1379–85.

² newspaper.

³ during their occupation of Rome, 1849–70.

- The rap-and-rending¹ nation! And it tells
Against the Church, no doubt,—another gird²
435 At the Temporality,³ your Trial, of course?”
“—Quite otherwise this time,” submitted I;
“Clean for the Church and dead against the world,
The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once.”
“—The rarer and the happier! All the same,
440 Content you with your treasure of a book,
And waive what’s wanting! Take a friend’s advice!
It’s not the custom of the country. Mend
Your ways indeed and we may stretch a point:
Go get you manned by Manning and new-manned
445 By Newman and, mayhap, wise-manned to boot
By Wiseman,⁴ and we’ll see or else we won’t!
Thanks meantime for the story, long and strong,
A pretty piece of narrative enough,
Which scarce ought so to drop out, one would think,
450 From the more curious annals of our kind.
Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,
Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,
(The while you vault it through the loose and large)
Hang to a hint? Or is there book at all,
455 And don’t you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?”

[— — —]

¹ “rap and rend,” common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, meant “to take or get by snatching or stealing.”

² attack.

³ the papal claim to power in secular affairs. This claim, much debated in the years when the poem was being written, was abrogated by the Vatican Council of 1870.

⁴ three members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England; of these, only Wiseman was as yet a cardinal.

Yes and no!

From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot¹ truth, that memorable day,

460 Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold,—
Yes; but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;

465 To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
Thredded and so thrown fast² the facts else free,
As right through ring and ring runs the djereed³
And binds the loose, one bar without a break.

I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,

470 Before attempting smithcraft, on the night
After the day when,—truth thus grasped and
gained,—

The book was shut and done with and laid by
On the cream-coloured massive agate,⁴ broad
'Neath the twin cherubs in the tarnished frame

475 O' the mirror, tall thence to the ceiling-top.
And from the reading, and that slab I leant
My elbow on, the while I read and read,
I turned, to free myself and find the world,
And stepped out on the narrow terrace,⁵ built

480 Over the street and opposite the church,
And paced its lozenge-brickwork sprinkled cool;
Because Felice-church-side stretched, a-glow

¹ the French version of the English “ingot.”

² Both mean “made (twisted) into thread.”

³ wooden javelin used in tilting at a target.

⁴ stone slab (l. 476).

⁵ balcony.

- Through each square window fringed for festival,
Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones
485 Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights—
I know not what particular praise of God,
It always came and went with June. Beneath
I' the street, quick shown by openings of the sky
When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,
490 Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes,¹
The townsmen walked by twos and threes, and talked,
Drinking the blackness in default of air—
A busy human sense beneath my feet:
While in and out the terrace-plants, and round
495 One branch of tall datura,² waxed and waned
The lamp-fly lured there, wanting the white flower.
Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked
A bowshot to the street's end, north³ away
Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
500 By the river, till I felt the Apennine.⁴
And there would lie Arezzo,⁵ the man's town,
The woman's trap and cage and torture-place,
Also the stage where the priest played his part,
A spectacle for angels,⁶—ay, indeed,
505 There lay Arezzo! Farther then I fared,
Feeling my way on through the hot and dense,
Romeward, until I found the wayside inn

¹ “gold snow” is wealth (*Iliad* 2.670).

² plant of the nightshade family.

³ Browning's mistake for “south” (the Roman Road leads southwest from the Casa Guidi).

⁴ sensed (imagined) the Apennine mountain range.

⁵ a Tuscan town 56 miles southeast of Florence and 154 miles north of Rome.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4.9.

- By Castelnuovo's¹ few mean hut-like homes
 Huddled together on the hill-foot bleak,
 510 Bare, broken only by that tree or two
 Against the sudden bloody splendour poured
 Cursewise in day's departure by the sun
 O'er the low house-roof of that squalid inn
 Where they three, for the first time and the last,
 515 Husband and wife and priest, met face to face.
 Whence I went on again, the end was near,
 Step by step, missing none and marking all,
 Till Rome itself, the ghastly goal, I reached.
 Why, all the while,—how could it otherwise?—
 520 The life in me abolished the death of things,
 Deep calling unto deep:² as then and there
 Acted itself over again once more
 The tragic piece. I saw with my own eyes
 In Florence as I trod the terrace, breathed
 525 The beauty and the fearfulness of night,
 How it had run, this round from Rome to Rome—
 Because, you are to know, they lived at Rome,
 Pompilia's parents, as they thought themselves,
 Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best
 530 Part God's way, part the other way than God's,
 To somehow make a shift and scramble through
 The world's mud, careless if it splashed and spoiled,
 Provided they might so hold high, keep clean
 Their child's soul, one soul white enough for three,
 535 And lift it to whatever star should stoop,
 What possible sphere of purer life than theirs
 Should come in aid of whiteness hard to save.

¹ a hamlet fifteen miles from Rome.

² Psalms 42.7.

- I saw the star stoop, that they strained to touch,
 And did touch and depose their treasure on,
- 540 As Guido Franceschini took away
 Pompilia to be his for evermore,
 While they sang "Now let us depart in peace,¹
 Having beheld thy glory, Guido's wife!"
- I saw the star supposed, but fog o' the fen,²
 545 Gilded star-fashion by a glint from hell;
 Having been heaved up, haled on its gross way,
 By hands unguessed before, invisible help
 From a dark brotherhood, and specially
 Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this,
- 550 Cat-clawed the other, called his next of kin
 By Guido the main monster,—cloaked and caped,
 Making as they were priests, to mock God more,—
 Abate Paul, Canon Girolamo.
- These who had rolled the starlike pest³ to Rome
 555 And stationed it to suck up and absorb
 The sweetness of Pompilia, rolled again
 That bloated bubble, with her soul inside,
 Back to Arezzo and a palace there—
 Or say, a fissure in the honest earth
- 560 Whence long ago had curled the vapour first,
 Blown big by nether fires to appal day:
 It touched home, broke, and blasted far and wide.
 I saw the cheated couple find the cheat
 And guess what foul rite they were captured for,—

¹ Simeon's words after he has beheld Jesus according to the promise of the Holy Spirit (Luke 2.29).

² phosphorescence emanating from decaying matter in a swamp, thought to be a carrier of pestilence.

³ pestilence. In later books, especially V, plague imagery will be frequent.

- 565 Too fain to follow over hill and dale
 That child of theirs caught up thus in the cloud
 And carried by the Prince o' the Power of the Air¹
 Whither he would, to wilderness or sea.
 I saw them, in the potency of fear,
- 570 Break somehow through the satyr-family
 (For a grey mother with a monkey-mien,
 Mopping and mowing,² was apparent too,
 As, confident of capture, all took hands
 And danced about the captives in a ring)
- 575 —Saw them break through, breathe safe, at Rome again,
 Saved by the selfish instinct, losing so
 Their loved one left with haters. These I saw,
 In recrudescency of baffled hate,
 Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge
- 580 From body and soul thus left them: all was sure,
 Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,
 The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?
 The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
 Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i' the dust the
- 585 crew,
- 585 As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,³
 Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest
 Bearing away the lady in his arms,
 Saved for a splendid minute and no more.
 For, whom i' the path did that priest come upon,
- 590 He and the poor lost lady borne so brave,
 —Checking the song of praise in me, had else

¹ Satan (Ephesians 2.2).

² making faces, grimacing.

³ the first of many allusions to Caponsacchi as a St. George figure, the valiant rescuer of beleaguered women.

- Swelled to the full for God's will done on earth—
Whom but a dusk misfeatured messenger,
No other than the angel of this life,
595 Whose care is lest men see too much at once.
He made the sign, such God-glimpse must suffice,
Nor prejudice the Prince o' the Power of the Air,
Whose ministration piles us overhead
What we call, first, earth's roof and, last, heaven's floor,
600 Now grate o' the trap, then outlet of the cage:
So took the lady, left the priest alone,
And once more canopied the world with black.
But through the blackness I saw Rome again,
And where a solitary villa¹ stood
605 In a lone garden-quarter: it was eve,
The second of the year, and oh so cold!
Ever and anon there flittered through the air
A snow-flake, and a scanty couch of snow
Crusted the grass-walk and the garden-mould.
610 All was grave, silent, sinister,—when, ha?
Glimmeringly did a pack of were-wolves pad
The snow, those flames were Guido's eyes in front,
And all five found and footed it, the track,
To where a threshold-streak of warmth and light
615 Betrayed the villa-door with life inside,
While an inch outside were those blood-bright eyes,
And black lips wrinkling o'er the flash of teeth,
And tongues that lolled—Oh God that madest man!
They parleyed in their language. Then one whined—
620 That was the policy and master-stroke—
Deep in his throat whispered what seemed a name—
“Open to Caponsacchi!” Guido cried:

¹ See note to II 206–07.

- “Gabriel!” cried Lucifer at Eden-gate.¹
Wide as a heart, opened the door at once,
625 Showing the joyous couple, and their child
The two-weeks’ mother, to the wolves, the wolves
To them. Close eyes! And when the corpses lay
Stark-stretched, and those the wolves, their wolf-work
done,
Were safe-embosomed by the night again,
630 I knew a necessary change in things;
As when the worst watch of the night gives way,
And there comes duly, to take cognizance,
The scrutinizing eye-point of some star—
And who despairs of a new daybreak now?
635 Lo, the first ray protruded on those five!
It reached them, and each felon writhed transfixed.
Awhile they palpitated on the spear
Motionless over Tophet:² stand or fall?
“I say, the spear should fall—should stand, I say!”
640 Cried the world come to judgment, granting grace
Or dealing doom according to world’s wont,
Those world’s-bystanders grouped on Rome’s cross-road
At prick and summons of the primal curse
Which bids man love as well as make a lie.³
645 There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,
Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep
wolves,

¹ That is, Guido’s use of Caponsacchi’s name was analogous to Lucifer’s use of the name of the guardian angel Gabriel to gain admission to Paradise.

² Old Testament site (Jeremiah 7.31–32) of child sacrifice, later developed into a symbol of hell.

³ Revelation 22.15; see also 2 Thessalonians 2.11.

- So that you scarce distinguished fell¹ from fleece;
Till out spoke a great guardian of the fold,
Stood up, put forth his hand that held the crook,
650 And motioned that the arrested point decline:
Horribly off, the wriggling dead-weight reeled,
Rushed to the bottom and lay ruined there.
Though still at the pit's mouth, despite the smoke
O' the burning, tarriers turned again to talk
655 And trim the balance, and detect at least
A touch of wolf in what showed whitest sheep,
A cross of sheep redeeming the whole wolf,—
Vex truth a little longer:—less and less,
Because years came and went, and more and more
660 Brought new lies with them to be loved in turn.
Till all at once the memory of the thing,—
The fact that, wolves or sheep, such creatures were,—
Which hitherto, however men supposed,
Had somehow plain and pillar-like prevailed
665 I' the midst of them, indisputably fact,
Granite, time's tooth should grate against, not graze,—
Why, this proved sandstone, friable,² fast to fly
And give its grain away at wish o' the wind.
Ever and ever more diminutive,
670 Base gone, shaft lost, only entablature,³
Dwindled into no bigger than a book,
Lay of the column; and that little, left
By the roadside 'mid the ordure, shards⁴ and weeds.

¹ hide, skin.

² easily crumbled.

³ the topmost (horizontal) portion of a classic order of architecture, consisting of cornice, frieze, and architrave.

⁴ debris, rubble.

Until I haply, wandering that lone way,
 675 Kicked it up, turned it over, and recognized,
 For all the crumblement, this abacus,¹
 This square old yellow book,—could calculate
 By this the lost proportions of the style.²

This was it from, my fancy with those facts,
 680 I used to tell the tale, turned gay to grave,
 But lacked a listener seldom; such alloy,
 Such substance of me interfused the gold
 Which, wrought into a shapely ring therewith,
 Hammered and filed, fingered and favoured,³ last
 685 Lay ready for the renovating wash
 O' the water. "How much of the tale was true?"
 I disappeared; the book grew all in all;
 The lawyers' pleadings swelled back to their size,—
 Doubled in two, the crease upon them yet,
 690 For more commodity of carriage,⁴ see!—
 And these are letters, veritable sheets
 That brought posthaste the news to Florence, writ
 At Rome the day Count Guido died, we find,
 To stay the craving of a client⁵ there,
 695 Who bound the same and so produced my book.

¹ the square-shaped top slab of a capital in a column.

² column. Browning may well have had in mind the famous feats of the paleontologist Sir Richard Owen, who audaciously deduced the size and form of a flightless New Zealand bird from a single six-inch fragment of bone (1839) and the life habits of an extinct elephant-sized sloth from a single skull (1847). In both cases, subsequent well-publicized discoveries proved him right.

³ ornamented.

⁴ portability.

⁵ Cencini (l. 272 above).

Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse?
 Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?

Well, now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world
 Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
 700 What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
 This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
 That quickened, made the inertness malleable¹
 O' the gold was not mine,—what's your name for this?
 Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
 705 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
 The somehow may be thisow.

I find first

Writ down for very A B C of fact,
 "In the beginning God made heaven and earth;"
 710 From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell
 And speak you out a consequence—that man,
 Man,—as befits the made, the inferior thing,—
 Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
 Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,—
 715 Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
 The good beyond him,—which attempt is growth,—
 Repeats God's process in man's due degree,
 Attaining man's proportionate result,—
 Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.
 720 Inalienable,² the arch-prerogative
 Which turns thought, act—conceives, expresses too!
 No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,
 May so project his surplusage of soul
 In search of body, so add self to self

¹ capable of being delicately hammered into shape.

² God's alone, not to be delegated to man.

- 725 By owning what lay ownerless before,—
 So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms—
 That, although nothing which had never life
 Shall get life from him, be, not having been,
 Yet, something dead may get to live again,
- 730 Something with too much life or not enough,
 Which, either way imperfect, ended once:
 An end whereat man's impulse intervenes,
 Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,
 Completes the incomplete and saves the thing.
- 735 Man's breath were vain to light a virgin wick,—
 Half-burned-out, all but quite-quenched wicks o' the
 lamp
 Stationed for temple-service¹ on this earth,
 These indeed let him breathe on and relume!
 For such man's feat is, in the due degree,
- 740 —Mimic creation, galvanism for life,²
 But still a glory portioned in the scale.
 Why did the mage³ say,—feeling as we are wont
 For truth, and stopping midway short of truth,
 And resting on a lie,—“I raise a ghost”?
- 745 “Because,” he taught adepts, “man makes not man.
 Yet by a special gift, an art of arts,
 More insight and more oversight and much more
 Will to use both of these than boast my mates,
 I can detach from me, commission forth

¹ 1 Samuel 3.3; Exodus 27.20–21 (the lamp in the tabernacle of the Lord).

² stimulation from inertia into activity. In Browning's time, galvanism meant especially the therapeutic use of electrical shock to stir muscular activity.

³ magician (and, in this context, poet).

- 750 Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage
 O'er old unwandered waste ways of the world,
 May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
 Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
 Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein
 755 I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
 Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
 (By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)¹
 What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
 Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust's!"
- 760 Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was not Elisha once?—²
 Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.
 There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
 Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
 And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up
 765 And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
 And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
 Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
 And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm:
 And he returned, walked to and fro the house,
 770 And went up, stretched him on the flesh again,
 And the eyes opened. 'T is a credible feat
 With the right man and way.

Enough of me!

- The Book! I turn its medicinable³ leaves
 775 In London now till, as in Florence erst,
 A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,

¹ a line suggesting an engraving by the eighteenth-century Roman artist Piranese.

² Faust was assisted to the realization of his ambitions by Mephistopheles (Satan); Elisha, in contrast, was aided by God (2 Kings 4.29–35).

³ healing.

And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,
 Letting me have my will again with these
 —How title I the dead alive once more?

- 780 Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine,
 Descended of an ancient house, though poor,
 A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord,
 Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust,
 Fifty years old,¹—having four years ago
- 785 Married Pompilia Comparini, young,
 Good, beautiful, at Rome, where she was born,
 And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived
 Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause,—
 This husband, taking four accomplices,
- 790 Followed this wife to Rome, where she was fled
 From their Arezzo to find peace again,
 In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,
 Aretine also, of still nobler birth,
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi,—caught her there
- 795 Quiet in a villa on a Christmas night,
 With only Pietro and Violante by,
 Both her putative parents; killed the three,
 Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen,
 And, two weeks since, the mother of his babe
- 800 First-born and heir to what the style² was worth
 O' the Guido who determined, dared and did
 This deed just as he purposed point by point.
 Then, bent upon escape, but hotly pressed,

¹ Guido's age is not mentioned in the Old Yellow Book, but another document says he was forty. The same document vouches for the truth of the other articles of Browning's description.

² title.

- And captured with his co-mates that same night,
805 He, brought to trial, stood on this defence—
Injury to his honour caused the act;
And since his wife was false, (as manifest
By flight from home in such companionship,)
Death, punishment deserved of the false wife
810 And faithless parents who abetted her
I' the flight aforesaid, wronged nor God nor man.
“Nor false she, nor yet faithless they,” replied
The accuser; “cloaked and masked this murder glooms;
True was Pompilia, loyal too the pair;
815 Out of the man's own heart a monster curled,
Which—crime coiled with connivancy at crime—
His victim's breast, he tells you, hatched and reared;
Uncoil we and stretch stark the worm of hell!”
A month the trial swayed this way and that
820 Ere judgment settled down on Guido's guilt;
Then was the Pope, that good Twelfth Innocent,
Appealed to: who well weighed what went before,
Affirmed the guilt and gave the guilty doom.

- Let this old woe step on the stage again!
825 Act itself o'er anew for men to judge,
Not by the very sense and sight indeed—
(Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
What mortal ever in entirety saw?)
830 —No dose of purer truth than man digests,
But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
Not strong meat he may get to bear some day—
To-wit, by voices we call evidence,
Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
835 Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away,

Yet helping us to all we seem to hear:
 For how else know we save by worth of word?

- Here are the voices presently shall sound¹
 In due succession. First, the world's outcry
- 840 Around the rush and ripple of any fact
 Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;
 The world's guess, as it crowds the bank o' the pool,
 At what were figure² and substance, by their splash:
 Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
- 845 At depth of deed already out of reach.
 This threefold murder of the day before,—
 Say, Half-Rome's feel after the vanished truth;
 Honest enough, as the way is: all the same,
 Harbouring in the centre of its sense
- 850 A hidden germ of failure, shy but sure,
 To neutralize that honesty and leave
 That feel for truth at fault, as the way is too.
 Some prepossession such as starts amiss,
 By but a hair's breadth at the shoulder-blade,
- 855 The arm o' the feeler, dip he ne'er so bold;
 So leads arm waveringly, lets fall wide
 O' the mark its finger, sent to find and fix
 Truth at the bottom, that deceptive speck.
 With this half-Rome,—the source of swerving, call
- 860 Over-belief in Guido's right and wrong
 Rather than in Pompilia's wrong and right:
 Who shall say how, who shall say why? 'T is there—
 The instinctive theorizing whence a fact

¹ From this point to l. 1329, Browning provides a series of previews of Books II–XI.

² shape.

- Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look.
- 865 Gossip in a public place, a sample-speech.¹
 Some worthy, with his previous hint to find
 A husband's side the safer, and no whit
 Aware he is not Aeacus² the while,—
 How such an one supposes and states fact
- 870 To whosoever of a multitude
 Will listen, and perhaps prolong thereby
 The not-unpleasant flutter at the breast,
 Born of a certain spectacle shut in
 By the church Lorenzo opposite. So, they lounge
- 875 Midway the mouth o' the street, on Corso³ side,
 'Twixt palace Fiano and palace Ruspoli,
 Linger and listen; keeping clear o' the crowd,
 Yet wishful one could lend that crowd one's eyes,
 (So universal is its plague of squint)
- 880 And make hearts beat our time that flutter false:
 —All for the truth's sake, mere truth, nothing else!
 How Half-Rome found for Guido much excuse.

- Next, from Rome's other half, the opposite feel
 For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess,—
- 885 Or if success, by no skill but more luck
 This time, through siding rather with the wife,
 Because a fancy-fit inclined that way,
 Than with the husband. One wears drab, one pink;
 Who wears pink, ask him “Which shall win the race,
- 890 Of coupled runners like as egg and egg?”

¹ two meanings—“illustrative case” and “warning” (compare “example”).

² King of Aegina, whose reputation for justice won him one of the three judgeships in Hades (Horace, *Odes* 2.13.22, 4.8.25).

³ a main Roman street.

- “—Why, if I must choose, he with the pink scarf.”
 Doubtless for some such reason choice fell here.
 A piece of public talk to correspond
 At the next stage of the story; just a day
- 895 Let pass and new day brings the proper change.
 Another sample-speech i’ the market-place
 O’ the Barberini by the Capucins;
 Where the old Triton, at his fountain-sport,
 Bernini’s creature¹ plated to the paps,
- 900 Puffs up steel sleet which breaks to diamond dust,
 A spray of sparkles snorted from his conch,
 High over the caritellas,² out o’ the way
 O’ the motley merchandizing multitude.
 Our murder has been done three days ago,
- 905 The frost is over and gone, the south wind laughs,
 And, to the very tiles of each red roof
 A-smoke i’ the sunshine, Rome lies gold and glad:
 So, listen how, to the other half of Rome,
 Pompilia seemed a saint and martyr both!
- 910 Then, yet another day let come and go,
 With pause prelusive still of novelty,
 Hear a fresh speaker!—neither this nor that
 Half-Rome aforesaid; something bred of both:
 One and one breed the inevitable three.
- 915 Such is the personage harangues you next;
 The elaborated product, *tertium quid*.³
 Rome’s first commotion in subsidence gives

¹ See note to III 118.

² small figures of the Graces.

³ an undefined or indefinite thing distinct from, but somehow related to, two other entities which are known and distinct.

The curd o' the cream, flower o' the wheat, as it were,
And finer sense o' the city. Is this plain?

- 920 You get a reasoned statement of the case,
Eventual verdict of the curious few
Who care to sift a business to the bran
Nor coarsely bolt it like the simpler sort.
Here, after ignorance, instruction speaks;
- 925 Here, clarity of candour, history's soul,
The critical mind, in short: no gossip-guess.
What the superior social section thinks,
In person of some man of quality
Who,—breathing musk from lace-work and brocade,
- 930 His solitaire amid the flow of frill,
Powdered peruke on nose, and bag at back,
And cane dependent from the ruffled wrist,—
Harangues in silvery and selectest phrase
'Neath waxlight in a glorified saloon
- 935 Where mirrors multiply the girandole:¹
Courting the approbation of no mob,
But Eminence This and All-Illustrious That
Who take snuff softly, range in well-bred ring,
Card-table-quitters for observance² sake,
- 940 Around the argument, the rational word—
Still, spite its weight and worth, a sample-speech.
How Quality dissertated on the case.

So much for Rome and rumour; smoke comes first:
Once let smoke rise untroubled, we descry

- 945 Clearlier what tongues of flame may spire and spit
To eye and ear, each with appropriate tinge

¹ branched candlestick.

² politeness.

- According to its food, or pure or foul.
The actors, no mere rumours of the act,
Intervene. First you hear Count Guido's voice,
950 In a small chamber that adjoins the court,
Where Governor and Judges, summoned thence,
Tommati, Venturini and the rest,
Find the accused ripe for declaring truth.
Soft-cushioned sits he; yet shifts seat, shirks touch,
955 As, with a twitchy brow and wincing lip
And cheek that changes to all kinds of white,
He proffers his defence, in tones subdued
Near to mock-mildness now, so mournful seems
The obtuser sense truth fails to satisfy;
- 960 Now, moved, from pathos at the wrong endured,
To passion; for the natural man is roused
At fools who first do wrong then pour the blame
Of their wrong-doing, Satan-like, on Job.¹
Also his tongue at times is hard to curb;
- 965 Incisive, nigh satiric bites the phrase,
Rough-raw, yet somehow claiming privilege
—It is so hard for shrewdness² to admit
Folly means no harm when she calls black white!
—Eruption momentary at the most,
- 970 Modified forthwith by a fall o' the fire,
Sage acquiescence; for the world's the world,
And, what it errs in, Judges rectify:
He feels he has a fist, then folds his arms
Crosswise and makes his mind up to be meek.
- 975 And never once does he detach his eye

¹ Job 2.1–7.

² intelligence.

From those ranged there to slay him or to save,
But does his best man's-service for himself,
Despite,—what twitches brow and makes lip wince,—
His limbs' late taste of what was called the Cord,¹
980 Or Vigil-torture² more facetiously.
Even so; they were wont to tease the truth
Out of loth witness (toying, trifling time)
By torture: 't was a trick, a vice of the age,
Here, there and everywhere, what would you have?
985 Religion used to tell Humanity
She gave him warrant or denied him course.³
And since the course was much to his own mind,
Of pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone
To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls,
990 Nor whisper of a warning stopped the way,
He, in their joint behalf, the burly slave,
Bestirred him, mauled and maimed all recusants,⁴
While, prim in place, Religion overlooked;
And so had done till doomsday, never a sign
995 Nor sound of interference from her mouth,
But that at last the burly slave wiped brow,

¹ The defendant was stripped and tied up, his arms twisted behind his back; he then was hoisted by a rope attached to a pulley and subjected to various additional tortures such as repeated jerks of the rope, weights hung on his feet, and a rod inserted between his feet to stretch his legs apart.

² Although Browning implies that this was another name for the Cord, it actually was a separate procedure. After the defendant was prepared as for the Cord and all hair removed from his body, he was fastened in a sitting position to a three-legged bench slightly raised in the middle. His shoulders were tied to the walls and his legs elevated by a rod between his feet.

³ proposed line of action.

⁴ persons refusing to conform (especially in religious matters).

- Let eye give notice as if soul were there,
 Muttered "T is a vile trick, foolish more than vile,
 Should have been counted sin; I make it so:
 1000 At any rate no more of it for me—
 Nay, for I break the torture-engine thus!"
 Then did Religion start up, stare amain,
 Look round for help and see none, smile and say
 "What, broken is the rack? Well done of thee!
 1005 Did I forget to abrogate its use?
 Be the mistake in common with us both!
 —One more fault our blind age shall answer for,
 Down in my book denounced though it must be
 Somewhere. Henceforth find truth by milder means!"
 1010 Ah but, Religion, did we wait for thee
 To ope the book, that serves to sit upon,
 And pick such place out, we should wait indeed!
 That is all history: and what is not now,
 Was then, defendants found it to their cost.
 1015 How Guido, after being tortured, spoke.

- Also hear Caponsacchi who comes next,
 Man and priest—could you comprehend the coil!—¹
 In days when that was rife which now is rare.
 How, mingling each its multifarious wires,
 1020 Now heaven, now earth, now heaven and earth at once,
 Had plucked at and perplexed their puppet here,
 Played off the young frank personable priest;
 Sworn fast and tonsured plain heaven's celibate,
 And yet earth's clear-accepted servitor,
 1025 A courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames
 By law of love and mandate of the mode.

¹ "the entanglement caused by combining the two roles" (Cook).

- The Church's own, or why parade her seal,¹
Wherefore that chrism² and consecrative work?
Yet verily the world's, or why go badged
1030 A prince of sonneteers and lutanists,
Show colour of each vanity in vogue
Borne with decorum due on blameless breast?
All that is changed now, as he tells the court
How he had played the part excepted at;³
1035 Tells it, moreover, now the second time:
Since, for his cause of scandal, his own share
I' the flight from home and husband of the wife,
He has been censured, punished in a sort
By relegation,—exile, we should say,
1040 To a short distance for a little time,—
Whence he is summoned on a sudden now,
Informed that she, he thought to save, is lost,
And, in a breath, bidden re-tell his tale,
Since the first telling somehow missed effect,
1045 And then advise in the matter. There stands he,
While the same grim black-panelled chamber blinks
As though rubbed shiny with the sins of Rome
Told the same oak for ages—wave-washed wall
Against which sets a sea of wickedness.
1050 There, where you yesterday heard Guido speak,
Speaks Caponsacchi; and there face him too
Tommati, Venturini and the rest
Who, eight months earlier, scarce repressed the smile,
Forewent the wink; waived recognition so
1055 Of peccadillos incident to youth,

¹ insignia.

² consecrated oil for anointment.

³ objected to.

- Especially youth high-born; for youth means love,
 Vows can't change nature, priests are only men,
 And love likes stratagem and subterfuge:
 Which age, that once was youth, should recognize,
 1060 May blame, but needs not press too hard upon.
 Here sit the old Judges then, but with no grace
 Of reverend carriage, magisterial port:
 For why? The accused of eight months since,—the same
 Who cut the conscious figure of a fool,
 1065 Changed countenance, dropped bashful gaze to ground,
 While hesitating for an answer then,—
 Now is grown judge himself, terrifies now
 This, now the other culprit called a judge,
 Whose turn it is to stammer and look strange,
 1070 As he speaks rapidly, angrily, speech that smites:
 And they keep silence, bear blow after blow,
 Because the seeming-solitary man,
 Speaking for God, may have an audience too,
 Invisible, no discreet judge provokes.
 1075 How the priest Caponsacchi said his say.

- Then a soul sighs its lowest and its last
 After the loud ones,—so much breath remains
 Unused by the four-days'-dying; for she lived
 Thus long, miraculously long, 't was thought,
 1080 Just that Pompilia might defend herself.
 How, while the hireling and the alien¹ stoop,
 Comfort, yet question,—since the time is brief,
 And folk, allowably inquisitive,
 Encircle the low pallet where she lies

¹ stranger.

- 1085 In the good house that helps the poor to die,—¹
 Pompilia tells the story of her life.
 For friend and lover,—leech² and man of law
 Do service; busy helpful ministrants
 As varied in their calling as their mind,
- 1090 Temper and age: and yet from all of these,
 About the white bed under the arched roof,
 Is somehow, as it were, evolved a one,—
 Small separate sympathies combined and large,
 Nothings that were, grown something very much:
- 1095 As if the bystanders gave each his straw,
 All he had, though a trifle in itself,
 Which, plaited all together, made a Cross
 Fit to die looking on and praying with,
 Just as well as if ivory or gold.
- 1100 So, to the common kindness she speaks,
 There being scarce more privacy at the last
 For mind than body: but she is used to bear,
 And only unused to the brotherly look.
 How she endeavoured to explain her life.
- 1105 Then, since a Trial ensued, a touch o' the same
 To sober us, flustered with frothy talk,
 And teach our common sense its helplessness.
 For why deal simply with divining-rod,
 Scrape where we fancy secret sources flow,
- 1110 And ignore law, the recognized machine,
 Elaborate display of pipe and wheel
 Framed to unchoke, pump up and pour apace

¹ St. Anna's hospital (III 37). But this is a mistake: Pompilia died at the Comparinis' house.

² physician.

- Truth till a flowery foam shall wash the world?
 The patent truth-extracting process,¹—ha?
 1115 Let us make that grave mystery turn one wheel,
 Give you a single grind of law at least!
 One orator, of two on either side,²
 Shall teach us the puissance³ of the tongue
 —That is, o' the pen which simulated tongue
 1120 On paper and saved all except the sound
 Which never was. Law's speech beside law's thought?
 That were too stunning, too immense an odds:
 That point of vantage law lets nobly pass.
 One lawyer shall admit us to behold
 1125 The manner of the making out a case,
 First fashion of a speech; the chick in egg,
 The masterpiece law's bosom incubates.
 How Don Giacinto of the Arcangeli,⁴
 Called Procurator of the Poor at Rome,
 1130 Now advocate for Guido and his mates,—
 The jolly learned man of middle age,

¹ See note to VIII 14.

² On each side of a Roman lawsuit were two lawyers of equal status: the Procurator (Arcangeli for the defense), who concentrated on facts, and the Advocatus (Spreti for the defense, Bottini for the prosecution), whose specialty was argumentation. Bottini's Procurator colleague, Gambi, is not mentioned.

³ power.

⁴ Browning's spelling of the lawyer's surname varies with the context. In all but two instances in the text, Browning uses the Italian spelling, as here, Arcangeli. At VIII 114 the speaker identifies himself with a form of the Latin version, Archangelus, and at IX 949 Bottinius coins an anglicized epithet, "Archangelic swine." The Latin form, de Archangelis, is employed by Browning on the contents page of volume nine of the 1888–89 *Poetical Works*, the title page of Book VIII of the poem, and in all running titles. We use the Italian, Arcangeli, in these notes.

Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law,
 Mirthful as mighty, yet, as great hearts use,¹
 Despite the name and fame that tempt our flesh,
 1135 Constant to that devotion of the hearth,
 Still captive in those dear domestic ties!—
 How he,—having a cause to triumph with,
 All kind of interests to keep intact,
 More than one efficacious² personage
 1140 To tranquillize, conciliate and secure,
 And above all, public anxiety
 To quiet, show its Guido in good hands,—
 Also, as if such burdens were too light,
 A certain family-feast to claim his care,
 1145 The birthday-banquet for the only son—
 Paternity at smiling strife with law—
 How he brings both to buckle in one bond;
 And, thick at throat, with waterish under-eye,
 Turns to his task and settles in his seat
 1150 And puts his utmost means in practice now:
 Wheezes out law-phrase, whiffles Latin forth,
 And, just as though roast lamb would never be,
 Makes logic levigate³ the big crime small:
 Rubs palm on palm, rakes foot with itchy foot,
 1155 Conceives and inchoates⁴ the argument,
 Sprinkling each flower appropriate to the time,
 —Ovidian quip or Ciceronian crank,⁵
 A-bubble in the larynx while he laughs,

¹ are accustomed.

² influential.

³ reduce to powder.

⁴ develops.

⁵ fantastic figure of speech. Browning may well have been recalling Milton's "Quips, and cranks, and wanton wiles" (*L'Allegro*).

As he had fritters deep down frying there.

- 1160 How he turns, twists, and tries the oily thing
Shall be—first speech for Guido 'gainst the Fisc.

Then with a skip as it were from heel to head,

Leaving yourselves fill up the middle bulk

O' the Trial, reconstruct its shape august,

- 1165 From such exordium¹ clap we to the close;
Give you, if we dare wing to such a height,
The absolute glory in some full-grown speech
On the other side, some finished butterfly,
Some breathing diamond-flake with leaf-gold fans,

- 1170 That takes the air, no trace of worm it was,
Or cabbage-bed it had production from.

Giovambattista o' the Bottini, Fisc,

Pompilia's patron by the chance of the hour,
To-morrow her persecutor,²—composite, he,

- 1175 As becomes who must meet such various calls—
Odds of age joined in him with ends of youth.
A man of ready smile and facile tear,
Improvised hopes, despairs at nod and beck,
And language—ah, the gift of eloquence!

- 1180 Language that goes, goes, easy as a glove,
O'er good and evil, smoothens both to one.
Rashness helps caution with him, fires the straw,
In free enthusiastic careless fit,
On the first proper pinnacle of rock

- 1185 Which offers, as reward for all that zeal,
To lure some bark to founder and bring gain:

¹ introduction.

² Browning's invention. See XII 707–17 and note.

While calm sits Caution, rapt with heavenward eye,
A true confessor's gaze, amid the glare
Beaconing to the breaker, death and hell.

1190 "Well done, thou good and faithful!"¹ she approves:
"Hadst thou let slip a faggot to the beach,

The crew might surely spy thy precipice
And save their boat; the simple and the slow
Might so, forsooth, forestall the wrecker's fee!

1195 Let the next crew be wise and hail in time!"
Just so compounded is the outside man,
Blue juvenile pure eye and pippin cheek,
And brow all prematurely soiled and seamed
With sudden age, bright devastated hair.

1200 Ah, but you miss the very tones o' the voice,
The scrannel² pipe that screams in heights of head,
As, in his modest studio,³ all alone,
The tall wight stands a-tilt, strives and strains,
Both eyes shut, like the cockerel that would crow,⁴

1205 Tries to his own self amorously o'er
What never will be uttered else than so—
Since to the four walls, Forum and Mars' Hill,⁵
Speaks out the poesy which, penned, turns prose.
Clavecinist⁶ debarred his instrument,

1210 He yet thrums—shirking neither turn nor trill,
With desperate finger on dumb table-edge—

¹ Matthew 25.21.

² strident, shrill (Milton, *Lycidas* 124).

³ study.

⁴ such as Chanticleer in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

⁵ the Roman and Athenian assembly places, respectively, where orators could have full scope for their talents.

⁶ performer on the clavecin, forerunner of the piano.

The sovereign rondo, shall conclude his *Suite*,
 Charm an imaginary audience there,
 From old Corelli to young Haendel, both
 1215 I' the flesh at Rome,¹ ere he perforce go print
 The cold black score, mere music for the mind—
 The last speech against Guido and his gang,
 With special end to prove Pompilia pure.
 How the Fisc vindicates Pompilia's fame.

- 1220 Then comes the all but end, the ultimate
 Judgment save yours. Pope Innocent the Twelfth,
 Simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute,
 With prudence, probity and—what beside
 From the other world he feels impress at times,
 1225 Having attained to fourscore years and six,—
 How, when the court found Guido and the rest
 Guilty, but law supplied a subterfuge
 And passed the final sentence to the Pope,
 He, bringing his intelligence to bear
 1230 This last time on what ball behoves him drop
 In the urn, or white or black, does drop a black,
 Send five souls more to just precede his own,
 Stand him in stead and witness, if need were,
 How he is wont to do God's work on earth.
 1235 The manner of his sitting out the dim
 Droop of a sombre February day
 In the plain closet where he does such work,
 With, from all Peter's treasury, one stool,
 One table and one lathen² crucifix.

¹ Handel actually did not arrive in Rome until the autumn of 1706.

² made of "latten," an alloy containing brass or bronze.

- 1240 There sits the Pope, his thoughts for company;
Grave but not sad,—nay, something like a cheer
Leaves the lips free to be benevolent,
Which, all day long, did duty firm and fast.
A cherishing there is of foot and knee,
1245 A chafing loose-skinned large-veined hand with hand,—
What steward but knows when stewardship earns its
wage,
May levy praise, anticipate the lord?
He reads, notes, lays the papers down at last,
Muses, then takes a turn about the room;
1250 Unclasps a huge tome¹ in an antique guise,
Primitive print and tongue half obsolete,
That stands him in diurnal² stead; opes page,
Finds place where falls the passage to be conned
According to an order long in use:
1255 And, as he comes upon the evening's chance,³
Starts somewhat, solemnizes straight his smile,
Then reads aloud that portion first to last,
And at the end lets flow his own thoughts forth
Likewise aloud, for respite and relief,
1260 Till by the dreary relics of the west
Wan through the half-moon window, all his light,
He bows the head while the lips move in prayer,
Writes some three brief lines, signs and seals the same,
Tinkles a hand-bell, bids the obsequious Sir
1265 Who puts foot presently o' the closet-sill
He watched outside of, bear as superscribed

¹ See the opening lines of Book X.

² daily.

³ See note to V 402.

That mandate to the Governor forthwith:
 Then heaves abroad his cares in one good sigh,
 Traverses corridor with no arm's help,
 1270 And so to sup as a clear conscience should.
 The manner of the judgment of the Pope.

Then must speak Guido yet a second time,
 Satan's old saw¹ being apt here—skin for skin,
 All a man hath that will he give for life.
 1275 While life was graspable and gainable,
 And bird-like buzzed her wings round Guido's brow,
 Not much truth stiffened out the web of words
 He wove to catch her: when away she flew
 And death came, death's breath rivelled² up the lies,
 1280 Left bare the metal thread, the fibre fine
 Of truth, i' the spinning: the true words shone last.
 How Guido, to another purpose quite,
 Speaks and despairs, the last night of his life,
 In that New Prison by Castle Angelo
 1285 At the bridge-foot: the same man, another voice.
 On a stone bench in a close fetid cell,
 Where the hot vapour of an agony,
 Struck into drops on the cold wall, runs down—
 Horrible worms made out of sweat and tears—
 1290 There crouch, well nigh to the knees in dungeon-straw,
 Lit by the sole lamp suffered for their sake,
 Two awe-struck figures, this a Cardinal,
 That an Abate, both of old styled friends
 O' the thing part man part monster in the midst,

¹ Job 2.4.

² shrivelled.

- 1295 So changed is Franceschini's gentle blood.
The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,
That pried and tried and trod so gingerly,
Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth joined;
Then you know how the bristling fury foams.
- 1300 They listen, this wrapped in his folds of red,
While his feet fumble for the filth below;
The other, as beseems a stouter heart,
Working his best with beads and cross to ban
The enemy that comes in like a flood
- 1305 Spite of the standard¹ set up, verily
And in no trope² at all, against him there:
For at the prison-gate, just a few steps
Outside, already, in the doubtful dawn,
Thither, from this side and from that, slow sweep
- 1310 And settle down in silence solidly,
Crow-wise, the frightful Brotherhood of Death.³
Black-hatted and black-hooded huddle they,
Black rosaries a-dangling from each waist;
So take they their grim station at the door,
- 1315 Torches lit, skull-and-cross-bones-banner spread,
And that gigantic Christ with open arms,
Grounded. Nor lacks there aught but that the group
Break forth, intone the lamentable psalm,
"Out of the deeps, Lord, have I cried to thee!"—⁴
- 1320 When inside, from the true profound, a sign
Shall bear intelligence that the foe is foiled,

¹ crucifix.

² figure of speech.

³ See XI 2415–16.

⁴ Psalms 130.1.

Count Guido Franceschini has confessed,
And is absolved and reconciled with God.

Then they, intoning, may begin their march,

1325 Make by the longest way for the People's Square,
Carry the criminal to his crime's award:
A mob to cleave, a scaffolding to reach,
Two gallows and Mannaia¹ crowning all.
How Guido made defence a second time.

- 1330 Finally, even as thus by step and step
I led you from the level of to-day
Up to the summit of so long ago,
Here, whence I point you the wide prospect round—²
Let me, by like steps, slope you back to smooth,
1335 Land you on mother-earth, no whit the worse,
To feed o' the fat o' the furrow: free to dwell,
Taste our time's better things profusely spread
For all who love the level, corn and wine,
Much cattle and the many-folded fleece.³
- 1340 Shall not my friends go feast again on sward,
Though cognizant of country in the clouds
Higher than wistful eagle's horny eye⁴
Ever unclosed for, 'mid ancestral crags,
When morning broke and Spring was back once more,
- 1345 And he died, heaven, save by his heart, unreached?

¹ guillotine.

² the "lay of the land"—the Franceschini story "of so long ago."

³ perhaps a reference to the easier kinds of Victorian poetry, whose subject was familiar experience in a placid everyday setting, such as Tennyson's domestic idylls.

⁴ a suggestion of Tennyson's "The Eagle," who "clasps the crag with crooked hands: / Close to the sun in lonely lands."

Yet heaven my fancy lifts to, ladder-like,—
As Jack reached, holpen of his beanstalk-rungs!

- A novel country: I might make it mine
By choosing which one aspect of the year
1350 Suited mood best, and putting solely that
On panel somewhere in the House of Fame,¹
Landscaping² what I saved,³ not what I saw:
—Might fix you, whether frost in goblin-time
Started the moon with his abrupt bright laugh,
1355 Or, August's hair afloat in filmy fire,
She fell, arms wide, face foremost on the world,
Swooned there and so singed out the strength of things.
Thus were abolished Spring and Autumn both,
The land dwarfed to one likeness of the land,
1360 Life cramped corpse-fashion. Rather learn and love
Each facet-flash of the revolving year!—
Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves,
1365 This man's act, changeable because alive!
Action now shrouds, now shows the informing thought;
Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
1370 Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
Shifted a hair's-breadth shoots you dark for bright,
Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so

¹ Chaucer's *House of Fame* was possibly suggested to Browning by the preceding image of the eagle.

² portraying.

³ selected.

Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.

Once set such orbs,—white styled, black stigmatized,—

1375 A-rolling, see them once on the other side¹

Your good men and your bad men every one,

From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux,²

Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names.

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,

1380 (God love you!)—whom I yet have laboured for,

Perchance more careful whoso runs may read

Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran,—³

Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise

Than late when he who praised and read and wrote

1385 Was apt to find himself the self-same me,—⁴

¹ The device that is the basis of this image has been identified as an “electric egg,” an instrument used to show the effect of an electric discharge in a glass vessel partially exhausted of air.” The effect of passing a charge across a gap in a partial vacuum “consisted of a bright, reddish-purple glow, spreading out from the points of the rods, forming dark and light striations as the glass ‘globe’ is more and more exhausted.” See John Killham, in Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *The Major Victorian Poets* (London, 1969): 167, 174–75.

² instigator of the Gunpowder Plot against James I and Parliament in 1605. See note to XI 652.

³ “that he may run that readeth it” (*Habakkuk* 2.2).

⁴ a passage expressing Browning’s rueful awareness of his lack of fame as a poet during his career thus far, when, as he says with some exaggeration in l. 1385, he had an audience of one—himself. At the very moment he was writing these lines, however (the autumn of 1864), the tide was turning in his favor. His two-volume collected works, published in mid-1863, was selling well enough to require a reprint within two years, and, more important, his volume of new poems, *Dramatis Personae*, published on May 28, had been so well received that a second edition was called for before the end of the year. Such success, though modest enough when compared with Tennyson’s concurrent

Such labour had such issue, so I wrought
 This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,
 And so, by one spirit, take away its trace
 Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring.

1390 A ring without a posy,¹ and that ring mine?

O lyric Love,² half angel and half bird
 And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
 Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
 Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
 1395 And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
 Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—³
 When the first summons from the darkling earth
 Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
 And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
 1400 To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
 This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
 Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!
 Never may I commence my song, my due
 To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
 1405 Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
 That still, despite the distance and the dark,

popular and critical acclaim, was new in Browning's experience. See Appendix B (p. 774) for examples of the contemporary reception of *The Ring and the Book*.

¹ inscription, motto.

² The following "invocation to the muse" is addressed to the memory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, although there are also faint references to Christ (l. 1400) and the Madonna (l. 1402).

³ one of a number of references in Browning's poetry to the "red-ripe heart" of the pomegranate—a rabbinical-patristic symbol of special personal meaning to him and his wife (see Exodus 28.33–34).

What was, again may be; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile:

- 1410 —Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
1415 Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!

HALF-ROME

WHAT, you Sir, come too? (Just the man I'd meet.)
Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd:
This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze:
I'll tell you like a book and save your shins.

- 5 Fie, what a roaring day we've had! Whose fault?
Lorenzo in Lucina,—here's a church
To hold a crowd at need, accommodate
All comers from the Corso! If this crush
Make not its priests ashamed of what they show
- 10 For temple-room, don't prick them to draw purse
And down with bricks and mortar, eke us out
The beggarly transept with its bit of apse
Into a decent space for Christian ease,
Why, to-day's lucky pearl is cast to swine.¹
- 15 Listen and estimate the luck they've had!
(The right man, and I hold him.)

Sir, do you see,

- They laid both bodies in the church, this morn
The first thing, on the chancel two steps up,
- 20 Behind the little marble balustrade;
Disposed them, Pietro the old murdered fool
To the right of the altar, and his wretched wife
On the other side. In trying to count stabs,
People supposed Violante showed the most,
- 25 Till somebody explained us that mistake;

The time is near dusk of the day after the murders, which took place on January 2, 1698. Preview: I 839–82.

¹ Matthew 7.6.

His wounds had been dealt out indifferent where,
 But she took all her stabbings in the face,
 Since punished thus solely for honour's sake,
Honoris causa,¹ that's the proper term.

- 30 A delicacy² there is, our gallants hold,
 When you avenge your honour and only then,
 That you disfigure the subject, fray³ the face,
 Not just take life and end, in clownish guise.
 It was Violante gave the first offence,
- 35 Got therefore the conspicuous punishment:
 While Pietro, who helped merely, his mere death
 Answered the purpose, so his face went free.
 We fancied even, free as you please, that face
 Showed itself still intolerably wronged;
- 40 Was wrinkled over with resentment yet,
 Nor calm at all, as murdered faces use,
 Once the worst ended: an indignant air
 O' the head there was—'t is said the body turned
 Round and away, rolled from Violante's side
- 45 Where they had laid it loving-husband-like.
 If so, if corpses can be sensitive,
 Why did not he roll right down altar-step,
 Roll on through nave, roll fairly out of church,
 Deprive Lorenzo of the spectacle,
- 50 Pay back thus the succession of affronts
 Whereto this church had served as theatre?
 For see: at that same altar where he lies,
 To that same inch of step, was brought the babe
 For blessing after baptism, and there styled

¹ a case of (defending one's) honor.

² delicate question, point of refinement.

³ cut into strips.

- 55 Pompilia, and a string of names beside,¹
 By his bad wife, some seventeen years ago,
 Who purchased her simply to palm on him,
 Flatter his dotage and defraud the heirs.
 Wait awhile! Also to this very step
- 60 Did this Violante, twelve years afterward,
 Bring, the mock-mother, that child-cheat full-grown,
 Pompilia, in pursuance of her plot,
 And there brave God and man a second time
 By linking a new victim to the lie.
- 65 There, having made a match unknown to him,
 She, still unknown to Pietro, tied the knot
 Which nothing cuts except this kind of knife;
 Yes, made her daughter, as the girl was held,
 Marry a man, and honest man beside,
- 70 And man of birth to boot,—clandestinely²
 Because of this, because of that, because
 O' the devil's will to work his worst for once,—
 Confident she could top her part³ at need
 And, when her husband must be told in turn,
- 75 Ply the wife's trade, play off the sex's trick
 And, alternating worry with quiet qualms,
 Bravado with submissiveness, prettily fool
 Her Pietro into patience: so it proved.
 Ay, 't is four years since man and wife they grew,
- 80 This Guido Franceschini and this same
 Pompilia, foolishly thought, falsely declared
 A Comparini and the couple's child:

¹ For these, see VII 6–7.

² There is no evidence for this charge, except for statements that Pietro withheld his consent. The marriage was carried out in due form.

³ play her part to the hilt, or to perfection.

Just at this altar where, beneath the piece
 Of Master Guido Reni,¹ Christ on cross,
 85 Second to nought observable in Rome,
 That couple lie now, murdered yestereve.
 Even the blind can see a providence here.

From dawn till now that it is growing dusk
 A multitude has flocked and filled the church,
 90 Coming and going, coming back again,
 Till to count crazed one. Rome was at the show.
 People climbed up the columns, fought for spikes
 O' the chapel-rail to perch themselves upon,
 Jumped over and so broke the wooden work
 95 Painted like porphyry to deceive the eye;
 Serve the priests right! The organ-loft was crammed,
 Women were fainting, no few fights ensued,
 In short, it was a show repaid your pains:
 For, though their room was scant undoubtedly,
 100 Yet they did manage matters, to be just,
 A little at this Lorenzo. Body o' me!
 I saw a body exposed once ... never mind!
 Enough that here the bodies had their due.
 No stinginess in wax, a row all round,
 105 And one big taper at each head and foot.

So, people pushed their way, and took their turn,
 Saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave place
 To pressure from behind, since all the world
 Knew the old pair, could talk the tragedy
 110 Over from first to last: Pompilia too,
 Those who had known her—what 't was worth to them!

¹ painter (1575–1642).

Guido's acquaintance was in less request;
 The Count had lounged somewhat too long in Rome,
 Made himself cheap; with him were hand and glove
 115 Barbers and blear-eyed, as the ancient sings.¹
 Also he is alive and like to be:
 Had he considerately died,—aha!
 I jostled Luca Cini on his staff,
 Mute in the midst, the whole man one amaze,
 120 Staring amain and crossing brow and breast.
 “How now?” asked I. “T is seventy years,” quoth he,
 “Since I first saw, holding my father’s hand,
 Bodies set forth: a many have I seen,
 Yet all was poor to this I live and see.
 125 Here the world’s wickedness seals up the sum:
 What with Molinos’ doctrine and this deed,
 Antichrist² surely comes and doomsday’s near.
 May I depart in peace, I have seen my see.”
 “Depart then,” I advised, “nor block the road
 130 For youngsters still behindhand with such sights!”
 “Why no,” rejoins the venerable sire,
 “I know it’s horrid, hideous past belief,
 Burdensome far beyond what eye can bear;
 But they do promise, when Pompilia dies
 135 I’ the course o’ the day,—and she can’t outlive night,—
 They’ll bring her body also to expose
 Beside the parents, one, two, three a-breast;
 That were indeed a sight, which might I see,
 I trust I should not last to see the like!”

¹ “a tale well known to every blear-eyed man and barber” (Horace, *Satires* 1.7.3).

² the ultimate evil—the opponent of Christ and denier of his teachings, whose coming is prophesied in Scripture.

- 140 Whereat I bade the senior spare his shanks,
 Since doctors give her till to-night to live,
 And tell us how the butchery happened. "Ah,
 But you can't know!" sighs he, "I'll not despair:
 Beside I'm useful at explaining things—
- 145 As, how the dagger laid there at the feet,
 Caused the peculiar cuts; I mind its make,
 Triangular i' the blade, a Genoese,
 Armed with those little hook-teeth on the edge
 To open in the flesh nor shut again:
- 150 I like to teach a novice: I shall stay!"
 And stay he did, and stay be sure he will.

- A personage came by the private door
 At noon to have his look: I name no names:
 Well then, His Eminence the Cardinal,¹
 155 Whose servitor in honourable sort
 Guido was once, the same who made the match,
 (Will you have the truth?) whereof we see effect.
 No sooner whisper ran he was arrived
 Than up pops Curate Carlo, a brisk lad,
 160 Who never lets a good occasion slip,
 And volunteers improving the event.
 We looked he'd give the history's self some help,
 Treat us to how the wife's confession went
 (This morning she confessed her crime,² we know)
 165 And, may-be, throw in something of the Priest—

¹ Cardinal Lauria, Paolo's patron. "Guido" (l. 156) is Browning's error for "Paolo."

² This was a groundless rumor. She did indeed make a deathbed confession to Fra Celestino, but in it she declared herself innocent of any wrongdoing.

If he's not ordered back, punished anew,
 The gallant, Caponsacchi, Lucifer
 I' the garden where Pompilia, Eve-like, lured
 Her Adam Guido to his fault and fall.

- 170 Think you we got a sprig of speech akin
 To this from Carlo, with the Cardinal there?
 Too wary he was, too widely awake, I trow.
 He did the murder in a dozen words;
 Then said that all such outrages crop forth
 175 I' the course of nature when Molinos' tares
 Are sown for wheat,¹ flourish and choke the Church:
 So slid on to the abominable sect²
 And the philosophic sin³—we've heard all that,
 And the Cardinal⁴ too, (who book-made on the same)
 180 But, for the murder, left it where he found.
 Oh but he's quick, the Curate, minds his game!
 And, after all, we have the main o' the fact:
 Case could not well be simpler,—mapped, as it were,
 We follow the murder's maze from source to sea,
 185 By the red line, past mistake: one sees indeed
 Not only how all was and must have been,
 But cannot other than be to the end of time.
 Turn out here by the Ruspoli!⁵ Do you hold
 Guido was so prodigiously to blame?
 190 A certain cousin of yours has told you so?

¹ Matthew 13.24–30, 36–43.

² the Molinists.

³ See General Note 4 (p. 770) for an explanation of the “philosophic sin” of Molinism.

⁴ The context suggests that this was Lauria, but Cook identifies him as Cardinal d'Estrées, French ambassador at Rome, who, according to current gossip, had been responsible for Molinos's arrest in 1685.

⁵ a palace (I 876).

Exactly! Here's a friend shall set you right,
Let him but have the handsel¹ of your ear.

These wretched Comparini were once gay
And galliard, of the modest middle class:

- 195 Born in this quarter seventy years ago
And married young, they lived the accustomed life,
Citizens as they were of good repute:
And, childless, naturally took their ease
With only their two selves to care about
- 200 And use the wealth for: wealthy is the word,
Since Pietro was possessed of house and land—
And specially one house, when good days smiled,
In Via Vittoria, the aspectable² street
Where he lived mainly; but another house
- 205 Of less pretension did he buy betimes,
The villa, meant for jaunts and jollity,
I' the Pauline district,³ to be private there—
Just what puts murder in an enemy's head.
Moreover,—here's the worm i' the core, the germ
- 210 O' the rottenness and ruin which arrived,—
He owned some usufruct,⁴ had moneys' use
Lifelong, but to determine⁵ with his life
In heirs' default: so, Pietro craved an heir,
(The story always old and always new)

¹ use, privilege.

² attractive, pleasant.

³ In his numerous references to the Comparinis' domesticity, Browning assumes that they had two residences in Rome, one on the Via Vittoria and another, less pretentious, on the Via Paolina. The fact is that they had but one, at the corner of the two streets. See Cook, Appendix II.

⁴ property producing income, interest.

⁵ terminate.

215 Shut his fool's-eyes fast on the visible good
 And wealth for certain, opened them owl-wide
 On fortune's sole piece of forgetfulness,
 The child that should have been and would not be.

Hence, seventeen years ago, conceive his glee
 220 When first Violante, 'twixt a smile and blush,
 With touch of agitation proper too,
 Announced that, spite of her unpromising age,¹
 The miracle would in time be manifest,
 An heir's birth was to happen: and it did.
 225 Somehow or other,—how, all in good time!
 By a trick, a sleight of hand you are to hear,—
 A child was born, Pompilia, for his joy,
 Plaything at once and prop, a fairy-gift,
 A saints' grace or, say, grant of the good God,—
 230 A fiddle-pin's end!² What imbeciles are we!
 Look now: if some one could have prophesied,
 "For love of you, for liking to your wife,
 I undertake to crush a snake I spy
 Settling itself i' the soft of both your breasts.
 235 Give me yon babe to strangle painlessly!
 She'll soar to the safe: you'll have your crying out,
 Then sleep, then wake, then sleep, then end your days
 In peace and plenty, mixed with mild regret,
 Thirty years hence when Christmas takes old folk"—
 240 How had old Pietro sprung up, crossed himself,

¹ a suggestion of the stories of Sarah (Genesis 18) and of St. Elizabeth (Luke 1.5–25).

² nonsense! (Seemingly a portmanteau expletive, combining "fiddle-sticks," "not worth a pin" and "fig's end." "Fiddle-pin" literally means "tuning peg.")

And kicked the conjuror! Whereas you and I,
 Being wise with after-wit,¹ had clapped our hands;
 Nay, added, in the old fool's interest,
 "Strangle the black-eyed babe, so far so good,
 245 But on condition you relieve the man
 O' the wife and throttle him Violante too—
 She is the mischief!"

We had hit the mark.

She, whose trick brought the babe into the world,
 250 She it was, when the babe was grown a girl,
 Judged a new trick should reinforce the old,
 Lend vigour to the lie now somewhat spent
 By twelve years' service; lest Eve's rule decline
 Over this Adam of hers,² whose cabbage-plot
 255 Throve dubiously since turned fools'-paradise,
 Spite of a nightingale on every stump.
 Pietro's estate was dwindling day by day,
 While he, rapt far above such mundane care,
 Crawled all-fours with his baby pick-a-back,
 260 Sat at serene cats'-cradle³ with his child,
 Or took the measured tallness, top to toe,
 Of what was grown a great girl twelve years old:
 Till sudden at the door a tap discreet,
 A visitor's premonitory cough,
 265 And poverty had reached him in her rounds.

[———]

¹ hindsight.

² The ordained situation in Genesis 3.16–17 is actually the opposite: Eve's "desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

³ a game in which two players intertwine a cord on their fingers so as to produce a symmetrical pattern.

This came when he was past the working-time,
 Had learned to dandle and forgot to dig,
 And who must but Violante cast about,
 Contrive and task that head of hers again?

- 270 She who had caught one fish, could make that catch
 A bigger still, in angler's policy:¹
 So, with an angler's mercy for the bait,
 Her minnow was set wriggling on its barb
 And tossed to mid-stream; which means, this grown girl
 275 With the great eyes and bounty of black hair
 And first crisp youth that tempts a jaded taste,
 Was whisked i' the way of a certain man, who snapped.

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine
 Was head of an old noble house enough,
 280 Not over-rich, you can't have everything,
 But such a man as riches rub against,
 Readily stick to,—one with a right to them
 Born in the blood: 't was in his very brow
 Always to knit itself against the world,

- 285 Beforehand so, when that world stinted due
 Service and suit:² the world ducks and defers.
 As such folks do, he had come up to Rome
 To better his fortune, and, since many years,
 Was friend and follower of a cardinal;
 290 Waiting the rather thus on providence
 That a shrewd younger poorer brother³ yet,
 The Abate Paolo, a regular priest,

¹ practice (with a suggestion of expedient, stratagem).

² The world was stingy in paying the rights due him (in the manner of a feudal lord).

³ Guido really was the youngest of four brothers, one of whom, Antonio, is not mentioned in the poem.

Had long since tried his powers and found he swam
 With the deftest on the Galilean¹ pool:
 295 But then he was a web-foot, free o' the wave,²
 And no ambiguous dab-chick³ hatched to strut,
 Humbled by any fond⁴ attempt to swim
 When fiercer fowl usurped his dunghill top—
 A whole priest, Paolo, no mere piece of one
 300 Like Guido tacked thus to the Church's tail!
 Guido moreover, as the head o' the house,
 Claiming the main prize, not the lesser luck,
 The centre lily, no mere chickweed fringe.

He waited and learned waiting, thirty years;
 305 Got promise, missed performance—what would you have?
 No petty post rewards a nobleman
 For spending youth in splendid lackey-work,
 And there's concurrence⁵ for each rarer prize;
 When that falls, rougher hand and readier foot
 310 Push aside Guido spite of his black looks.
 The end was, Guido, when the warning showed,
 The first white hair i' the glass, gave up the game,
 Determined on returning to his town,
 Making the best of bad incurable,
 315 Patching the old palace up and lingering there
 The customary life out with his kin,
 Where honour helps to spice the scanty bread.

[———]

¹ Christian; therefore, in the present context, churchly, ecclesiastical.

² well adapted to his element, or with the freedom of the whole pond.

³ a small bird, specifically the grebe.

⁴ silly.

⁵ competition.

- Just as he trimmed his lamp and girt his loins¹
To go his journey and be wise at home,
320 In the right mood of disappointed worth,
Who but Violante sudden spied her prey
(Where was I with that angler-simile?)
And threw her bait, Pompilia, where he sulked—
A gleam i' the gloom!

- What constituted him so choice a catch,
345 You question? Past his prime and poor beside!

¹ Luke 12.35, but the phraseology is closer to Browning's in "The Statue and the Bust," l. 247.

- Ask that of any she who knows the trade.
 Why first, here was a nobleman with friends,
 A palace one might run to and be safe
 When presently the threatened fate should fall,
 350 A big-browed master to block door-way up,
 Parley with people bent on pushing by
 And praying the mild Pietro quick clear scores:¹
 Is birth a privilege and power or no?
 Also,—but judge of the result desired,
 355 By the price paid and manner of the sale.
 The Count was made woo, win and wed at once:
 Asked, and was haled for answer, lest the heat
 Should cool, to San Lorenzo, one blind² eve,
 And had Pompilia put into his arms
 360 O' the sly there, by a hasty candle-blink,
 With sanction of some priest-confederate³
 Properly paid to make short work and sure.

- So did old Pietro's daughter change her style
 For Guido Franceschini's lady-wife
 365 Ere Guido knew it well; and why this haste
 And scramble and indecent secrecy?
 "Lest Pietro, all the while in ignorance,
 Should get to learn, gainsay⁴ and break the match:
 His peevishness had promptly put aside
 370 Such honour and refused the proffered boon,
 Pleased to become authoritative once.
 She remedied the wilful man's mistake—"—
 Did our discreet Violante. Rather say,

¹ pay debts.

² dark.

³ See III 455 and note.

⁴ oppose.

Thus did she, lest the object of her game,
 375 Guido the gulled one, give him but a chance,
 A moment's respite, time for thinking twice,
 Might count the cost before he sold himself,
 And try the clink of coin they paid him with.

But coin paid, bargain struck and business done,
 380 Once the clandestine marriage over thus,
 All parties made perforce the best o' the fact;
 Pietro could play vast indignation off,
 Be ignorant and astounded, dupe, poor soul,
 Please you, of daughter, wife and son-in-law,
 385 While Guido found himself in flagrant fault,
 Must e'en do suit and service, soothe, subdue
 A father not unreasonably chafed,
 Bring him to terms by paying son's devoir.¹
 Pleasant initiation!

390 The end, this:
 Guido's broad back was saddled to bear all—
 Pietro, Violante, and Pompilia too,—
 Three lots cast confidently in one lap,
 Three dead-weights with one arm to lift the three
 395 Out of their limbo up to life again.
 The Roman household was to strike fresh root
 In a new soil, graced with a novel name,
 Gilt with an alien glory, Aretine
 Henceforth and never Roman any more,
 400 By treaty and engagement; thus it ran:
 Pompilia's dowry for Pompilia's self
 As a thing of course,—she paid her own expense;

¹ respects, duty.

- No loss nor gain there: but the couple, you see,
 They, for their part, turned over first of all
 405 Their fortune in its rags and rottenness
 To Guido, fusion¹ and confusion, he
 And his with them and theirs,—whatever rag
 With coin residuary fell on floor
 When Brother Paolo's energetic shake
 410 Should do the relics justice: since 't was thought,
 Once vulnerable Pietro out of reach,
 That, left at Rome as representative,
 The Abate, backed by a potent patron here,
 And otherwise with purple flushing him,²
 415 Might play a good game with the creditor,
 Make up a moiety³ which, great or small,
 Should go to the common stock—if anything,
 Guido's, so far repayment of the cost
 About to be,—and if, as looked more like,
 420 Nothing,—why, all the nobler cost were his
 Who guaranteed, for better or for worse,
 To Pietro and Violante, house and home,
 Kith and kin, with the pick of company
 And life o' the fat o' the land while life should last.
 425 How say you to the bargain at first blush?
 Why did a middle-aged not-silly man
 Show himself thus besotted all at once?
 Quoth Solomon, one black eye does it all.⁴

[— — —]

¹ apart from its suggestion of “melt,” used here simply for effect, as a back-formation from “confusion.”

² backed by influential churchmen (such as purple-wearing cardinals), and himself with the expectation of rising to the cardinalate (see III 375).

³ share, portion.

⁴ “thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes” (Song of Solomon 4.9).

- They went to Arezzo,—Pietro and his spouse,
 430 With just the dusk o' the day of life to spend,
 Eager to use the twilight, taste a treat,
 Enjoy for once with neither stay nor stint
 The luxury of lord-and-lady-ship,
 And realize the stuff and nonsense long
 435 A-simmer in their noddles; vent the fume
 Born there and bred, the citizen's¹ conceit²
 How fares nobility while crossing earth,
 What rampart or invisible body-guard
 Keeps off the taint of common life from such.
- 440 They had not fed for nothing on the tales
 Of grandees who give banquets worthy Jove,
 Spending gold as if Plutus paid a whim,³
 Served with obeisances as when ... what God?⁴
 I'm at the end of my tether; 't is enough
- 445 You understand what they came primed to see:
 While Guido who should minister⁵ the sight,
 Stay all this qualmish greediness of soul
 With apples and with flagons⁶—for his part,
 Was set on life diverse as pole from pole:
- 450 Lust of the flesh, lust of the eye,—what else
 Was he just now awake from, sick and sage,
 After the very debauch they would begin?—
 Suppose such stuff and nonsense really were.

¹ ordinary man's.

² fancy, imaginary notion.

³ indiscriminately. Plutus, the Greek personification of riches, was said to have been blinded by Zeus so that he would distribute his gifts in such a fashion.

⁴ The speaker gropes, unsuccessfully, for a fresh mythological analogy.

⁵ manage.

⁶ Song of Solomon 2.5.

- That bubble, they were bent on blowing big,
 455 He had blown already till he burst his cheeks,
 And hence found soapsuds bitter to the tongue.¹
 He hoped now to walk softly all his days
 In soberness of spirit,² if haply so,
 Pinching and paring he might furnish forth
 460 A frugal board, bare sustenance, no more,
 Till times, that could not well grow worse, should mend.

Thus minded then, two parties mean to meet
 And make each other happy. The first week,
 And fancy strikes fact and explodes in full.

- 465 "This," shrieked the Comparini, "this is the Count,
 The palace, the signorial privilege,
 The pomp and pageantry were promised us?
 For this have we exchanged our liberty,
 Our competence,³ our darling of a child?
 470 To house as spectres in a sepulchre
 Under this black stone-heap, the street's disgrace,
 Grimmest as that is of the gruesome town,
 And here pick garbage on a pewter plate
 Or cough at verjuice⁴ dripped from earthenware?
 475 Oh Via Vittoria, oh the other place
 I' the Pauline, did we give you up for this?
 Where's the foregone housekeeping good and gay,
 The neighbourliness, the companionship,
 The treat and feast when holidays came round,
 480 The daily feast that seemed no treat at all,

¹ Compare the image at I 557.

² Isaiah 38.15: "I shall go softly all my years in the *bitterness* of my soul."

³ money.

⁴ sour wine.

Called common by the uncommon fools we were!
 Even the sun that used to shine at Rome,
 Where is it? Robbed and starved and frozen too,
 We will have justice, justice if there be!"

- 485 Did not they shout, did not the town resound!
 Guido's old lady-mother Beatrice,
 Who since her husband, Count Tommaso's death,
 Had held sole sway i' the house,—the doited¹ crone
 Slow to acknowledge, curtsey and abdicate,—
- 490 Was recognized of true novveral² type,
 Dragon and devil. His brother Girolamo
 Came next in order: priest was he? The worse!
 No way of winning him to leave his mumps³
 And help the laugh against old ancestry
- 495 And formal habits⁴ long since out of date,
 Letting his youth be patterned on the mode
 Approved of where Violante laid down law.
 Or did he brighten up by way of change,
 Dispose himself for affability?
- 500 The malapert,⁵ too complaisant by half
 To the alarmed young novice of a bride!
 Let him go buzz, betake himself elsewhere
 Nor singe his fly-wings in the candle-flame!

Four months' probation of this purgatory,
 505 Dog-snap and cat-claw, curse and counterblast,
 The devil's self were sick of his own din;

¹ old and feeble (Scottish).

² stepmotherly.

³ ill humor, sulks.

⁴ empty customs.

⁵ impudent one.

- And Pietro, after trumpeting huge wrongs
 At church and market-place, pillar and post,
 Square's corner, street's end, now the palace-step
 510 And now the wine-house bench—while, on her side,
 Violante up and down was voluble
 In whatsoever pair of ears would perk
 From goody, gossip, cater-cousin and sib,¹
 Curious to peep at the inside of things
 515 And catch in the act pretentious poverty
 At its wits' end to keep appearance up,
 Make both ends meet,—nothing the vulgar loves
 Like what this couple pitched them right and left.
 Then, their worst done that way, both struck tent,
 marched:
 520 —Renounced their share o' the bargain, flung what dues
 Guido was bound to pay, in Guido's face,
 Left their hearts'-darling, treasure of the twain
 And so forth, the poor inexperienced bride,
 To her own devices, bade Arezzo rot,
 525 Cursed life signorial, and sought Rome once more.

- I see the comment ready on your lip,
 "The better fortune, Guido's—free at least
 By this defection of the foolish pair,
 He could begin make profit in some sort
 530 Of the young bride and the new quietness,
 Lead his own life now, henceforth breathe unplagued."
 Could he? You know the sex like Guido's self.
 Learn the Violante-nature!

[———]

¹ collectively, busybodies, sometimes with a tenuous claim to family relationship.

Once in Rome,

- 535 By way of helping Guido lead such life,
 Her first act to inaugurate return
 Was, she got pricked in conscience:¹ Jubilee
 Gave her the hint. Our Pope, as kind as just,
 Attained his eighty years, announced a boon
 540 Should make us bless the fact, held Jubilee—
 Short shrift,² prompt pardon for the light offence,
 And no rough dealing with the regular crime
 So this occasion were not suffered slip—
 Otherwise, sins commuted³ as before,
 545 Without the least abatement in the price.
 Now, who had thought it? All this while, it seems,
 Our sage Violante had a sin of a sort
 She must compound⁴ for now or not at all.
 Now be the ready riddance! She confessed
 550 Pompilia was a fable not a fact:
 She never bore a child in her whole life.
 Had this child been a changeling,⁵ that were grace⁶
 In some degree, exchange is hardly theft,
 You take your stand on truth ere leap your lie:
 555 Here was all lie, no touch of truth at all,
 All the lie hers—not even Pietro guessed
 He was as childless still as twelve years since.

¹ an allusion to the medieval religious treatise, *The Prick of Conscience*. (Browning often uses the verb "prick" in this poem, usually but not uniformly with the meaning of "stir," "urge," "goad.")

² hurried confession and absolution.

³ absolved. (The usual meaning of "commute" is "to reduce a punishment," such as penance, but this seems negated by the following line.)

⁴ settle.

⁵ substitute.

⁶ mitigation, a mercy.

- The babe had been a find i' the filth-heap, Sir,
 Catch from the kennel!¹ There was found at Rome,
 560 Down in the deepest of our social dregs,
 A woman who professed the wanton's trade
 Under the requisite thin coverture,
*Communis meretrix*² and washer-wife:
 The creature thus conditioned³ found by chance
 565 Motherhood like a jewel in the muck,
 And straightway either trafficked with her prize
 Or listened to the tempter and let be,—
 Made pact abolishing her place and part
 In womankind, beast-fellowship indeed.
 570 She sold this babe eight months before its birth
 To our Violante, Pietro's honest spouse,
 Well-famed and widely-instanced as that crown
 To the husband,⁴ virtue in a woman's shape.
 She it was, bought, paid for, passed off the thing
 575 As very flesh and blood and child of her
 Despite the flagrant fifty years,—and why?
 Partly to please old Pietro, fill his cup
 With wine at the late hour when lees are left,
 And send him from life's feast rejoicingly,—
 580 Partly to cheat the rightful heirs, agape,
 Each uncle's cousin's brother's son of him,

¹ refuse from the gutter.

² common prostitute, the "wanton" of l. 561. A document discovered by Beatrice Corrigan, however, reveals that Pompilia's mother was not a Roman prostitute but a widow named Corona Paperozzi, lately come to Rome from a village southeast of Viterbo.

³ circumstanced.

⁴ "A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones" (Proverbs 12.4).

For that same principal of the usufruct
 It vext him he must die and leave behind.

Such was the sin had come to be confessed.

- 585 Which of the tales, the first or last, was true?
 Did she so sin once, or, confessing now,
 Sin for the first time? Either way you will.
 One sees a reason for the cheat: one sees
 A reason for a cheat in owning cheat
 590 Where no cheat had been. What of the revenge?
 What prompted the contrition all at once,
 Made the avowal easy, the shame slight?
 Why, prove they but Pompilia not their child,
 No child, no dowry! this, supposed their child,
 595 Had claimed what this, shown alien to their blood,
 Claimed nowise: Guido's claim was through his wife,
 Null then and void with hers. The biter bit,
 Do you see! For such repayment of the past,
 One might conceive the penitential pair
 600 Ready to bring their case before the courts,
 Publish their infamy to all the world
 And, arm in arm, go chuckling thence content.

Is this your view? 'T was Guido's anyhow

And colourable:¹ he came forward then,

- 605 Protested in his very bride's behalf
 Against this lie and all it led to, least
 Of all the loss o' the dowry; no! From her
 And him alike he would expunge the blot,
 Erase the brand of such a bestial birth,

¹ plausible.

- 610 Participate in no hideous heritage
 Gathered from the gutter to be garnered up
 And glorified in a palace. Peter and Paul!¹
 But that who likes may look upon the pair
 Exposed in yonder church, and show his skill
- 615 By saying which is eye and which is mouth
 Thro' those stabs thick and threefold,—but for that—
 A strong word on the liars and their lie
 Might crave expression and obtain it, Sir!
 —Though prematurely, since there's more to come,
- 620 More that will shake your confidence in things
 Your cousin tells you,—may I be so bold?

This makes the first act of the farce,—anon
 The sombre element comes stealing in
 Till all is black or blood-red in the piece.

- 625 Guido, thus made a laughing-stock abroad,
 A proverb for the market-place at home,
 Left alone with Pompilia now, this graft
 So reputable on his ancient stock,
 This plague-seed set to fester his sound flesh,
- 630 What does the Count? Revenge him on his wife?
 Unfasten at all risks to rid himself
 The noisome lazarus-badge,² fall foul of fate,
 And, careless whether the poor rag was 'ware
 O' the part it played, or helped unwittingly,
- 635 Bid it go burn and leave his frayed flesh free?
 Plainly, did Guido open both doors wide,
 Spurn thence the cur-cast creature and clear scores
 As man might, tempted in extreme like this?

¹ a casual expletive.

² leper rag.

- No, birth and breeding, and compassion too
- 640 Saved her such scandal. She was young, he thought,
Not privy to the treason, punished most
I' the proclamation of it; why make her
A party to the crime she suffered by?
Then the black eyes were now her very own,
- 645 Not any more Violante's: let her live,
Lose in a new air, under a new sun,
The taint of the imputed parentage
Truly or falsely, take no more the touch
Of Pietro and his partner anyhow!
- 650 All might go well yet.

- So she thought, herself,
It seems, since what was her first act and deed
When news came how these kindly ones at Rome
Had stripped her naked to amuse the world
- 655 With spots here, spots there and spots everywhere?
—For I should tell you that they noised abroad
Not merely the main scandal of her birth,
But slanders written, printed, published wide,
Pamphlets which set forth all the pleasantry
- 660 Of how the promised glory was a dream,
The power a bubble, and the wealth—why, dust.
There was a picture, painted to the life,
Of those rare doings, that superlative
Initiation in magnificence
- 665 Conferred on a poor Roman family
By favour of Arezzo and her first
And famousest, the Franceschini there.
You had the Countship holding head aloft
Bravely although bespattered, shifts and straits
- 670 In keeping out o' the way o' the wheels o' the world,

- The comic of those home-contrivances
 When the old lady-mother's wit was taxed
 To find six clamorous mouths in¹ food more real
 Than fruit plucked off the cobwebbed family-tree,
- 675 Or acorns shed from its gilt mouldered frame—
 Cold glories served up with stale fame for sauce.
 What, I ask,—when the drunkenness of hate
 Hiccuped return for hospitality,
 Befouled the table they had feasted on,
- 680 Or say,—God knows I'll not prejudge the case,—
 Grievances thus distorted, magnified,
 Coloured by quarrel into calumny,—
 What side did our Pompilia first espouse?
 Her first deliberate measure was—she wrote,²
- 685 Pricked by some loyal impulse, straight to Rome
 And her husband's brother the Abate there,
 Who, having managed to effect the match,
 Might take men's censure for its ill success.
 She made a clean breast also in her turn,
- 690 And qualified³ the couple properly,
 Since whose departure, hell, she said, was heaven,
 And the house, late distracted by their peals,
 Quiet as Carmel where the lilies live.⁴
 Herself had oftentimes complained: but why?
- 695 All her complaints had been their prompting, tales
 Trumped up, devices to this very end.
 Their game had been to thwart her husband's love
 And cross his will, malign his words and ways,

¹ supply with.

² See General Note 5 (p. 771).

³ characterized, described (but in this context, "berated," "condemned").

⁴ proverbial—not a Biblical expression.

- To reach this issue, furnish this pretence
700 For impudent withdrawal from their bond,—
Theft, indeed murder, since they meant no less
Whose last injunction to her simple self
Had been—what parents'-precept do you think?
That she should follow after with all speed,
705 Fly from her husband's house clandestinely,
Join them at Rome again, but first of all
Pick up a fresh companion in her flight,
So putting youth and beauty to fit use,—
Some gay dare-devil cloak-and-rapier spark
710 Capable of adventure,—helped by whom
She, some fine eve when lutes were in the air,
Having put poison in the posset-cup,¹
Laid hands on money, jewels and the like,
And, to conceal the thing with more effect,
715 By way of parting benediction too,
Fired the house,—one would finish famously
I' the tumult, slip out, scurry off and away
And turn up merrily at home once more.
Fact this, and not a dream o' the devil, Sir!
720 And more than this, a fact none dare dispute,
Word for word, such a letter did she write,
And such the Abate read, nor simply read
But gave all Rome to ruminate upon,
In answer to such charges as, I say,
725 The couple sought to be beforehand with.

[— — —]

¹ cup of hot milk and wine or ale, spiced and sweetened; often taken for medicinal purposes.

The cause thus carried to the courts at Rome,¹
 Guido away, the Abate had no choice
 But stand forth, take his absent brother's part,
 Defend the honour of himself beside.

- 730 He made what head he might against the pair,
 Maintained Pompilia's birth legitimate
 And all her rights intact—hers, Guido's now:
 And so far by his policy turned their flank,
 (The enemy being beforehand in the place)
- 735 That,—though the courts allowed the cheat for fact,
 Suffered Violante to parade her shame,
 Publish her infamy to heart's content,
 And let the tale o' the feigned birth pass for proved,—
 Yet they stopped there, refused to intervene
- 740 And dispossess the innocents, befooled
 By gifts o' the guilty, at guilt's new caprice.
 They would not take away the dowry now
 Wrongfully given at first, nor bar at all
 Succession to the aforesaid usufruct,
- 745 Established on a fraud, nor play the game
 Of Pietro's child and now not Pietro's child
 As it might suit the gamester's purpose. Thus
 Was justice ever ridiculed in Rome:
 Such be the double verdicts favoured here
- 750 Which send away both parties to a suit
 Nor puffed up nor cast down,—for each a crumb
 Of right, for neither of them the whole loaf.
 Whence, on the Comparini's part, appeal—
 Counter-appeal² on Guido's,—that's the game:
- 755 And so the matter stands, even to this hour,

¹ For this and the following lawsuits, see General Note 3 (p. 769).

² Guido did not, in fact, contest the appeal.

Bandied as balls are in a tennis-court,
 And so might stand, unless some heart broke first,
 Till doomsday.

Leave it thus, and now revert

- 760 To the old Arezzo whence we moved to Rome.
 We've had enough o' the parents, false or true,
 Now for a touch o' the daughter's quality.
 The start's fair henceforth, every obstacle
 Out of the young wife's footpath, she's alone,
 765 Left to walk warily now: how does she walk?
 Why, once a dwelling's threshold marked and crossed
 In rubric¹ by the enemy on his rounds
 As eligible, as fit place of prey,
 Baffle him henceforth, keep him out who can!
 770 Stop up the door at the first hint of hoof,
 Presently at the window taps a horn,
 And Satan's by your fireside, never fear!
 Pompilia, left alone now, found herself;
 Found herself young too, sprightly, fair enough,
 775 Matched with a husband old beyond his age
 (Though that was something like four times her own)
 Because of cares past, present and to come:
 Found too the house dull and its inmates dead,
 So, looked outside for light and life.

- 780 And love
 Did in a trice turn up with life and light,—
 The man with the aureole,² sympathy made flesh,
 The all-consoling Caponsacchi, Sir!

¹ red.

² halo, possibly with a suggestion of tonsure.

- A priest—what else should the consoler be?
- 785 With goodly shoulderblade and proper leg,
 A portly make¹ and symmetric shape,
 And curls that clustered to the tonsure quite.
 This was a bishop in the bud, and now
 A canon full-blown so far: priest, and priest
- 790 Nowise exorbitantly overworked,
 The courtly Christian, not so much Saint Paul
 As a saint of Caesar's household:² there posed he
 Sending his god-glance after his shot shaft,
 Apollos turned Apollo,³ while the snake
- 795 Pompilia writhed transfixed through all her spires.⁴
 He, not a visitor at Guido's house,
 Scarce an acquaintance, but in prime request
 With the magnates of Arezzo, was seen here,
 Heard there, felt everywhere in Guido's path
- 800 If Guido's wife's path be her husband's too.
 Now he threw comfits at the theatre
 Into her lap,—what harm in Carnival?⁵
 Now he pressed close till his foot touched her gown,
 His hand brushed hers,—how help on promenade?
- 805 And, ever on weighty business, found his steps
 Incline to a certain haunt of doubtful fame
 Which fronted Guido's palace by mere chance;
 While—how do accidents sometimes combine!—
 Pompilia chose to cloister up her charms

¹ handsome appearance, disposition.

² Philippians 4.22.

³ Apollos (a follower of St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 3.4–6) transformed into Apollo, the god of archery.

⁴ coils.

⁵ period of festivity preceding Lent.

- 810 Just in a chamber that o'erlooked the street,
Sat there to pray, or peep thence at mankind.

This passage of arms and wits amused the town.

At last the husband lifted eyebrow,—bent

On day-book¹ and the study how to wring

- 815 Half the due vintage from the worn-out vines
At the villa, tease a quarter the old rent
From the farmstead, tenants swore would tumble soon,—
Pricked up his ear a-singing day and night
With “ruin, ruin;”—and so surprised at last—
820 Why, what else but a titter? Up he jumps.
Back to mind come those scratchings at the grange,
Prints of the paw about the outhouse; rife
In his head at once again are word and wink,
Mum here and *budget* there,² the smell o' the fox,
825 The musk o' the gallant. “Friends, there's falseness here!”

The proper help of friends in such a strait

Is waggery, the world over. Laugh him free

O' the regular jealous-fit that's incident

To all old husbands that wed brisk young wives,

- 830 And he'll go duly docile all his days.
“Somebody courts your wife, Count? Where and when?
How and why? Mere horn-madness:³ have a care!
Your lady loves her own room, sticks to it,
Locks herself in for hours, you say yourself.

¹ ledger.

² “shhhhhh.”

³ the delusive insanity of a cuckold (a man whose wife is unfaithful to him). According to ancient folk belief, the outward sign of cuckoldry was the sprouting of horns from the husband's forehead.

- 835 And—what, it's Caponsacchi means you harm?
 The Canon? We caress him, he's the world's,
 A man of such acceptance¹—never dream,
 Though he were fifty times the fox you fear,
 He'd risk his brush for your particular chick,
- 840 When the wide town's his hen-roost! Fie o' the fool!"
 So they dispensed their comfort of a kind.
 Guido at last cried "Something is in the air,
 Under the earth, some plot against my peace.
 The trouble of eclipse² hangs overhead:
- 845 How it should come of that officious³ orb
 Your Canon in my system,⁴ you must say:
 I say—that from the pressure of this spring⁵
 Began the chime and interchange of bells,
 Ever one whisper, and one whisper more,
- 850 And just one whisper for the silvery last,
 Till all at once a-row the bronze-throats burst
 Into a larum both significant
 And sinister: stop it I must and will.
 Let Caponsacchi take his hand away
- 855 From the wire!—disport himself in other paths
 Than lead precisely to my palace-gate,—
 Look where he likes except one window's way
 Where, cheek on hand, and elbow set on sill,
 Happens to lean and say her litanies
- 860 Every day and all day long, just my wife—
 Or wife and Caponsacchi may fare the worse!"

[———]

¹ popularity, *entrée*.

² Eclipses of the sun or moon were thought to be portents of evil.

³ meddlesome, interloping.

⁴ the solar system.

⁵ touch of this wire.

- Admire the man's simplicity, "I'll do this,
 I'll not have that, I'll punish and prevent!"—
 'T is easy saying. But to a fray, you see,
 865 Two parties go. The badger shows his teeth:
 The fox nor lies down sheep-like nor dares fight.
 Oh, the wife knew the appropriate warfare well,
 The way to put suspicion to the blush!
 At first hint of remonstrance, up and out
 870 I' the face of the world, you found her: she could speak,
 State her case,—Franceschini was a name,
 Guido had his full share of foes and friends—
 Why should not she call these to arbitrate?
 She bade the Governor do governance,
 875 Cried out on the Archbishop,—why, there now,
 Take him for sample! Three successive times,
 Had he to reconduct her by main-force
 From where she took her station opposite
 His shut door,—on the public steps thereto,
 880 Wringing her hands, when he came out to see,
 And shrieking all her wrongs forth at his foot,—
 Back to the husband and the house she fled:
 Judge if that husband warmed him in the face
 Of friends or frowned on foes as heretofore!
 885 Judge if he missed the natural grin of folk,
 Or lacked the customary compliment
 Of cap and bells, the luckless husband's fit!¹

So it went on and on till—who was right?
 One merry April morning, Guido woke

¹ a ballad ("fit") sung by a jester, whose emblems were cap and bells, about a cuckold. See V 1451-55.

- 890 After the cuckoo,¹ so late, near noonday,
 With an inordinate yawning of the jaws,
 Ears plugged, eyes gummed together, palate, tongue
 And teeth one mud-paste made of poppy-milk;²
 And found his wife flown, his scritoire³ the worse
- 895 For a rummage,—jewelry that was, was not,
 Some money there had made itself wings too,—
 The door lay wide and yet the servants slept
 Sound as the dead, or dosed which does as well.
 In short, Pompilia, she who, candid⁴ soul,
- 900 Had not so much as spoken all her life
 To the Canon, nay, so much as peeped at him
 Between her fingers while she prayed in church,—
 This lamb-like innocent of fifteen years
 (Such she was grown to by this time of day)
- 905 Had simply put an opiate in the drink
 Of the whole household overnight, and then
 Got up and gone about her work secure,
 Laid hand on this waif and the other stray,⁵
 Spoiled the Philistine⁶ and marched out of doors
- 910 In company of the Canon who, Lord's love,
 What with his daily duty at the church,
 Nightly devoir where ladies congregate,

¹ "The point here is that Caponsacchi is the cuckoo; he has been beforehand with Guido, cuckolded him ... and has now carried his wife off" (Cook). The allusion to the cuckoo has a double point: the bird itself is an early riser, and it has the habit of laying its eggs in another bird's nest—hence the word "cuckold."

² laudanum (an opiate).

³ scritoire, writing desk.

⁴ innocent.

⁵ various pieces of property.

⁶ Exodus 3.22, where it is "spoil the *Egyptians*."

- Had something else to mind, assure yourself,
 Beside Pompilia, paragon though she be,
 915 Or notice if her nose were sharp or blunt!
 Well, anyhow, albeit impossible,
 Both of them were together jollily
 Jaunting it Rome-ward, half-way there by this,
 While Guido was left go and get undrugged,
 920 Gather his wits up, groaningly give thanks
 When neighbours crowded round him to condole.
 "Ah," quoth a gossip, "well I mind me now,
 The Count did always say he thought he felt
 He feared as if this very chance might fall!
 925 And when a man of fifty finds his corns
 Ache and his joints throb, and foresees a storm,
 Though neighbours laugh and say the sky is clear,
 Let us henceforth believe him weatherwise!"
 Then was the story told, I'll cut you short:
 930 All neighbours knew: no mystery in the world.
 The lovers left at nightfall—over night
 Had Caponsacchi come to carry off
 Pompilia,—not alone, a friend of his,
 One Guillichini, the more conversant
 935 With Guido's housekeeping that he was just
 A cousin of Guido's and might play a prank—
 (Have not you too a cousin that's a wag?)
 —Lord and a Canon also,—what would you have?
 Such are the red-clothed milk-swollen poppy-heads¹
 940 That stand and stiffen 'mid the wheat o' the Church!—
 This worthy came to aid, abet his best.
 And so the house was ransacked, booty bagged,

¹ red birettas of the higher clergy, with a play on "poppy," the source of opium and thus of laudanum.

- The lady led downstairs and out of doors
 Guided and guarded till, the city passed,
 945 A carriage lay convenient at the gate.
 Good-bye to the friendly Canon; the loving one
 Could peradventure do the rest himself.
 In jumps Pompilia, after her the priest,
 "Whip, driver! Money makes the mare to go,
 950 And we've a bagful. Take the Roman road!"
 So said the neighbours. This was eight hours since.

- Guido heard all, swore the befitting oaths,
 Shook off the relics of his poison-drench,¹
 Got horse, was fairly started in pursuit
 955 With never a friend to follow, found the track
 Fast enough, 't was the straight Perugia way,
 Trod soon upon their very heels, too late
 By a minute only at Camoscia, reached
 Chiusi, Foligno, ever the fugitives
 960 Just ahead, just out as he galloped in,
 Getting the good news ever fresh and fresh,
 Till, lo, at the last stage of all, last post
 Before Rome,—as we say, in sight of Rome
 And safety (there's impunity² at Rome
 965 For priests, you know) at—what's the little place?—
 What some call Castelnuovo, some just call
 The Osteria, because o' the post-house inn,
 There, at the journey's all but end, it seems,
 Triumph deceived them and undid them both,
 970 Secure they might foretaste felicity

¹ large dose ("drench" is a term usually associated with veterinary medicine).

² immunity from civil prosecution.

- Nor fear surprisal: so, they were surprised.
 There did they halt at early evening, there
 Did Guido overtake them: 't was day-break;
 He came in time enough, not time too much,
 975 Since in the courtyard stood the Canon's self
 Urging the drowsy stable-grooms to haste
 Harness the horses, have the journey end,
 The trifling four-hours'-running, so reach Rome.
 And the other runaway, the wife? Upstairs,
 980 Still on the couch where she had spent the night,
 One couch in one room, and one room for both.
 So gained they six hours, so were lost thereby.

- Sir, what's the sequel? Lover and beloved
 Fall on their knees? No impudence serves here?
 985 They beat their breasts and beg for easy death,
 Confess this, that and the other?—anyhow
 Confess there wanted not some likelihood
 To the supposition so preposterous,
 That, O Pompilia, thy sequestered eyes
 990 Had noticed, straying o'er the prayerbook's edge,
 More of the Canon than that black his coat,
 Buckled his shoes were, broad his hat of brim:
 And that, O Canon, thy religious care
 Had breathed too soft a *benedicite*¹
 995 To banish trouble from a lady's breast
 So lonely and so lovely, nor so lean!
 This you expect? Indeed, then, much you err.
 Not to such ordinary end as this
 Had Caponsacchi flung the cassock far,
 1000 Doffed the priest, donned the perfect cavalier.

¹ blessing.

The die was cast: over shoes over boots:
 And just as she, I presently shall show,
 Pompilia, soon looked Helen to the life,
 Recumbent upstairs in her pink and white,
 1005 So, in the inn-yard, bold as 't were Troy-town,
 There strutted Paris in correct costume,
 Cloak, cap and feather, no appointment¹ missed,
 Even to a wicked-looking sword at side,
 He seemed to find and feel familiar at.
 1010 Nor wanted words as ready and as big
 As the part he played, the bold abashless one.
 "I interposed to save your wife from death,
 Yourself from shame, the true and only shame:
 Ask your own conscience else!—or, failing that,
 1015 What I have done I answer, anywhere,
 Here, if you will; you see I have a sword:
 Or, since I have a tonsure as you taunt,
 At Rome, by all means,—priests to try a priest.²
 Only, speak where your wife's voice can reply!"
 1020 And then he fingered at the sword again.
 So, Guido called, in aid and witness both,
 The Public Force. The Commissary³ came,
 Officers also; they secured the priest;
 Then, for his more confusion, mounted up
 1025 With him, a guard on either side, the stair
 To the bed-room where still slept or feigned a sleep
 His paramour and Guido's wife: in burst
 The company and bade her wake and rise.

[———]

¹ adornment, accessory.

² In Rome, the papal state, the civil courts were composed of ecclesiastics.

³ governor.

- Her defence? This. She woke, saw, sprang upright
 1030 I' the midst and stood as terrible as truth,¹
 Sprang to her husband's side, caught at the sword
 That hung there useless,—since they held each hand
 O' the lover, had disarmed him properly,—
 And in a moment out flew the bright thing
 1035 Full in the face of Guido: but for help
 O' the guards who held her back and pinioned her
 With pains² enough, she had finished you my tale
 With a flourish of red all round it, pinked³ her man
 Prettily; but she fought them one to six.
- 1040 They stopped that,—but her tongue continued free:
 She spat forth such invective at her spouse,
 O'erfrothed him with such foam of murderer,
 Thief, pandar—that the popular tide soon turned,
 The favour of the very *sbirri*,⁴ straight
- 1045 Ebed from the husband, set toward his wife,
 People cried “Hands off, pay a priest respect!”
 And “persecuting fiend” and “martyred saint”
 Began to lead a measure⁵ from lip to lip.
- But facts are facts and flinch not; stubborn things,
 1050 And the question “Prithee, friend, how comes my purse
 I' the poke⁶ of you?”—admits of no reply.
 Here was a priest found out in masquerade,

¹ perhaps deriving from “*O magna vis veritatis*” (Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 26.63) or “*Magna est veritas, et praevaleat*” (3 Esdras 4.41, Vulgate).

² difficulty.

³ stabbed, pierced.

⁴ police.

⁵ dance.

⁶ pocket.

A wife caught playing truant if no more;
While the Count, mortified in mien enough,
And, nose to face, an added palm in length,¹
Was plain writ "husband" every piece of him:
Capture once made, release could hardly be.
Beside, the prisoners both made appeal,
"Take us to Rome!"

¹ In Italian idiom, an elongated nose was a sign of disappointed expectations (compare the modern "nose out of joint").

² See General Note 5 (p. 771).

3 prologue.

Matured the middle, added 'neath his nose.
He might go cross himself;¹ the case was clear.

- Therefore to Rome with the clear case; there plead
Each party its best, and leave law do each right,
1085 Let law shine forth and show, as God in heaven,
Vice prostrate, virtue pedestalled at last,
The triumph of truth! What else shall glad our gaze
When once authority has knit the brow
And set the brain behind it to decide
1090 Between the wolf and sheep turned litigants?
"This is indeed a business!" law shook head:
"A husband charges hard things on a wife,
The wife as hard o' the husband: whose fault here?
A wife that flies her husband's house, does wrong:
1095 The male friend's interference looks amiss,
Lends a suspicion: but suppose the wife,
On the other hand, be jeopardized at home—
Nay, that she simply hold, ill-groundedly,
An apprehension she is jeopardized,—
1100 And further, if the friend partake the fear,
And, in a commendable charity
Which trusteth all, trust her that she mistrusts,—
What do they but obey law—natural law?
Pretence may this be and a cloak for sin,
1105 And circumstances that concur i' the close²
Hint as much, loudly—yet scarce loud enough
To drown the answer 'strange may yet be true:'
Innocence often looks like guiltiness.

¹ a colloquial phrase meaning the business was done with.

² fit into a pattern, "add up."

- The accused declare that in thought, word and deed,¹
- 1110 Innocent were they both from first to last
 As male-babe haply laid by female-babe
 At church on edge of the baptismal font
 Together for a minute, perfect-pure.
 Difficult to believe, yet possible,
- 1115 As witness Joseph, the friend's patron-saint.²
 The night at the inn—there charity nigh chokes
 Ere swallow what they both asseverate;
 Though down the gullet faith may feel it go,
 When mindful of what flight fatigued the flesh
- 1120 Out of its faculty³ and fleshliness,
 Subdued it to the soul, as saints assure:
 So long a flight necessitates a fall
 On the first bed, though in a lion's den,
 And the first pillow, though the lion's back:
- 1125 Difficult to believe, yet possible.
 Last come the letters' bundled beastliness—
 Authority repugns⁴ give glance to—nay,
 Turns head, and almost lets her whip-lash fall;
 Yet here a voice cries 'Respite!' from the clouds—
- 1130 The accused, both in a tale,⁵ protest, disclaim,
 Abominate the horror: 'Not my hand'
 Asserts the friend—'Nor mine' chimes in the wife,
 'Seeing I have no hand, nor write at all.'

¹ This phrase, repeated several times in the course of the poem, is from the *Confiteor* of the ordinary of the Mass.

² perhaps an allusion to St. Joseph's difficulty in accepting the idea of the virgin birth (Matthew 1.18-20).

³ intellectual powers.

⁴ resists, refuses.

⁵ agreeing in their story.

- Illiterate—for she goes on to ask,
 1135 What if the friend did pen now verse now prose,
 Commend it to her notice now and then?
 'T was pearls to swine:¹ she read no more than wrote,
 And kept no more than read, for as they fell
 She ever brushed the burr-like things away,
 1140 Or, better, burned them, quenched the fire in smoke.
 As for this fardel,² filth and foolishness,
 She sees it now the first time: burn it too!
 While for his part the friend vows ignorance
 Alike of what bears his name and bears hers:
 1145 'T is forgery, a felon's masterpiece,
 And, as 't is said the fox still finds the stench,
 Home-manufacture and the husband's work.
 Though he confesses, the ingenuous friend,
 That certain missives, letters of a sort,
 1150 Flighty and feeble, which assigned themselves
 To the wife, no less have fallen, far too oft,
 In his path: wherefrom he understood just this—
 That were they verily the lady's own,
 Why, she who penned them, since he never saw
 1155 Save for one minute the mere face of her,
 Since never had there been the interchange
 Of word with word between them all their life,
 Why, she must be the fondest³ of the frail,
 And fit, she for the '*apage*'⁴ he flung,
 1160 Her letters for the flame they went to feed!

¹ Matthew 7.6.

² bundle (of).

³ most naïve or foolish.

⁴ "get thee hence" (Matthew 4.10).

- But, now he sees her face and hears her speech,
 Much he repents him if, in fancy-freak
 For a moment the minutest measurable,
 He coupled her with the first flimsy word
- 1165 O' the self-spun fabric some mean spider-soul
 Furnished forth: stop his films and stamp on him!
 Never was such a tangled knottiness,
 But thus authority cuts the Gordian¹ through,
 And mark how her decision suits the need!
- 1170 Here's troublesomeness, scandal on both sides,
 Plenty of fault to find, no absolute crime:
 Let each side own its fault and make amends!
 What does a priest in cavalier's attire
 Consorting publicly with vagrant wives
- 1175 In quarters close as the confessional,
 Though innocent of harm? 'T is harm enough:
 Let him pay it,—say, be relegate a good
 Three years, to spend in some place not too far
 Nor yet too near, midway 'twixt near and far,
- 1180 Rome and Arezzo,—Civita² we choose,
 Where he may lounge away time, live at large,
 Find out the proper function of a priest,
 Nowise an exile,—that were punishment,—
 But one our love thus keeps out of harm's way
- 1185 Not more from the husband's anger than, mayhap
 His own ... say, indiscretion, waywardness,
 And wanderings when Easter eves grow warm.
 For the wife,—well, our best step to take with her,
 On her own showing, were to shift her root

¹ the complicated knot tied by Gordius, legendary king of Phrygia, which Alexander the Great cut with his sword.

² Civitâ Vecchia, a seaport thirty-five miles northwest of Rome.

- 1190 From the old cold shade and unhappy soil
 Into a generous ground that fronts the south
 Where, since her callow¹ soul, a-shiver late,
 Craved simply warmth and called mere passers-by
 To the rescue, she should have her fill of shine.
- 1195 Do house and husband hinder and not help?
 Why then, forget both and stay here at peace,
 Come into our community, enroll
 Herself along with those good Convertites,
 Those sinners saved, those Magdalens re-made,
- 1200 Accept their ministration, well bestow
 Her body and patiently possess her soul,²
 Until we see what better can be done.³
 Last for the husband: if his tale prove true,
 Well is he rid of two domestic plagues—
- 1205 Both wife that ailed, do whatsoever he would,
 And friend of hers that undertook the cure.
 See, what a double load we lift from breast!
 Off he may go, return, resume old life,
 Laugh at the priest here and Pompilia there
- 1210 In limbo each and punished for their pains,
 And grateful tell the inquiring neighbourhood—
 In Rome, no wrong but has its remedy.”
 The case was closed. Now, am I fair or no
 In what I utter? Do I state the facts,
- 1215 Having forechosen a side? I promised you!

The Canon Caponsacchi, then, was sent
 To change his garb, re-trim his tonsure, tie

¹ unfledged, unprotected.

² Luke 21.19.

³ a mistake; see General Note 6 (p. 772).

- The clerkly silk round, every plait correct,
 Make the impressive entry on his place
- 1220 Of relegation, thrill his Civita,
 As Ovid,¹ a like sufferer in the cause,
 Planted a primrose-patch by Pontus: where,—
 What with much culture of the sonnet-stave
 And converse with the aborigines,
- 1225 Soft savagery of eyes unused to roll
 And hearts that all awry went pit-a-pat
 And wanted setting right in charity,—
 What were a couple of years to while away?
 Pompilia, as enjoined, betook herself
- 1230 To the aforesaid Convertites, soft sisterhood
 In Via Lungara, where the light ones live,
 Spin, pray, then sing like linnets o'er the flax.
 "Anywhere, anyhow, out of my husband's house
 Is heaven," cried she,—was therefore suited so.
- 1235 But for Count Guido Franceschini, he—
 The injured man thus righted—found no heaven
 I' the house when he returned there, I engage,
 Was welcomed by the city turned upside down
 In a chorus of inquiry. "What, back—you?
- 1240 And no wife? Left her with the Penitents?
 Ah, being young and pretty, 't were a shame
 To have her whipped in public: leave the job
 To the priests who understand! Such priests as yours—
 (Pontifex Maximus² whipped Vestals once)
- 1245 Our madcap Caponsacchi: think of him!

¹ In 8 AD Ovid was exiled from Rome to Tomis on the Black Sea, ostensibly because of the immoral tendency of his love poems.

² the high priest of ancient Rome, who had the privilege of flogging Vestal Virgins who were lax in their duties.

So, he fired up, showed fight and skill of fence?
 Ay, you drew also, but you did not fight!
 The wiser, 't is a word and a blow with him,
 True Caponsacchi, of old Head-i'-the Sack¹

1250 That fought at Fiesole² ere Florence was:
 He had done enough, to firk³ you were too much.
 And did the little lady menace you,
 Make at your breast with your own harmless sword?
 The spitfire! Well, thank God you're safe and sound,

1255 Have kept the sixth commandment whether or no
 The lady broke the seventh: I only wish
 I were as saint-like, could contain me so.
 I, the poor sinner, fear I should have left
 Sir Priest no nose-tip to turn up at me!"

1260 You, Sir, who listen but interpose no word,
 Ask yourself, had you borne a baiting thus?
 Was it enough to make a wise man mad?
 Oh, but I'll have your verdict at the end!

Well, not enough, it seems: such mere hurt falls,
 1265 Frets awhile, aches long, then grows less and less,
 And so gets done with. Such was not the scheme
 O' the pleasant Comparini: on Guido's wound
 Ever in due succession, drop by drop,
 Came slow distilment from the alembic⁴ here
 1270 Set on to simmer by Canidian⁵ hate,
 Corrosives keeping the man's misery raw.

¹ a word play on "CaponSacchi."

² See VI 228–30.

³ assault, trounce.

⁴ distilling apparatus.

⁵ Canidia was the evil sorceress in Horace's *Satires* and *Epodes*.

First fire-drop,—when he thought to make the best
 O' the bad, to wring from out the sentence passed,
 Poor, pitiful, absurd although it were,
 1275 Yet what might eke him out result enough
 And make it worth while to have had the right
 And not the wrong i' the matter judged at Rome.
 Inadequate her punishment, no less
 Punished in some slight sort his wife had been;
 1280 Then, punished for adultery, what else?
 On such admitted crime he thought to seize,
 And institute procedure in the courts
 Which cut corruption of this kind from man,
 Cast loose a wife proved loose and castaway:
 1285 He claimed in due form a divorce at least.¹

This claim was met now by a counterclaim:
 Pompilia sought divorce from bed and board
 Of Guido, whose outrageous cruelty,
 Whose mother's malice and whose brother's hate
 1290 Were just the white o' the charge, such dreadful depths
 Blackened its centre,—hints of worse than hate,
 Love from that brother, by that Guido's guile,
 That mother's prompting. Such reply was made,
 So was the engine² loaded, wound up, sprung
 1295 On Guido, who received bolt full in breast;
 But no less bore up, giddily perhaps.
 He had the Abate Paolo still in Rome,
 Brother and friend and fighter on his side:

¹ not true; the Franceschinis had earlier contemplated doing so on Guido's behalf, but their lawyers discouraged them.

² catapult.

- They rallied in a measure, met the foe
1300 Manlike, joined battle in the public courts,
As if to shame supine law from her sloth:
And waiting her award, let beat the while
Arezzo's banter, Rome's buffoonery,
On this ear and on that ear, deaf alike,
1305 Safe from worse outrage. Let a scorpion nip,
And never mind till he contorts his tail!¹
But there was sting i' the creature; thus it struck.
Guido had thought in his simplicity—
That lying declaration of remorse,
1310 That story of the child which was no child
And motherhood no motherhood at all,
—That even this sin might have its sort of good
Inasmuch as no question more could be,—
Call it false, call the story true,—no claim
1315 Of further parentage pretended now:
The parents had abjured all right, at least,
I' the woman owned his wife: to plead right still
Were to declare the abjuration false:
He was relieved from any fear henceforth
1320 Their hands might touch, their breath defile again
Pompilia with his name upon her yet.
Well, no: the next news was, Pompilia's health
Demanded change after full three long weeks
Spent in devotion with the Sisterhood,—
1325 Which rendered sojourn,—so the court opined,—
Too irksome, since the convent's walls were high
And windows narrow, nor was air enough
Nor light enough, but all looked prison-like,

¹ The scorpion's poison was said to be delivered by the sting of its tail.

- The last thing which had come in the court's head.
- 1330 Propose a new expedient therefore,—this!
She had demanded—had obtained indeed,
By intervention of her pitying friends
Or perhaps lovers—(beauty in distress,
Beauty whose tale is the town-talk beside,
1335 Never lacks friendship's arm about her neck)—
Obtained remission of the penalty,
Permitted transfer to some private place
Where better air, more light, new food might soothe—
Incarcerated (call it, all the same)
- 1340 At some sure friend's house she must keep inside,
Be found in at requirement fast enough,—
Domus pro carcere,¹ in Roman style.
You keep the house i' the main, as most men do
And all good women: but free otherwise,
1345 Should friends arrive, to lodge them and what not?
And such a *domum*, such a dwelling-place,
Having all Rome to choose from, where chose she?
What house obtained Pompilia's preference?
Why, just the Comparini's—just, do you mark,
- 1350 Theirs who renounced all part and lot in her
So long as Guido could be robbed thereby,
And only fell back on relationship
And found their daughter safe and sound again
When that might surelier stab him: yes, the pair
- 1355 Who, as I told you, first had baited hook
With this poor gilded fly Pompilia-thing,
Then caught the fish, pulled Guido to the shore
And gutted him,—now found a further use

¹ house arrest.

- For the bait, would trail the gauze wings yet again
 1360 I' the way of what new swimmer passed their stand.
 They took Pompilia to their hiding-place—
 Not in the heart of Rome as formerly,
 Under observance, subject to control—
 But out o' the way,—or in the way, who knows?
 1365 That blind mute villa lurking by the gate
 At Via Paulina, not so hard to miss
 By the honest eye, easy enough to find
 In twilight by marauders: where perchance
 Some muffled Caponsacchi might repair,
 1370 Employ odd moments when he too tried change,
 Found that a friend's abode was pleasanter
 Than relegation, penance and the rest.

- Come, here's the last drop does its worst to wound:
 Here's Guido poisoned to the bone, you say,
 1375 Your boasted still's full strain and strength: not so!
 One master-squeeze from screw shall bring to birth
 The hoard i' the heart o' the toad,¹ hell's quintessence.
 He learned the true convenience of the change,
 And why a convent lacks the cheerful hearts
 1380 And helpful hands which female straits require,
 When, in the blind mute villa by the gate,
 Pompilia—what? sang, danced, saw company?
 —Gave birth, Sir, to a child, his son and heir,
 Or Guido's heir and Caponsacchi's son.
 1385 I want your word now: what do you say to this?
 What would say little Arezzo and great Rome,

¹ Toads were thought to be full of deadly poison ("the toad, ugly and venomous," *As You Like It* 2.1.13).

- And what did God say and the devil say
 One at each ear o' the man, the husband, now
 The father? Why, the overburdened mind
 1390 Broke down, what was a brain became a blaze.
 In fury of the moment—(that first news
 Fell on the Count among his vines, it seems,
 Doing his farm-work,)—why, he summoned steward,
 Called in the first four hard hands and stout hearts
 1395 From field and furrow, poured forth his appeal,
 Not to Rome's law and gospel any more,
 But this clown with a mother or a wife,
 That clodpole¹ with a sister or a son:
 And, whereas law and gospel held their peace,
 1400 What wonder if the sticks and stones cried out?²

All five soon somehow found themselves at Rome,
 At the villa door: there was the warmth and light—
 The sense of life so just an inch inside—
 Some angel must have whispered “One more chance!”

- 1405 He gave it: bade the others stand aside:
 Knocked at the door,—“Who is it knocks?” cried one.
 “I will make,” surely Guido's angel urged,
 “One final essay, last experiment,
 Speak the word, name the name from out all names
 1410 Which, if,—as doubtless strong illusions are,
 And strange disguisings whereby truth seems false,
 And, since I am but man, I dare not do

¹ Both “clown” and “clodpole” mean “lout,” “stupid one.”

² “If these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19.40). There is also a hint of the children's chant, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, / But names will never hurt me.”

- God's work until assured I see with God,—
If I should bring my lips to breathe that name
1415 And they be innocent,—nay, by one mere touch
Of innocence redeemed from utter guilt,—
That name will bar the door and bid fate pass.
I will not say 'It is a messenger,
A neighbour, even a belated man,
1420 Much less your husband's friend, your husband's self:'
At such appeal the door is bound to ope.
But I will say"—here's rhetoric and to spare!
Why, Sir, the stumbling-block is cursed and kicked,
Block though it be; the name that brought offence
1425 Will bring offence: the burnt child dreads the fire
Although that fire feed on some taper-wick
Which never left the altar nor singed a fly:
And had a harmless man tripped you by chance,
How would you wait him, stand or step aside,
1430 When next you heard he rolled your way? Enough.

- "Giuseppe Caponsacchi!" Guido cried;
And open flew the door: enough again.
Vengeance, you know, burst, like a mountain-wave
That holds a monster in it, over the house,
1435 And wiped its filthy four walls free at last
With a wash of hell-fire,—father, mother, wife,
Killed them all, bathed his name clean in their blood,
And, reeking so, was caught, his friends and he,
Haled hither and imprisoned yesternight
1440 O' the day all this was.

Now, Sir, tale is told,
Of how the old couple come to lie in state
Though hacked to pieces,—never, the expert say,
So thorough a study of stabbing—while the wife

- 1445 (Viper-like, very difficult to slay)¹
 Writhes still through every ring of her, poor wretch,
 At the Hospital hard by—survives, we'll hope,
 To somewhat purify her putrid soul
 By full confession, make so much amends
 1450 While time lasts; since at day's end die she must.

- For Caponsacchi,—why, they'll have him here,
 As hero of the adventure, who so fit
 To figure in the coming Carnival?
 'T will make the fortune of whate'er saloon
 1455 Hears him recount, with helpful cheek, and eye
 Hotly indignant now, now dewy-dimmed,
 The incidents of flight, pursuit, surprise,
 Capture, with hints of kisses all between—
 While Guido, wholly unromantic spouse,
 1460 No longer fit to laugh at since the blood
 Gave the broad farce an all too brutal air,
 Why, he and those four luckless friends of his
 May tumble in the straw this bitter day—
 Laid by the heels i' the New Prison, I hear,
 1465 To bide their trial, since trial, and for the life,
 Follows if but for form's sake: yes, indeed!

- But with a certain issue: no dispute,
 "Try him," bids law: formalities oblige:
 But as to the issue,—look me in the face!—
 1470 If the law thinks to find them guilty, Sir,

¹ Folk herpetology held that wounded snakes survived until after sunset and in some cases had the power to make themselves whole again. ("We have scotch'd the snake, not killed it: / She'll close and be herself," *Macbeth* 3.2.13–14.) Pompilia actually lived three more days.

- Master or men—touch one hair of the five,
 Then I say in the name of all that's left
 Of honour in Rome, civility i' the world
 Whereof Rome boasts herself the central source,—
- 1475 There's an end to all hope of justice more.
 Astraea's¹ gone indeed, let hope go too!
 Who is it dares impugn the natural law,
 Deny God's word "the faithless wife shall die"?²
 What, are we blind? How can we fail to learn
- 1480 This crowd of miseries make the man a mark,
 Accumulate on one devoted head
 For our example?—yours and mine who read
 Its lesson thus—"Henceforward let none dare
 Stand, like a natural³ in the public way,
 1485 Letting the very urchins twitch his beard
 And tweak his nose, to earn a nickname so,
 Be styled male-Grissel⁴ or else modern Job!"
 Had Guido, in the twinkling of an eye,
 Summed up the reckoning, promptly paid himself,
- 1490 That morning when he came up with the pair
 At the wayside inn,—exacted his just debt
 By aid of what first mattock, pitchfork, axe
 Came to hand in the helpful stable-yard,
 And with that axe, if providence so pleased,

¹ the goddess of justice.

² The exact phrase does not occur in the Bible, but the idea is that of, for example, Leviticus 20.10: "the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."

³ idiot.

⁴ Griselda (a woman) was the model of boundless patience (Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*).

- 1495 Cloven each head, by some Rolando-stroke,¹
 In one clean cut from crown to clavicle,²
 —Slain the priest-gallant, the wife-paramour,
 Sticking, for all defence, in each skull's cleft
 The rhyme and reason of the stroke thus dealt,
- 1500 To-wit, those letters and last evidence
 Of shame, each package in its proper place,—
 Bidding, who pitied, undistend the skulls,—
 I say, the world had praised the man. But no!
 That were too plain, too straight, too simply just!
- 1505 He hesitates, calls law forsooth to help.
 And law, distasteful to who calls in law
 When honour is beforehand and would serve,
 What wonder if law hesitate in turn,
 Plead her disuse to calls o' the kind, reply
- 1510 (Smiling a little) “T is yourself assess
 The worth of what's lost, sum of damage done.
 What you touched with so light a finger-tip,
 You whose concern it was to grasp the thing,
 Why must law gird herself and grapple with?
- 1515 Law, alien to the actor³ whose warm blood
 Asks heat from law whose veins run lukewarm milk,—
 What you dealt lightly with, shall law make out
 Heinous forsooth?”

Sir, what's the good of law

- 1520 In a case o' the kind? None, as she all but says.
 Call in law when a neighbour breaks your fence,
 Cribs from your field, tampers with rent or lease,

¹ the sword of Roland, Charlemagne's nephew.

² collarbone.

³ man of action.

Touches the purse or pocket,—but wooes your wife?

No: take the old way trod when men were men!

1525 Guido preferred the new path,—for his pains,
Stuck in a quagmire, floundered worse and worse
Until he managed somehow scramble back
Into the safe sure rutted road once more,
Revenged his own wrong like a gentleman.

1530 Once back 'mid the familiar prints, no doubt
He made too rash amends for his first fault,
Vaulted too loftily over what barred him late,
And lit i' the mire again,—the common chance,
The natural over-energy: the deed

1535 Maladroit yields three deaths instead of one,
And one life left: for where's the Canon's corpse?

All which is the worse for Guido, but, be frank—
The better for you and me and all the world,
Husbands of wives, especially in Rome.

1540 The thing is put right, in the old place,—ay,
The rod hangs on its nail behind the door,
Fresh from the brine: a matter I commend
To the notice, during Carnival that's near,
Of a certain what's-his-name and jackanapes
1545 Somewhat too civil of eyes with lute and song
About a house here, where I keep a wife.
(You, being his cousin, may go tell him so.)

III

THE OTHER HALF-ROME

- ANOTHER day that finds her living yet,
Little Pompilia, with the patient brow
And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
And, under the white hospital-array,¹
- 5 A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
You'd think, yet now, stabbed through and through
again,
- Alive i' the ruins. 'T is a miracle.
- It seems that, when her husband struck her first,
She prayed Madonna just that she might live
- 10 So long as to confess and be absolved;
And whether it was that, all her sad life long
Never before successful in a prayer,
This prayer rose with authority too dread,—
Or whether, because earth was hell to her,
- 15 By compensation, when the blackness broke
She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool blue,
To show her for a moment such things were,—
Or else,—as the Augustinian Brother² thinks,
The friar who took confession from her lip,—
- 20 When a probationary soul that moved
From nobleness to nobleness, as she,
Over the rough way of the world, succumbs,
Bloodies its last thorn with unflinching foot,

The time is either the second day (I 894–95; this book, l. 36) or the third (I 904) after the murders. Preview: I 883–909.

¹ See note to I 1085.

² Fra Celestino. See XII 441–642.

- The angels love to do their work betimes,
- 25 Staunch some wounds here nor leave so much for God.
 Who knows? However it be, confessed, absolved,
 She lies, with overplus of life beside
 To speak and right herself from first to last,
 Right the friend also, lamb-pure, lion-brave,
- 30 Care for the boy's concerns, to save the son
 From the sire, her two-weeks' infant orphaned thus,
 And—with best smile of all reserved for him—
 Pardon that sire and husband from the heart.
 A miracle, so tell your Molinists!
- 35 There she lies in the long white lazarus-house.
 Rome has besieged, these two days, never doubt,
 Saint Anna's where she waits her death, to hear
 Though but the chink o' the bell, turn o' the hinge
 When the reluctant wicket¹ opes at last,
- 40 Lets in, on now this and now that pretence,
 Too many by half,—complain the men of art,—²
 For a patient in such plight. The lawyers first
 Paid the due visit—justice must be done;
 They took her witness, why the murder was.
- 45 Then the priests followed properly,—a soul
 To shrive; 't was Brother Celestine's own right,
 The same who noises thus her gifts³ abroad.
 But many more, who found they were old friends,
 Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
- 50 And go forth boasting of it and to boast.
 Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,

¹ small door set inside a larger one.

² doctors.

³ virtues.

- Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
 Just as she felt the benefit begin,
 The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
 55 Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life
 At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much more
 Had she but brushed the body as she tried!
 Cavalier Carlo—well, there's some excuse
 For him—Maratta¹ who paints Virgins so—
 60 He too must fee the porter and slip by
 With pencil cut and paper squared, and straight
 There was he figuring away at face:
 "A lovelier face is not in Rome," cried he,
 "Shaped like a peacock's egg, the pure as pearl,
 65 That hatches you anon a snow-white chick."
 Then, oh that pair of eyes, that pendent hair,
 Black this and black the other! Mighty fine—
 But nobody cared ask to paint the same,
 Nor grew a poet over hair and eyes
 70 Four little years ago when, ask and have,
 The woman who wakes all this rapture leaned
 Flower-like from out her window² long enough,
 As much uncomplimented as uncropped
 By comers and goers in Via Vittoria: eh?
 75 'T is just a flower's fate: past parterre³ we trip,
 Till peradventure someone plucks our sleeve—
 "Yon blossom at the briar's end, that's the rose

¹ Roman painter of great contemporary reputation (1625–1713).

² Browning recalls the image in the opening lines of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" (1850): "The blessed damozel leaned out / From the gold bar of Heaven."

³ formal garden.

- Two jealous people fought for yesterday
 And killed each other: see, there's undisturbed
 80 A pretty pool at the root, of rival red!"
 Then cry we "Ah, the perfect paragon!"
 Then crave we "Just one keepsake-leaf for us!"

- Truth lies between: there's anyhow a child
 Of seventeen years, whether a flower or weed,
 85 Ruined: who did it shall account to Christ—
 Having no pity on the harmless life
 And gentle face and girlish form he found,
 And thus flings back. Go practise if you please
 With men and women: leave a child alone
 90 For Christ's particular love's sake!—so I say.

- Somebody, at the bedside, said much more,
 Took on him to explain the secret cause
 O' the crime: quoth he, "Such crimes are very rife,
 Explode nor make us wonder now-a-days,
 95 Seeing that Antichrist disseminates
 That doctrine of the Philosophic Sin:¹
 Molinos' sect will soon make earth too hot!"
 "Nay," groaned the Augustinian, "what's there new?
 Crime will not fail to flare up from men's hearts
 100 While hearts are men's and so born criminal;
 Which one fact, always old yet ever new,
 Accounts for so much crime that, for my part,
 Molinos may go whistle to the wind
 That waits outside a certain church,² you know!"

[———]

¹ See note to II 178.

² The piazza outside the Gesù church in Rome was notoriously windy.

- 105 Though really it does seem as if she here,
 Pompilia, living so and dying thus,
 Has had undue experience how much crime
 A heart can hatch. Why was she made to learn
 —Not you, not I, not even Molinos' self—
- 110 What Guido Franceschini's heart could hold?
 Thus saintship is effected probably;
 No sparing saints the process!—which the more
 Tends to the reconciling us, no saints,
 To sinnership, immunity and all.¹
- 115 For see now: Pietro and Violante's life
 Till seventeen years ago, all Rome might note
 And quote for happy—see the signs distinct
 Of happiness as we yon Triton's trump.²
 What could they be but happy?—balanced so,
- 120 Nor low i' the social scale nor yet too high,
 Nor poor nor richer than comports with ease,
 Nor bright and envied, nor obscure and scorned,
 Nor so young that their pleasures fell too thick,
 Nor old past catching pleasure when it fell,
- 125 Nothing above, below the just degree,
 All at the mean where joy's components mix.
 So again, in the couple's very souls
 You saw the adequate half with half to match,
 Each having and each lacking somewhat, both
- 130 Making a whole that had all and lacked nought.
 The round and sound, in whose composure³ just
 The acquiescent and recipient side

¹ exemption from the trials incident to sainthood.

² Bernini's statue of the Triton, referred to at I 899.

³ balanced composition.

- Was Pietro's, and the stirring striving one
 Violante's: both in union gave the due
 135 Quietude, enterprise, craving and content,
 Which go to bodily health and peace of mind.
 But, as 't is said a body, rightly mixed,
 Each element in equipoise, would last
 Too long and live for ever,—accordingly
 140 Holds a germ—sand-grain weight too much i' the scale—
 Ordained to get predominance one day
 And so bring all to ruin and release,—
 Not otherwise a fatal germ lurked here:¹
 “With mortals much must go, but something stays;
 145 Nothing will stay of our so happy selves.”
 Out of the very ripeness of life's core
 A worm was bred²—“Our life shall leave no fruit.”
 Enough of bliss, they thought, could bliss bear seed,
 Yield its like, propagate a bliss in turn
 150 And keep the kind up; not supplant themselves
 But put in evidence, record they were,
 Show them, when done with, i' the shape of a child.
 “T is in a child, man and wife grow complete,
 One flesh: God says so:³ let him do his work!”
- 155 Now, one reminder of this gnawing want,
 One special prick o' the maggot at the core,
 Always befell when, as the day came round,
 A certain yearly sum,—our Pietro being,

¹ 137–43 A philosophical notion mixing the Aristotelian concept of the “fatal flaw” with the idea of original sin.

² Compare the different application of the same figure at II 209–10.

³ “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and the two shall become one” (Matthew 19.5). But nothing is said about “a child.”

- As the long name runs, an usufructuary,—¹
- 160 Dropped in the common bag as interest
Of money, his till death, not afterward,
Failing an heir: an heir would take and take,
A child of theirs be wealthy in their place
To nobody's hurt—the stranger else seized all.
- 165 Prosperity rolled river-like and stopped,
Making their mill go; but when wheel wore out,
The wave would find a space and sweep on free
And, half-a-mile off, grind some neighbour's corn.

- Adam-like, Pietro sighed and said no more:
- 170 Eve saw the apple² was fair and good to taste,
So, plucked it, having asked the snake advice.
She told her husband God was merciful,
And his and her prayer granted at the last:
Let the old mill-stone moulder,—wheel unworn,
- 175 Quartz from the quarry, shot into the stream
Adroitly, as before should go bring grist—
Their house continued to them by an heir,
Their vacant heart replenished with a child.
We have her own confession³ at full length
- 180 Made in the first remorse: 't was Jubilee
Pealed in the ear o' the conscience and it woke.
She found she had offended God no doubt,
So much was plain from what had happened since,
Misfortune on misfortune; but she harmed
- 185 No one i' the world, so far as she could see.

¹ recipient of income.

² a repetition of the same cast (Pietro as Adam, Violante as Eve) seen at II 253-54.

³ See note to II 164.

- The act had gladdened Pietro to the height,
Her spouse whom God himself must gladden so
Or not at all: thus much seems probable
From the implicit faith, or rather say
- 190 Stupid credulity of the foolish man
Who swallowed such a tale nor strained a whit¹
Even at his wife's far-over-fifty years
Matching his sixty-and-under. Him she blessed;
And as for doing any detriment
- 195 To the veritable heir,—why, tell her first
Who was he? Which of all the hands held up
I' the crowd, one day would gather round their gate,
Did she so wrong by intercepting thus
The ducat, spendthrift fortune thought to fling
- 200 For a scramble just to make the mob break shins?
She kept it, saved them kicks and cuffs thereby.
While at the least one good work had she wrought,
Good, clearly and incontestably! Her cheat—
What was it to its subject, the child's self,
- 205 But charity and religion? See the girl!
A body most like—a soul too probably—
Doomed to death, such a double death as waits
The illicit offspring of a common trull,
Sure to resent and forthwith rid herself
- 210 Of a mere interruption to sin's trade,
In the efficacious way old Tiber knows.
Was not so much proved by the ready sale
O' the child, glad transfer of this irksome chance?²
Well then, she had caught up this castaway:

¹ "Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23.24).

² embarrassment.

215 This fragile egg,¹ some careless wild bird dropped,
 She had picked from where it waited the foot-fall,
 And put in her own breast till forth broke finch
 Able to sing God praise on mornings now.
 What so excessive harm was done?—she asked.

220 To which demand the dreadful answer comes—
 For that same deed, now at Lorenzo's church,
 Both agents, conscious and unconscious,² lie;
 While she, the deed was done to benefit,
 Lies also, the most lamentable of things,
 225 Yonder where curious people count her breaths,
 Calculate how long yet the little life
 Unspilt may serve their turn nor spoil the show,
 Give them their story, then the church its group.³

Well, having gained Pompila, the girl grew
 230 I' the midst of Pietro here, Violante there,
 Each, like a semicircle with stretched arms,
 Joining the other round her preciousness—
 Two walls that go about a garden-plot
 Where a chance sliver, branchlet slipt from bole
 235 Of some tongue-leaved eye-figured Eden tree,⁴
 Filched by two exiles and borne far away,
 Patiently glorifies their solitude,—

¹ It will be laid in Guido's nest at V 655.

² unwitting and unwitting.

³ complete the group of three bodies; see II 136–37.

⁴ perhaps, as Cook speculates, a reference to "some allegorical woodcut of the early seventeenth century, representing the tree of knowledge of good or evil," or a suggestion of the serpent hiding in the tree, camouflaged by its leaves and knots (see note to V 1956–57). In any case, this tree has its counterpart in the stump at II 256.

- Year by year mounting, grade by grade surmounts
The builded brick-work, yet is compassed still,
240 Still hidden happily and shielded safe,—
Else why should miracle have graced the ground?
But on the twelfth sun that brought April there
What meant that laugh? The coping-stone was reached;
Nay, above towered a light tuft of bloom
245 To be toyed with by butterfly or bee,
Done good to or else harm to from outside:
Pompilia's root, stalk and a branch or two
Home enclosed still, the rest would be the world's.
All which was taught our couple though obtuse,
250 Since walls have ears, when one day brought a priest,¹
Smooth-mannered soft-speeched sleek-cheeked visitor,
The notable Abate Paolo—known
As younger brother of a Tuscan house
Whereof the actual representative,
255 Count Guido, had employed his youth and age
In culture of Rome's most productive plant—
A cardinal: but years pass and change comes,²
In token of which, here was our Paolo brought
To broach a weighty business. Might he speak?
260 Yes—to Violante somehow caught alone
While Pietro took his after-dinner doze,
And the young maiden, busily as befits,
Minded her broider-frame three chambers off.

So—giving now his great flap-hat a gloss
265 With flat o' the hand between-whiles, soothing now

¹ Paolo's visit to the Comparinis as Guido's envoy is Browning's invention.

² See note to V 285–342.

- The silk from out its creases o'er the calf,
 Setting the stocking clerical again,
 But never disengaging, once engaged,
 The thin clear grey hold of his eyes on her—
- 270 He dissertated on that Tuscan house,
 Those Franceschini,—very old they were—
 Not rich however—oh, not rich, at least,
 As people look to be who, low i' the scale
 One way, have reason, rising all they can
 275 By favour of the money-bag! 't is fair—
 Do all gifts go together? But don't suppose
 That being not so rich means all so poor!
 Say rather, well enough—i' the way, indeed,
 Ha, ha, to fortune better than the best:
- 280 Since if his brother's patron-friend kept faith,
 Put into promised play the Cardinalate,
 Their house might wear the red cloth¹ that keeps warm,
 Would but the Count have patience—there's the point!
 For he was slipping into years apace,
- 285 And years make men restless—they needs must spy
 Some certainty, some sort of end assured,
 Some sparkle, tho' from topmost beacon-tip,
 That warrants life a harbour through the haze.²
 In short, call him fantastic³ as you choose,
- 290 Guido was home-sick, yearned for the old sights
 And usual faces,—fain would settle himself
 And have the patron's bounty when it fell⁴
 Irrigate far rather than deluge near,

¹ the garb of a cardinal.

² Compare I 1182–95, where a similar beacon results in a shipwreck.

³ irrational, lacking in common sense.

⁴ In I. 280 it was “*if* his brother's patron-friend kept faith.”

Go fertilize Arezzo, not flood Rome.¹

- 295 Sooth to say, 't was the wiser wish: the Count
Proved wanting in ambition,—let us avouch,
Since truth is best,—in callousness of heart,
And winced at pin-pricks whereby honours hang
A ribbon o'er each puncture: his—no soul
- 300 Ecclesiastic (here the hat was brushed)
Humble but self-sustaining, calm and cold,
Having, as one who puts his hand to the plough,²
Renounced the over-vivid family-feel—
Poor brother Guido! All too plain, he pined
- 305 Amid Rome's pomp and glare for dinginess
And that dilapidated palace-shell
Vast as a quarry³ and, very like, as bare—
Since to this comes old grandeur now-a-days—
Or that absurd wild villa in the waste
- 310 O' the hill side, breezy though, for who likes air,
Vittiano,⁴ nor unpleasant with its vines,
Outside the city and the summer heats.
And now his harping on this one tense chord
The villa and the palace, palace this
- 315 And villa the other, all day and all night
Creaked like the implacable cicala's⁵ cry
And made one's ear-drum ache: nought else would serve
But that, to light his mother's visage up

¹ Compare similar imagery above, ll. 165–68, 174–76, and below, 715–17.

² "And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9.62).

³ "antres vast and deserts idle, / Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven" (*Othello* 1.3.140–41).

⁴ a village nine miles from Arezzo.

⁵ cicada's.

- With second youth, hope, gaiety again,
 320 He must find straightway, woo and haply win
 And bear away triumphant back, some wife.
 Well now, the man was rational in his way:
 He, the Abate,—ought he to interpose?
 Unless by straining still his tutelage
 325 (Priesthood leaps over elder-brothership)
 Across this difficulty: then let go,
 Leave the poor fellow in peace! Would that be wrong?
 There was no making Guido great, it seems,
 Spite of himself: then happy be his dole!
- 330 Indeed, the Abate's little interest
 Was somewhat nearly touched i' the case, they saw:
 Since if his simple kinsman so were bent,
 Began his rounds in Rome to catch a wife,
 Full soon would such unworldliness surprise
 335 The rare bird, sprinkle salt on phoenix' tail,
 And so secure the nest a sparrow-hawk.
 No lack of mothers here in Rome,—no dread
 Of daughters lured as larks by looking-glass!
 The first name-pecking credit-scratching¹ fowl
 340 Would drop her unfledged cuckoo in our nest
 To gather greyness there, give voice at length
 And shame the brood ... but it was long ago
 When crusades were, and we sent eagles forth!
 No, that at least the Abate could forestall.
- 345 He read the thought within his brother's word,
 Knew what he purposed better than himself.
 We want no name and fame—having our own:
 No worldly aggrandizement—such we fly:
 But if some wonder of a woman's-heart

¹ foraging in hope of finding social dignity.

- 350 Were yet untainted on this grimy earth,
 Tender and true—tradition tells of such—
 Prepared to pant¹ in time and tune with ours—
 If some good girl (a girl, since she must take
 The new bent, live new life, adopt new modes)
 355 Not wealthy (Guido for his rank was poor)
 But with whatever dowry came to hand,—
 There were the lady-love predestinate!
 And somehow the Abate's guardian eye—
 Scintillant, rutilant,² fraternal fire,—
 360 Roving round every way had seized the prize
 —The instinct of us, we, the spirituality!³
 Come, cards on table; was it true or false
 That here—here in this very tenement—⁴
 Yea, Via Vittoria did a marvel hide,
 365 Lily of a maiden,⁵ white with intact leaf
 Guessed thro' the sheath that saved it from the sun?
 A daughter with the mother's hands still clasped
 Over her head for fillet⁶ virginal,
 A wife worth Guido's house and hand and heart?
 370 He came to see; had spoken, he could no less—
 (A final cherish of the stockinged calf)
 If harm were,—well, the matter was off his mind.

Then with the great air did he kiss, devout,
 Violante's hand, and rise up his whole height

¹ beat.

² glittering, shining red.

³ clergy.

⁴ house.

⁵ Compare the use of the lily figure at II 303 and IV 323.

⁶ hair band.

- 375 (A certain purple gleam¹ about the black)
 And go forth grandly,—as if the Pope came next.
 And so Violante rubbed her eyes awhile,
 Got up too, walked to wake her Pietro soon
 And pour into his ear the mighty news
- 380 How somebody had somehow somewhere seen
 Their tree-top-tuft of bloom above the wall,
 And came now to apprise them the tree's self
 Was no such crab-sort as should go feed swine,
 But veritable gold, the Hesperian ball²
- 385 Ordained for Hercules to haste and pluck,
 And bear and give the Gods to banquet with—
 Hercules standing ready at the door.
 Whereon did Pietro rub his eyes in turn,
 Look very wise, a little woeful too,
- 390 Then, periwig on head, and cane in hand,
 Sally forth dignifiedly into the Square
 Of Spain across Babbuino³ the six steps,
 Toward the Boat-fountain where our idlers lounge,—
 Ask, for form's sake, who Hercules might be,
- 395 And have congratulation from the world.

Heartily laughed the world in his fool's-face
 And told him Hercules was just the heir
 To the stubble once a corn-field, and brick-heap

¹ "the air of a cardinal-to-be" (Cook), suggestive also of the iridescence of certain snakes.

² one of the golden apples which Ge (Earth) gave to Hera on her marriage to Zeus; Hercules, outwitting the Hesperides who stood guard along with a dragon, succeeded in gathering the apples. The legend is used again at VI 1002–09.

³ a street near the Piazza di Spagna; the "Boat-fountain" (next line) is at the foot of the steps from the Piazza to the Trinità de Monti.

Where used to be a dwelling-place now burned.

- 400 Guido and Franceschini; a Count,—ay:
 But a cross i' the poke¹ to bless the Countship? No!
 All gone except sloth, pride, rapacity,
 Humours of the imposthume² incident
 To rich blood that runs thin,—nursed to a head
- 405 By the rankly-salted soil—a cardinal's court
 Where, parasite and picker-up of crumbs,
 He had hung on long, and now, let go, said some,
 Shaken off, said others,—but in any case
 Tired of the trade and something worse for wear,
- 410 Was wanting to change town for country quick,
 Go home again: let Pietro help him home!
 The brother, Abate Paolo, shrewder mouse,
 Had pricked³ for comfortable quarters, inched
 Into the core of Rome, and fattened so;
- 415 But Guido, over-burly for rat's hole
 Suited to clerical slimness, starved outside,
 Must shift for himself: and so the shift was this!⁴
 What, was the snug retreat of Pietro tracked,
 The little provision for his old age snuffed?⁵
- 420 "Oh, make your girl a lady, an you list,
 But have more mercy on our wit than vaunt
 Your bargain as we burgesses⁶ who brag!
 Why, Goodman Dullard, if a friend must speak,
 Would the Count, think you, stoop to you and yours
- 425 Were there the value of one penny-piece

¹ a coin (of any denomination) in the purse.

² temperamental quirks caused by the abscess (disease).

³ put himself in position by piercing, boring.

⁴ a pun—this "shift," unlike the preceding one, means "scheme."

⁵ snuffed out.

⁶ See note to IV 65.

To rattle 'twixt his palms—or likelier laugh,
Bid your Pompilia help you black his shoe?"

Home again, shaking oft the puzzled pate,
Went Pietro to announce a change indeed,

- 430 Yet point Violante where some solace lay
Of a rueful sort,—the taper, quenched so soon,
Had ended merely in a snuff,¹ not stink—
Congratulate there was one hope the less
Not misery the more: and so an end.

- 435 The marriage thus impossible, the rest
Followed: our spokesman, Paolo, heard his fate,
Resignedly Count Guido bore the blow:

Violante wiped away the transient tear,
Renounced the playing Danae to gold dreams,²

- 440 Praised much her Pietro's prompt sagaciousness,
Found neighbours' envy natural, lightly laughed
At gossips' malice, fairly wrapped herself

In her integrity three folds about,
And, letting pass a little day or two,

- 445 Threw, even over that integrity,
Another wrappage, namely one thick veil
That hid her, matron-wise, from head to foot,
And, by the hand holding a girl veiled too,
Stood, one dim end of a December day,

- 450 In Saint Lorenzo on the altar-step—

¹ charred wick or puff of smoke.

² Danaë, imprisoned by her father Acrisius because an oracle had warned him she would be the mother of a son who would kill him, was visited by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold. The resulting child was Perseus, who did indeed kill Acrisius by accident.

Just where she lies now and that girl will lie—
 Only with fifty candles' company
 Now, in the place of the poor winking one
 Which saw,—doors shut and sacristan made sure,—

- 455 A priest—perhaps¹ Abate Paolo—wed
 Guido clandestinely,² irrevocably
 To his Pompilia aged thirteen years
 And five months,—witness the church register,—
 Pompilia, (thus become Count Guido's wife
 460 Clandestinely, irrevocably his,)
 Who all the while had borne, from first to last,
 As brisk a part i' the bargain, as yon lamb,
 Brought forth from basket and set out for sale,
 Bears while they chaffer,³ wary market-man
 465 And voluble housewife, o'er it,—each in turn
 Patting the curly calm unconscious head,
 With the shambles⁴ ready round the corner there,
 When the talk's talked out and a bargain struck.

Transfer complete, why, Pietro was apprised.

- 470 Violante sobbed the sobs and prayed the prayers
 And said the serpent tempted so she fell,
 Till Pietro had to clear his brow apace
 And make the best of matters: wrath at first,—
 How else? pacification presently,
 475 Why not?—could flesh withstand the impurled one,
 The very Cardinal, Paolo's patron-friend?

¹ Pompilia, however, says it *was* Paolo (VII 437).

² See note to II 70.

³ bargain, haggle.

⁴ slaughterhouse.

- Who, justifiably surnamed "a hinge,"¹
 Knew where the mollifying oil should drop
 To cure the creak o' the valve,—considerate
 480 For frailty, patient in a naughty world.²
 He even volunteered to supervise
 The rough draught of those marriage-articles
 Signed in a hurry by Pietro, since revoked:
 Trust's politic, suspicion does the harm,
 485 There is but one way to brow-beat this world,
 Dumb-founder doubt, and repay scorn in kind,—
 To go on trusting, namely, till faith move
 Mountains.³

And faith here made the mountains move.

- 490 Why, friends whose zeal cried "Caution ere too late!"—
 Bade "Pause ere jump, with both feet joined, on
 slough!"—
 Counselled "If rashness then, now temperance!"—
 Heard for their pains that Pietro had closed eyes,⁴
 Jumped and was in the middle of the mire,
 495 Money and all, just what should sink a man.
 By the mere marriage, Guido gained forthwith
 Dowry, his wife's right; no rescinding there:
 But Pietro, why must he needs ratify
 One gift Violante gave, pay down one doit⁵
 500 Promised in first fool's-flurry? Grasp the bag

¹ The word "cardinal" is derived from the Latin *cardo, cardinis*: "hinge, that on which something turns or depends."

² probably suggested by *The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.91: "So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

³ 1 Corinthians 13.2; Matthew 17.20, 21.21.

⁴ 493-520 Compare the quagmire image above, II 1526-33, where Guido is the victim.

⁵ a negligible sum (formerly a small Dutch coin).

- Lest the son's service flag,—is reason and rhyme,
 Above all when the son's a son-in-law.
- Words to the wind! The parents cast their lot
 Into the lap o' the daughter: and the son¹
- 505 Now with a right to lie there, took what fell,
 Pietro's whole having and holding,² house and field,
 Goods, chattels and effects, his worldly worth
 Present and in perspective, all renounced
 In favour of Guido. As for the usufruct—
- 510 The interest now, the principal anon,
 Would Guido please to wait, at Pietro's death:
 Till when, he must support the couple's charge,³
 Bear with them, housemates, pensionaries, pawned
 To an alien for fulfilment of their pact.
- 515 Guido should at discretion deal them orts,⁴
 Bread-bounty in Arezzo the strange place,—
 They who had lived deliciously and rolled
 Rome's choicest comfit 'neath the tongue before.
 Into this quag, "jump" bade the Cardinal!
- 520 And neck-deep in a minute there flounced⁵ they.

But they touched bottom at Arezzo: there—
 Four months' experience of how craft and greed
 Quickened by penury and pretentious hate
 Of plain truth, brutify and bestialize,—

525 Four months' taste of apportioned insolence,
 Cruelty graduated,⁶ dose by dose

¹ Compare II 393.

² property.

³ burden, responsibility.

⁴ scraps of refuse.

⁵ floundered.

⁶ meted out.

- Of ruffianism dealt out at bed and board,
 And lo, the work was done, success clapped hands.
 The starved, stripped, beaten brace of stupid dupes
 530 Broke at last in their desperation loose,
 Fled away for their lives, and lucky so;
 Found their account in casting coat¹ afar
 And bearing off a shred of skin at least:
 Left Guido lord o' the prey, as the lion is,
 535 And, careless what came after, carried their wrongs
 To Rome,—I nothing doubt, with such remorse
 As folly feels, since pain can make it wise,
 But crime, past wisdom, which is innocence,
 Needs not be plagued with till a later day.
- 540 Pietro went back to beg from door to door,
 In hope that memory not quite extinct
 Of cheery days and festive nights would move
 Friends and acquaintance—after the natural laugh,
 And tributary² “Just as we foretold—”
 545 To show some bowels,³ give the dregs o' the cup,
 Scraps of the trencher, to their host that was,
 Or let him share the mat with the mastiff, he
 Who lived large and kept open house so long.
 Not so Violante: ever a-head i' the march,
 550 Quick at the bye-road and the cut-across,
 She went first to the best adviser, God—
 Whose finger unmistakably was felt
 In all this retribution of the past.
 Here was the prize of sin, luck of a lie!

¹ suggestive of a snake shedding its skin; see below, ll. 694–96.

² gratuitous.

³ compassion.

- 555 But here too was what Holy Year would help,
 Bound to rid sinners of sin vulgar,¹ sin
 Abnormal, sin prodigious, up to sin
 Impossible and supposed for Jubilee' sake:
 To lift the leadenest of lies, let soar
- 560 The soul unhampered by a feather-weight.
 "I will" said she "go burn out this bad hole
 That breeds the scorpion, baulk the plague at least
 Of hope to further plague by progeny:
 I will confess my fault, be punished, yes,
- 565 But pardoned too: Saint Peter pays for all."

- So, with the crowd she mixed, made for the dome,
 Through the great door new-broken for the nonce²
 Marched, muffled more than ever matron-wise,
 Up the left nave to the formidable throne,
- 570 Fell into file with this the poisoner
 And that the parricide, and reached in turn
 The poor repugnant Penitentiary³
 Set at this gully-hole o' the world's discharge
 To help the frightfullest of filth have vent,
- 575 And then knelt down and whispered in his ear
 How she had bought Pompilia, palmed the babe
 On Pietro, passed the girl off as their child
 To Guido, and defrauded of his due
 This one and that one,—more than she could name,
- 580 Until her solid piece of wickedness

¹ petty, common.

² the extreme right-hand door in the west front of St. Peter's, normally walled up, but opened during a papal Jubilee year (l. 558 above).

³ member of a tribunal of the Holy See (the Sacred Penitentiary) charged with hearing confessions, especially of grave sins. "Repugnant" alludes to the feelings evoked in him by the sins confessed.

Happened to split and spread woe far and wide:
Contritely now she brought the case for cure.

Replied the throne—"Ere God forgive the guilt,
Make man some restitution! Do your part!

585 The owners of your husband's heritage,
Barred thence by this pretended birth and heir,—

Tell them, the bar came so, is broken so,
Theirs be the due reversion as before!

Your husband who, no partner in the guilt,

590 Suffers the penalty, led blindfold thus
By love of what he thought his flesh and blood
To alienate¹ his all in her behalf,—

Tell him too such contract is null and void!

Last, he who personates your son-in-law,

595 Who with sealed eyes and stopped ears, tame and mute,
Took at your hand that bastard of a whore
You called your daughter and he calls his wife,—
Tell him, and bear the anger which is just!
Then, penance so performed, may pardon be!"

600 Who could gainsay this just and right award?
Nobody in the world: but, out o' the world,
Who knows?—might timid intervention be
From any makeshift of an angel-guide,
Substitute for celestial guardianship,

605 Pretending to take care of the girl's self:
"Woman, confessing crime is healthy work,
And telling truth relieves a liar like you,
But how of my quite unconsidered charge?
No thought if, while this good befalls yourself,

¹ renounce.

- 610 Aught in the way of harm may find out her?"
 No least thought, I assure you: truth being truth,
 Tell it and shame the devil!
- Said and done:
- Home went Violante, disbosomed all:
- 615 And Pietro who, six months before, had borne
 Word after word of such a piece of news
 Like so much cold steel inched through his breast-blade,
 Now at its entry gave a leap for joy,¹
 As who—what did I say of one in a quag?—
- 620 Should catch a hand from heaven and spring thereby
 Out of the mud, on ten toes stand once more.
 "What? All that used to be, may be again?
 My money mine again, my house, my land,
 My chairs and tables, all mine evermore?
- 625 What, the girl's dowry never was the girl's,
 And, unpaid yet, is never now to pay?
 Then the girl's self, my pale Pompilia child
 That used to be my own with her great eyes—
 He who drove us forth, why should he keep her
- 630 When proved as very a pauper as himself?
 Will she come back, with nothing changed at all,
 And laugh 'But how you dreamed uneasily!
 I saw the great drops stand here on your brow—
 Did I do wrong to wake you with a kiss?'
- 635 No, indeed, darling! No, for wide awake
 I see another outburst of surprise:
 The lout-lord, bully-beggar, braggart-sneak,
 Who not content with cutting purse, crops ear—
 Assuredly it shall be salve to mine

¹ "And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb" (Luke 1.41).

- 640 When this great news red-letters him, the rogue!
 Ay, let him taste the teeth o' the trap, this fox,
 Give us our lamb back, golden fleece and all,
 Let her creep in and warm our breasts again!
 Why care for the past? We three are our old selves,
 645 And know now what the outside world is worth."
 And so, he carried case before the courts;
 And there Violante, blushing to the bone,
 Made public declaration of her fault,
 Renounced her motherhood, and prayed the law
 650 To interpose, frustrate of its effect
 Her folly, and redress the injury done.

- Whereof was the disastrous consequence,
 That though indisputably clear the case
 (For thirteen years are not so large a lapse,
 655 And still six witnesses survived in Rome
 To prove the truth o' the tale)—yet, patent wrong
 Seemed Guido's; the first cheat had chanced on him:
 Here was the pity that, deciding right,
 Those who began the wrong would gain the prize.
 660 Guido pronounced the story one long lie
 Lied to do robbery and take revenge:
 Or say it were no lie at all but truth,
 Then, it both robbed the right heirs and shamed him
 Without revenge to humanize the deed:
 665 What had he done when first they shamed him thus?
 But that were too fantastic: losels¹ they,
 And leasing this world's-wonder of a lie,
 They lied to blot him though it brand themselves.

[— — —]

¹ worthless persons.

So answered Guido through the Abate's mouth.

- 670 Wherefore the court, its customary way,
Inclined to the middle course the sage affect.
They held the child to be a changeling,—good:
But, lest the husband got no good thereby,
675 Should yet be his, if not by right then grace—¹
Part-payment for the plain injustice done.
As for that other contract, Pietro's work,
Renunciation of his own estate,
That must be cancelled—give him back his gifts,
680 He was no party to the cheat at least!
So ran the judgment:—whence a prompt appeal
On both sides, seeing right is absolute.
Cried Pietro “Is the child no child of mine?
Why give her a child's dowry?”—“Have I right
685 To the dowry, why not to the rest as well?”
Cried Guido, or cried Paolo in his name:
Till law said “Reinvestigate the case!”
And so the matter pends, to this same day.

Hence new disaster—here no outlet seemed;

- 690 Whatever the fortune of the battle-field,
No path whereby the fatal man might march
Victorious, wreath on head and spoils in hand,
And back turned full upon the baffled foe,—
Nor cranny whence, desperate and disgraced,
695 Stripped to the skin, he might be fain to crawl
Worm-like, and so away with his defeat
To other fortune and a novel prey.
No, he was pinned to the place there, left alone

¹ kindness.

With his immense hate and, the solitary
 700 Subject to satisfy that hate, his wife.
 "Cast her off? Turn her naked out of doors?
 Easily said! But still the action pends,
 Still dowry, principal and interest,
 Pietro's possessions, all I bargained for,—
 705 Any good day, be but my friends alert,
 May give them me if she continue mine.
 Yet, keep her? Keep the puppet of my foes—
 Her voice that lisps me back their curse—her eye
 They lend their leer of triumph to—her lip
 710 I touch and taste their very filth upon?"

In short, he also took the middle course
 Rome taught him—did at last excogitate¹
 How he might keep the good and leave the bad
 Twined in revenge, yet extricable,—nay
 715 Make the very hate's eruption, very rush
 Of the unpent sluice of cruelty relieve
 His heart first, then go fertilize his field.
 What if the girl-wife, tortured with due care,
 Should take, as though spontaneously, the road
 720 It were impolitic to thrust her on?
 If, goaded, she broke out in full revolt,
 Followed her parents i' the face o' the world,
 Branded as runaway not castaway,
 Self-sentenced and self-punished in the act?
 725 So should the loathed form and detested face
 Launch themselves into hell and there be lost
 While he looked o'er the brink with folded arms;
 So should the heaped-up shames go shuddering back

¹ think out.

- O' the head o' the heapers, Pietro and his wife,
 730 And bury in the breakage three at once:
 While Guido, left free, no one right renounced,
 Gain present, gain prospective, all the gain,
 None of the wife except her rights absorbed,
 Should ask law what it was law paused about—
 735 If law were dubious still whose word to take,
 The husband's—dignified and derelict,¹
 Or the wife's—the ... what I tell you. It should be.

- Guido's first step was to take pen, indite
 A letter to the Abate,—not his own,
 740 His wife's,—she should re-write, sign, seal and send.
 She liberally told the household-news,
 Rejoiced her vile progenitors were gone,
 Revealed their malice—how they even laid²
 A last injunction on her, when they fled,
 745 That she should forthwith find a paramour,
 Complot with him to gather spoil enough,
 Then burn the house down,—taking previous care
 To poison all its inmates overnight,—
 And so companioned, so provisioned too,
 750 Follow to Rome and there join fortunes gay.
 This letter, traced in pencil-characters,
 Guido as easily got re-traced in ink
 By his wife's pen, guided from end to end,
 As if it had been just so much Chinese.
 755 For why? That wife could broider, sing perhaps,
 Pray certainly, but no more read than write
 This letter “which yet write she must,” he said,

¹ deserted.

² 743–50 Compare the discrepant account at II 702–18.

“Being half courtesy and compliment,
Half sisterliness: take the thing on trust!”

- 760 She had as readily re-traced the words
Of her own death-warrant,—in some sort 't was so.
This letter the Abate in due course
Communicated to such curious souls
In Rome as needs must pry into the cause
765 Of quarrel, why the Comparini fled
The Franceschini, whence the grievance grew,
What the hubbub meant: “Nay,—see the wife's own
word,
Authentic answer! Tell detractors too
There's a plan formed, a programme figured¹ here
770 —Pray God no after-practice put to proof,
This letter cast no light upon, one day!”

So much for what should work in Rome: back now
To Arezzo, follow up the project there,
Forward the next step with as bold a foot,

- 775 And plague Pompilia to the height, you see!
Accordingly did Guido set himself
To worry up and down, across, around,
The woman, hemmed in by her household-bars,—
Chase her about the coop of daily life,²
780 Having first stopped each outlet thence save one
Which, like bird with a ferret in her haunt,
She needs must seize as sole way of escape
Though there was tied and twittering a decoy
To seem as if it tempted,—just the plume

¹ described.

² 779–87 Note the related image at II 820–25.

- 785 O' the popinjay,¹ not a real respite there
 From tooth and claw of something in the dark,—
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi.

Now begins

- The tenebrific² passage of the tale:
 790 How hold a light, display the cavern's gorge?³
 How, in this phase of the affair, show truth?
 Here is the dying wife who smiles and says
 "So it was,—so it was not,—how it was,
 I never knew nor ever care to know—"
 795 Till they all weep, physician, man of law,
 Even that poor old bit of battered brass
 Beaten out of all shape by the world's sins,
 Common utensil of the lazar-house—
 Confessor Celestino groans "T is truth,
 800 All truth and only truth: there's something here,
 Some presence in the room beside us all,
 Something that every lie expires before:
 No question she was pure from first to last."
 So far is well and helps us to believe:
 805 But beyond, she the helpless, simple-sweet
 Or silly-sooth,⁴ unskilled to break one blow
 At her good fame by putting finger forth,—
 How can she render service to the truth?
 The bird says "So I fluttered where a springe
 810 Caught me: the springe did not contrive itself,
 That I know: who contrived it, God forgive!"
 But we, who hear no voice and have dry eyes,

¹ fop.

² shadowy.

³ inner portion.

⁴ naïve, easily deceived.

- Must ask,—we cannot else, absolving her,—
 How of the part played by that same decoy
 815 I' the catching, caging? Was himself caught first?
 We deal here with no innocent at least,
 No witless victim,—he's a man of the age
 And priest beside,—persuade the mocking world
 Mere charity boiled over in this sort!
- 820 He whose own safety too,—(the Pope's apprised—
 Good-natured with the secular offence,
 The Pope looks grave on priesthood in a scrape)
 Our priest's own safety therefore, may-be life,
 Hangs on the issue! You will find it hard.
- 825 Guido is here to meet you with fixed foot,
 Stiff like a statue—"Leave what went before!
 My wife fled i' the company of a priest,
 Spent two days and two nights alone with him:
 Leave what came after!" He stands hard to throw.
- 830 Moreover priests are merely flesh and blood;
 When we get weakness, and no guilt beside,
 'Tis no such great ill-fortune: finding grey,
 We gladly call that white which might be black,
 Too used to the double-dye. So, if the priest
- 835 Moved by Pompilia's youth and beauty, gave
 Way to the natural weakness.... Anyhow
 Here be facts, charactery;¹ what they spell
 Determine, and thence pick what sense you may!

- There was a certain young bold handsome priest
 840 Popular in the city, far and wide
 Famed, since Arezzo's but a little place,
 As the best of good companions, gay and grave

¹ "facts in black and white" (Cook); "charactery" means "handwriting."

- At the decent¹ minute; settled in his stall,
Or sidling, lute on lap, by lady's couch,
845 Ever the courtly Canon; see in him
A proper star to climb and culminate,
Have its due handbreadth of the heaven at Rome,
Though meanwhile pausing on Arezzo's edge,
As modest candle does 'mid mountain fog,
850 To rub off redness and rusticity
Ere it sweep chastened, gain the silver-sphere!
Whether through Guido's absence or what else,
This Caponsacchi, favourite of the town,
Was yet no friend of his nor free o' the house,
855 Though both moved in the regular magnates' march:
Each must observe the other's tread and halt
At church, saloon, theatre, house of play.
Who could help noticing the husband's slouch,
The black of his brow—or miss the news that buzzed
860 Of how the little solitary wife
Wept and looked out of window all day long?
What need of minute search into such springs
As start men, set o' the move?—machinery
Old as earth, obvious as the noonday sun.
865 Why, take men as they come,—an instance now,—
Of all those who have simply gone to see
Pompilia on her deathbed since four days,
Half at the least are, call it how you please,
In love with her—I don't except the priests
870 Nor even the old confessor whose eyes run
Over at what he styles his sister's voice
Who died so early and weaned him from the world.
Well, had they viewed her ere the paleness pushed

¹ appropriate.

- The last o' the red o' the rose away, while yet
 875 Some hand, adventurous¹ 'twixt the wind and her,
 Might let shy life run back and raise the flower
 Rich with reward up to the guardian's face,—
 Would they have kept that hand employed all day
 At fumbling on with prayer-book pages? No!
 880 Men are men: why then need I say one word
 More than that our mere man the Canon here
 Saw, pitied, loved Pompilia?

- This is why;
 This startling why: that Caponsacchi's self—
 885 Whom foes and friends alike avouch, for good
 Or ill, a man of truth whate'er betide,
 Intrepid altogether, reckless² too
 How his own fame and fortune, tossed to the winds,
 Suffer by any turn the adventure take,
 890 Nay, more—not thrusting, like a badge to hide,
 'Twixt shirt and skin a joy which shown is shame—
 But flirting flag-like i' the face o' the world
 This tell-tale kerchief, this conspicuous love
 For the lady,—oh, called innocent love, I know!
 895 Only, such scarlet fiery innocence
 As most folk would try muffle up in shade,—
 —'T is strange then that this else abashless mouth
 Should yet maintain, for truth's sake which is God's,
 That it was not he made the first advance,
 900 That, even ere word had passed between the two,
 Pompilia penned him letters, passionate prayers,
 If not love, then so simulating love

¹ coming by chance.

² uncaring.

- That he, no novice to the taste of thyme,
Turned from such over-luscious honey-clot
- 905 At end o' the flower, and would not lend his lip
Till ... but the tale here frankly outsoars faith:
There must be falsehood somewhere. For her part,
Pompilia quietly constantly avers
She never penned a letter in her life¹
- 910 Nor to the Canon nor any other man,
Being incompetent to write and read:
Nor had she ever uttered word to him, nor he
To her till that same evening when they met,
She on her window-terrace, he beneath
- 915 I' the public street, as was their fateful chance,
And she adjured him in the name of God
To find out, bring to pass where, when and how
Escape with him to Rome might be contrived.
Means were found, plan laid, time fixed, she avers,
- 920 And heart assured to heart in loyalty,
All at an impulse! All extemporized
As in romance-books! Is that credible?
Well, yes: as she avers this with calm mouth
Dying, I do think "Credible!" you'd cry—
- 925 Did not the priest's voice come to break the spell.
They questioned him apart, as the custom is,
When first the matter made a noise at Rome,
And he, calm, constant then as she is now,
For truth's sake did assert and re-assert
- 930 Those letters called him to her and he came,
—Which damns the story credible otherwise.
Why should this man,—mad to devote himself,
Careless what comes of his own fame, the first,—

¹ See General Note 5 (p. 771).

- Be studious thus to publish and declare
935 Just what the lightest nature loves to hide,
So screening lady from the byword's laugh
"First spoke the lady, last the cavalier!"
—I say,—why should the man tell truth just now
When graceful lying meets such ready shrift?
- 940 Or is there a first moment for a priest
As for a woman, when invaded shame
Must have its first and last excuse to show?
Do both contrive love's entry in the mind
Shall look, i' the manner of it, a surprise,—
- 945 That after, once the flag o' the fort hauled down,
Effrontery may sink drawbridge, open gate,
Welcome and entertain the conqueror?
Or what do you say to a touch of the devil's worst?
Can it be that the husband, he who wrote
- 950 The letter to his brother I told you of,
I' the name of her it meant to criminate,—
What if he wrote those letters to the priest?
Further the priest says, when it first befell,
This folly o' the letters, that he checked the flow,
- 955 Put them back lightly each with its reply.
Here again vexes new discrepancy:
There never reached her eye a word from him:
He did write but she could not read—could just
Burn the offence to wifehood, womanhood,
- 960 So did burn: never bade him come to her,
Yet when it proved he must come, let him come,
And when he did come though uncalled,—why, spoke
Prompt by an inspiration: thus it chanced.
Will you go somewhat back to understand?

- 965 When first, pursuant to his plan, there sprang,
Like an uncaged beast, Guido's cruelty
On soul and body of his wife, she cried
To those whom law appoints resource for such,
The secular guardian,—that's the Governor,
- 970 And the Archbishop,—that's the spiritual guide,
And prayed them take the claws from out her flesh.
Now, this is ever the ill consequence
Of being noble, poor and difficult,
Ungainly, yet too great to disregard,—
- 975 This—that born peers and friends hereditary,—
Though disinclined to help from their own store
The opprobrious wight,¹ put penny in his poke
From private purse or leave the door ajar
When he goes wistful by at dinner-time,—
- 980 Yet, if his needs conduct him where they sit
Smugly in office, judge this, bishop that,
Dispensers of the shine and shade o' the place—
And if, friend's door shut and friend's purse undrawn,
Still potentates may find the office-seat
- 985 Do as good service at no cost—give help
By-the-bye, pay up traditional dues at once
Just through a feather-weight too much i' the scale,
Or finger-tip forgot at the balance-tongue,—
Why, only churls refuse, or Molinists.
- 990 Thus when, in the first roughness of surprise
At Guido's wolf-face whence the sheepskin fell,
The frightened couple, all bewilderment,
Rushed to the Governor,—who else rights wrong?
Told him their tale of wrong and craved redress—
- 995 Why, then the Governor woke up to the fact

¹ disgraced one.

That Guido was a friend of old, poor Count!—
So, promptly paid his tribute, promised the pair,
Wholesome chastisement should soon cure their
qualms¹

Next time they came, wept, prated and told lies:
1000 So stopped all prating, sent them dumb to Rome.
Well, now it was Pompilia's turn to try:
The troubles pressing on her, as I said,
Three times she rushed, maddened by misery,
To the other mighty man, sobbed out her prayer
1005 At footstool of the Archbishop—fast the friend
Of her husband also! Oh, good friends of yore!
So, the Archbishop, not to be outdone
By the Governor, break custom more than he,
Thrice bade the foolish woman stop her tongue,
1010 Unloosed her hands from harassing his gout,
Coached her and carried her to the Count again,
—His old friend should be master in his house,
Rule his wife and correct her faults at need!
Well, driven from post to pillar in this wise,
1015 She, as a last resource, betook herself²
To one, should be no family-friend at least,
A simple friar o' the city; confessed to him,
Then told how fierce temptation of release
By self-dealt death was busy with her soul,
1020 And urged that he put this in words, write plain
For one who could not write, set down her prayer
That Pietro and Violante, parent-like
If somehow not her parents, should for love

¹ cure what ailed them.

² The sole evidence of Pompilia's appeal to the friar is her own statement in the Old Yellow Book.

- Come save her, pluck from out the flame the brand¹
 1025 Themselves had thoughtlessly thrust in so deep
 To send gay-coloured sparkles up and cheer
 Their seat at the chimney-corner. The good friar
 Promised as much at the moment; but, alack,
 Night brings discretion: he was no one's friend,
 1030 Yet presently found he could not turn about
 Nor take a step i' the case and fail to tread
 On someone's toe who either was a friend,
 Or a friend's friend, or friend's friend thrice-removed,
 And woe to friar by whom offences come!²
 1035 So, the course being plain,—with a general sigh
 At matrimony the profound mistake,—
 He threw reluctantly the business up,
 Having his other penitents to mind.

- If then, all outlets thus secured save one,
 1040 At last she took to the open, stood and stared
 With her wan face to see where God might wait—
 And there found Caponsacchi wait as well
 For the precious something at perdition's edge,
 He only was predestinate to save,—
 1045 And if they recognized in a critical flash
 From the zenith, each the other, her need of him,
 His need of ... say, a woman to perish for,
 The regular way o' the world, yet break no vow,
 Do no harm save to himself,—if this were thus?
 1050 How do you say? It were improbable;
 So is the legend of my patron-saint.³

[———]

¹ Zechariah 3.2.

² Matthew 18.7.

³ Compare II 1115.

Anyhow, whether, as Guido states the case,
 Pompilia,—like a starving wretch i' the street
 Who stops and rifles the first passenger¹
 1055 In the great right of an excessive wrong,—
 Did somehow call this stranger and he came,—
 Or whether the strange sudden interview
 Blazed as when star and star must needs go close
 Till each hurts each and there is loss in heaven—
 1060 Whatever way in this strange world it was,—
 Pompilia and Caponsacchi met, in fine,
 She at her window, he i' the street beneath,
 And understood each other at first look.

All was determined and performed at once.
 1065 And on a certain April evening, late²
 I' the month, this girl of sixteen, bride and wife
 Three years and over,—she who hitherto
 Had never taken twenty steps in Rome
 Beyond the church, pinned to her mother's gown,
 1070 Nor, in Arezzo, knew her way through street
 Except what led to the Archbishop's door,—
 Such an one rose up in the dark, laid hand
 On what came first, clothes and a trinket or two,
 Belongings of her own in the old day,—
 1075 Stole from the side o' the sleeping spouse—who knows?
 Sleeping perhaps, silent for certain,—slid
 Ghost-like from great dark room to great dark room,

¹ passer-by.

² The historical record identifies this as the night of April 28–29, but Browning changed it to April 23 to take advantage of the fact that the latter is the feast day of St. George.

- In through the tapestries and out again
And onward, unembarrassed as a fate,
1080 Descended staircase, gained last door of all,
Sent it wide open at first push of palm,
And there stood, first time, last and only time,
At liberty, alone in the open street,—
Unquestioned, unmolested found herself
1085 At the city gate, by Caponsacchi's side,
Hope there, joy there, life and all good again,
The carriage there, the convoy¹ there, light there
Broadening ever into blaze at Rome
And breaking small what long miles lay between;
1090 Up she sprang, in he followed, they were safe.

- The husband quotes this for incredible,
All of the story from first word to last:
Sees the priest's hand throughout upholding hers,
Traces his foot to the alcove, that night,
1095 Whither and whence blindfold he knew the way,
Proficient in all craft and stealthiness;
And cites for proof a servant, eye that watched
And ear that opened to purse secrets up,
A woman-spy,—suborned to give and take
1100 Letters and tokens, do the work of shame
The more adroitly that herself, who helped
Communion thus between a tainted pair,
Had long since been a leper thick in spot,
A common trull o' the town: she witnessed all,
1105 Helped many meetings, partings, took her wage
And then told Guido the whole matter. Lies!

¹ escort.

The woman's life confutes her word,—her word¹
 Confutes itself: "Thus, thus and thus I lied."
 "And thus, no question, still you lie," we say.

- 1110 "Ay, but at last, e'en have it how you will,
 Whatever the means, whatever the way, explodes
 The consummation"—the accusers shriek:
 "Here is the wife avowedly found in flight,
 And the companion of her flight, a priest;
 1115 She flies her husband, he the church his spouse:
 What is this?"

Wife and priest alike reply

- "This is the simple thing it claims to be,
 A course we took for life and honour's sake,
 1120 Very strange, very justifiable."
 She says, "God put it in my head to fly,
 As when the martin migrates: autumn claps
 Her hands, cries 'Winter's coming, will be here,
 Off with you ere the white teeth overtake!
 1125 Flee!" So I fled: this friend was the warm day,
 The south wind and whatever favours flight;
 I took the favour, had the help, how else?
 And so we did fly rapidly all night,
 All day, all night—a longer night—again,
 1130 And then another day, longest of days,
 And all the while, whether we fled or stopped,
 I scarce know how or why, one thought filled both,
 'Fly and arrive!' So long as I found strength
 I talked with my companion, told him much,

¹ And, in fact, her testimony was rejected by the court on the ground that immorality precludes credibility.

- 1135 Knowing that he knew more, knew me, knew God
 And God's disposal of me,—but the sense
 O' the blessed flight absorbed me in the main,
 And speech became mere talking through a sleep,
 Till at the end of that last longest night
- 1140 In a red daybreak,¹ when we reached an inn
 And my companion whispered 'Next stage—Rome!'
 Sudden the weak flesh fell like piled-up cards,
 All the frail fabric at a finger's touch,
 And prostrate the poor soul too, and I said
- 1145 'But though Count Guido were a furlong off,
 Just on me, I must stop and rest awhile!'
 Then something like a huge white wave o' the sea
 Broke o'er my brain and buried me in sleep
 Blessedly, till it ebbed and left me loose,
- 1150 And where was I found but on a strange bed
 In a strange room like hell, roaring with noise,
 Ruddy with flame, and filled with men, in front
 Who but the man you call my husband? ay—
 Count Guido once more between heaven and me,
- 1155 For there my heaven stood, my salvation, yes—
 That Caponsacchi all my heaven of help,
 Helpless himself, held prisoner in the hands
 Of men who looked up in my husband's face
 To take the fate thence he should signify,
- 1160 Just as the way was at Arezzo. Then,
 Not for my sake but his who had helped me—
 I sprang up, reached him with one bound, and seized
 The sword o' the felon, trembling at his side,
 Fit creature of a coward, unsheathed the thing

¹ In all the depositions in the Old Yellow Book except Pompilia's, the time of arrival is given as nightfall.

- 1165 And would have pinned him through the poison-bag
To the wall and left him there to palpitate,
As you serve scorpions, but men interposed—
Disarmed me, gave his life to him again
That he might take mine and the other lives,
1170 And he has done so. I submit myself!"
The priest says—oh, and in the main result
The facts asseverate, he truly says,
As to the very act and deed of him,
However you mistrust the mind o' the man—
1175 The flight was just for flight's sake, no pretext
For aught except to set Pompilia free.
He says "I cite the husband's self's worst charge
In proof of my best word for both of us.
Be it conceded that so many times
1180 We took our pleasure in his palace: then,
What need to fly at all?—or flying no less,
What need to outrage the lips sick and white
Of a woman, and bring ruin down beside,
By halting when Rome lay one stage beyond?"
1185 So does he vindicate Pompilia's fame,
Confirm her story in all points but one—¹
This; that, so fleeing and so breathing forth
Her last strength in the prayer to halt awhile,
She makes confusion of the reddening white
1190 Which was the sunset when her strength gave way,
And the next sunrise and its whitening red
Which she revived in when her husband came:
She mixes both times, morn and eve, in one,
Having lived through a blank of night 'twixt each

¹ untrue; in the Old Yellow Book there are many discrepancies between her story and Caponsacchi's. See Cook, Appendix V.

- 1195 Though dead-asleep, unaware as a corpse,
She on the bed above; her friend below
Watched in the doorway of the inn the while,
Stood i' the red o' the morn, that she mistakes,
In act to rouse and quicken the tardy crew
1200 And hurry out the horses, have the stage
Over, the last league, reach Rome and be safe:
When up came Guido.

Guido's tale begins—

- How he and his whole household, drunk to death
1205 By some enchanted potion, poppied drugs
Plied by the wife, lay powerless in gross sleep
And left the spoilers unimpeded way,
Could not shake off their poison and pursue,
Till noontide, then made shift to get on horse
1210 And did pursue: which means he took his time,
Pressed on no more than lingered after, step
By step, just making sure o' the fugitives,
Till at the nick of time, he saw his chance,
Seized it, came up with and surprised the pair.
1215 How he must needs have gnawn lip and gnashed teeth,
Taking successively at tower and town,
Village and roadside, still the same report
“Yes, such a pair arrived an hour ago,
Sat in the carriage just where now you stand,
1220 While we got horses ready,—turned deaf ear
To all entreaty they would even alight;
Counted the minutes and resumed their course.”
Would they indeed escape, arrive at Rome,
Leave no least loop-hole to let murder through,
1225 But foil him of his captured infamy,¹

¹ object of public reproach (Ezekiel 36.3).

- Prize of guilt proved and perfect? So it seemed.
 Till, oh the happy chance, at last stage, Rome
 But two short hours off,¹ Castelnuovo reached,
 The guardian angel gave reluctant place,
 1230 Satan stepped forward with alacrity,
 Pompilia's flesh and blood succumbed, perforce
 A halt was, and her husband had his will.
 Perdue² he couched, counted out hour by hour
 Till he should spy in the east a signal-streak—
 1235 Night had been, morrow was, triumph would be.
 Do you see the plan deliciously complete?
 The rush upon the unsuspecting sleep,
 The easy execution, the outcry
 Over the deed “Take notice all the world!
 1240 These two dead bodies, locked still in embrace,—
 The man is Caponsacchi and a priest,
 The woman is my wife: they fled me late,
 Thus have I found and you behold them thus,
 And may judge me: do you approve or no?”
- 1245 Success did seem not so improbable,
 But that already Satan's laugh was heard,
 His black back turned on Guido—left i' the lurch
 Or rather, baulked of suit and service now,
 Left to improve on both by one deed more,
 1250 Burn up the better at no distant day,
 Body and soul one holocaust to hell.
 Anyhow, of this natural consequence
 Did just the last link of the long chain snap:
 For an eruption was o' the priest, alive

¹ It was “the trifling four-hours'-running” at II 978.

² hidden. Compare Guido's conduct as reported at II 955–78.

- 1255 And alert, calm, resolute and formidable,
Not the least look of fear in that broad brow—
One not to be disposed of by surprise,
And armed moreover—who had guessed as much?
Yes, there stood he in secular costume
- 1260 Complete from head to heel, with sword at side,
He seemed to know the trick of perfectly.
There was no prompt suppression of the man
As he said calmly “I have saved your wife
From death; there was no other way but this;
- 1265 Of what do I defraud you except death?
Charge any wrong beyond, I answer it.”
Guido, the valorous, had met his match,
Was forced to demand help instead of fight,
Bid the authorities o’ the place lend aid
- 1270 And make the best of a broken matter so.
They soon obeyed the summons—I suppose,
Apprised¹ and ready, or not far to seek—
Laid hands on Caponsacchi, found in fault,
A priest yet flagrantly accoutred thus,—
- 1275 Then, to make good Count Guido’s further charge,
Proceeded, prisoner made lead the way,
In a crowd, upstairs to the chamber-door
Where wax-white, dead asleep, deep beyond dream,
As the priest laid her, lay Pompilia yet.
- 1280 And as he mounted step and step with the crowd
How I see Guido taking heart again!
He knew his wife so well and the way of her—
How at the outbreak she would shroud her shame
In hell’s heart, would it mercifully yawn—

¹ alerted.

- 1285 How, failing that, her forehead to his foot,
 She would crouch silent till the great doom fell,
 Leave him triumphant with the crowd to see
 Guilt motionless or writhing like a worm!
 No! Second misadventure, this worm turned,¹
- 1290 I told you: would have slain him on the spot
 With his own weapon, but they seized her hands:
 Leaving her tongue free, as it tolled the knell
 Of Guido's hope so lively late. The past
 Took quite another shape now. She who shrieked
- 1295 "At least and for ever I am mine and God's,
 Thanks to his liberating angel Death—
 Never again degraded to be yours
 The ignoble noble, the unmanly man,
 The beast below the beast in brutishness!"—
- 1300 This was the foward² child, "the restif³ lamb⁴
 Used to be cherished in his breast," he groaned—
 "Eat from his hand and drink from out his cup,
 The while his fingers pushed their loving way
 Through curl on curl of that soft coat—alas,
- 1305 And she all silverly baaed gratitude
 While meditating mischief!"—and so forth.
 He must invent another story now!
 The ins and outs o' the rooms were searched: he found
 Or showed for found the abominable prize—
- 1310 Love-letters from his wife who cannot write,
 Love-letters in reply o' the priest—thank God!—

¹ 1289–1317 With this version of the scene at Castelnuovo, compare Half-Rome's account, II 983–1059.

² disobedient.

³ unruly.

⁴ variation of the lamb image above, ll. 462–68.

Who can write and confront his character
 With this, and prove the false thing forged throughout:
 Spitting whereat, he needs must spatter whom
 1315 But Guido's self?—that forged and falsified
 One letter called Pompilia's, past dispute:
 Then why not these to make sure still more sure?

So was the case concluded then and there:
 Guido preferred his charges in due form,
 1320 Called on the law to adjudicate, consigned
 The accused ones to the Prefect of the place,
 (Oh mouse-birth of that mountain-like revenge!)¹
 And so to his own place betook himself
 After the spring that failed,—the wildcat's way.
 1325 The captured parties were conveyed to Rome;
 Investigation followed here i' the court—
 Soon to review the fruit of its own work,
 From then to now being eight months and no more.
 Guido kept out of sight and safe at home:
 1330 The Abate, brother Paolo, helped most
 At words when deeds were out of question, pushed
 Nearest the purple, best played deputy,
 So, pleaded, Guido's representative
 At the court shall soon try Guido's self,—what's more,
 1335 The court that also took—I told you, Sir—
 That statement of the couple, how a cheat
 Had been i' the birth of the babe, no child of theirs.
 That was the prelude; this, the play's first act:
 Whereof we wait what comes, crown, close of all.

[———]

¹ Horace, *Ars Poetica* 139.

- 1340 Well, the result was something of a shade
 On the parties thus accused,—how otherwise?
 Shade, but with shine as unmistakable.
 Each had a prompt defence: Pompilia first—
 “Earth was made hell to me who did no harm:
- 1345 I only could emerge one way from hell
 By catching at the one hand¹ held me, so
 I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven:
 If that be wrong, do with me what you will!”
 Then Caponsacchi with a grave grand sweep
- 1350 O’ the arm as though his soul warned baseness off—
 “If as a man, then much more as a priest
 I hold me bound to help weak innocence:
 If so my worldly reputation burst,
 Being the bubble it is, why, burst it may:²
- 1355 Blame I can bear though not blameworthiness.
 But use your sense first, see if the miscreant proved,
 The man who tortured thus the woman, thus
 Have not both laid the trap and fixed the lure
 Over the pit should bury body and soul!
- 1360 His facts are lies: his letters are the fact—
 An infiltration flavoured with himself!
 As for the fancies—whether ... what is it you say?
 The lady loves me, whether I love her
 In the forbidden sense of your surmise,—
- 1365 If, with the midday blaze of truth above,
 The unlidded eye of God awake, aware,
 You needs must pry about and trace the birth

¹ Caponsacchi’s, as an agent of God. Compare I. 620.

² “the bubble reputation” (*As You Like It* 2.7.152). Compare the bubble imagery at I 557–62 and II 454–56. There will be others at V 449–52, XI 1813–17, and XII 639–46.

Of each stray beam of light may traverse night
 To the night's sun that's Lucifer himself,

1370 Do so, at other time, in other place,
 Not now nor here! Enough that first to last
 I never touched her lip nor she my hand
 Nor either of us thought a thought, much less
 Spoke a word which the Virgin might not hear.
 1375 Be such your question, thus I answer it."

Then the court had to make its mind up, spoke.

"It is a thorny question, yea, a tale
 Hard to believe, but not impossible:¹
 Who can be absolute for either side?

1380 A middle course is happily open yet.²
 Here has a blot surprised the social blank,—³
 Whether through favour, feebleness or fault,
 No matter, leprosy has touched our robe
 And we unclean must needs be purified.

1385 Here is a wife makes holiday from home,
 A priest caught playing truant to his church,
 In masquerade moreover: both allege
 Enough excuse to stop our lifted scourge
 Which else would heavily fall. On the other hand,

1390 Here is a husband, ay and man of mark,
 Who comes complaining here, demands redress
 As if he were the pattern of desert—⁴
 The while those plaguy allegations frown,

¹ Compare Half-Rome's attribution to the court of the same attitude, II 1114, 1125.

² Compare similar praise of the middle course, ll. 671, 711.

³ the whiteness of society.

⁴ the very epitome of injury.

Forbid we grant him the redress he seeks.

- 1395 To all men be our moderation known!
 Rewarding none while compensating each,
 Hurting all round though harming nobody,
 Husband, wife, priest, scot-free not one shall 'scape,
 Yet priest, wife, husband, boast the unbroken head
 1400 From application of our excellent oil:
 So that, whatever be the fact, in fine,
 We make no miss of justice in a sort.
 First, let the husband stomach¹ as he may,
 His wife shall neither be returned him, no—
 1405 Nor branded, whipped and caged, but just consigned
 To a convent and the quietude she craves;
 So is he rid of his domestic plague:
 What better thing can happen to a man?
 Next, let the priest retire—unshent, unshamed,²
 1410 Unpunished as for perpetrating crime,
 But relegated (not imprisoned, Sirs!)
 Sent for three years to clarify his youth
 At Civita, a rest by the way to Rome:
 There let his life skim off its last of lees
 1415 Nor keep this dubious colour. Judged the cause:
 All parties may retire, content, we hope.”
 That’s Rome’s way, the traditional road of law;
 Whither it leads is what remains to tell.

- 1420 The priest went to his relegation-place,
 The wife to her convent, brother Paolo
 To the arms of brother Guido with the news
 And this beside—his charge was countercharged;

¹ take offense, belly-ache.

² The words are virtually synonymous.

- The Comparini, his old brace of hates,
 Were breathed¹ and vigilant and venomous now—
- 1425 Had shot a second bolt where the first stuck,
 And followed up the pending dowry-suit
 By a procedure should release the wife
 From so much of the marriage-bond as barred
 Escape when Guido turned the screw too much²
- 1430 On his wife's flesh and blood, as husband may.
 No more defence, she turned and made attack,
 Claimed now divorce from bed and board, in short:
 Pleaded such subtle strokes of cruelty,
 Such slow sure siege laid to her body and soul,
- 1435 As, proved,—and proofs seemed coming thick and fast,—
 Would gain both freedom and the dowry back
 Even should the first suit leave them in his grasp:
 So urged the Comparini for the wife.
 Guido had gained not one of the good things
- 1440 He grasped at by his creditable plan
 O' the flight and following and the rest: the suit
 That smouldered late was fanned to fury new,
 This adjunct came to help with fiercer fire,
 While he had got himself a quite new plague—
- 1445 Found the world's face an universal grin
 At this last best of the Hundred Merry Tales³

¹ rested (as a horse), therefore reinvigorated.

² He was a *victim* of “one master-squeeze from screw” at II 1376. For another use of the image, see below, ll. 1542-45.

³ At least one commentator has identified this as the story of the Patient Griselda in Boccaccio's *Decameron*—ironically appropriate to Pompilia, of course. But Hodell and Cook are probably right in seeing an allusion to Franco Sacchetti's *Libro delle Trecentonovelle* (*Book of Three Hundred Tales*). Sacchetti was a contemporary of Chaucer (c.1330–1400). See V 560, 1153; XI 261.

Of how a young and spritely clerk devised
 To carry off a spouse that moped too much,
 And cured her of the vapours in a trice:

- 1450 And how the husband, playing Vulcan's part,¹
 Told by the Sun, started in hot pursuit
 To catch the lovers, and came halting up,
 Cast his net and then called the Gods to see
 The convicts in their rosy impudence—
 1455 Whereat said Mercury "Would that I were Mars!"
 Oh it was rare, and naughty all the same!
 Brief, the wife's courage and cunning,—the priest's show
 Of chivalry and adroitness,—last not least,
 The husband—how he ne'er showed teeth at all,
 1460 Whose bark had promised biting; but just sneaked
 Back to his kennel, tail 'twixt legs,² as 't were,—
 All this was hard to gulp down and digest.
 So pays the devil his liegeman, brass for gold.

But this was at Arezzo: here in Rome

- 1465 Brave Paolo bore up against it all—
 Battled it out, nor wanting to himself
 Nor Guido nor the House whose weight he bore
 Pillar-like,³ by no force of arm but brain.
 He knew his Rome, what wheels to set to work;
 1470 Plied influential folk, pressed to the ear
 Of the efficacious⁴ purple, pushed his way

¹ 1450–55 The story of Vulcan and Mars is told in *Odyssey* 8.266–366. Compare Half-Rome's version, II 1003–09, where the culprits are Paris and Helen, and the injured husband Guido by implication is Menelaus. See also IX 868–77.

² Compare II 1062.

³ Guido in the role of Samson (*Judges* 16.25–30).

⁴ influential.

To the old Pope's self,—past decency indeed,—
 Praying him take the matter in his hands
 Out of the regular court's incompetence.

- 1475 But times are changed and nephews out of date¹
 And favouritism unfashionable: the Pope
 Said "Render Caesar what is Caesar's due!"²
 As for the Comparini's counter-plea,
 He met that by a counter-plea again,
 1480 Made Guido claim divorce³—with help so far
 By the trial's issue: for, why punishment
 However slight unless for guiltiness
 However slender?—and a molehill serves
 Much as a mountain of offence this way.
 1485 So was he gathering strength on every side
 And growing more and more to menace—when
 All of a terrible moment came the blow
 That beat down Paolo's fence, ended the play
 O' the foil and brought mannaia on the stage.

- 1490 Five months had passed now since Pompilia's flight,
 Months spent in peace among the Convert nuns.
 This,—being, as it seemed, for Guido's sake
 Solely, what pride might call imprisonment
 And quote as something gained, to friends at home,—
 1495 This naturally was at Guido's charge:
 Grudge it he might, but penitential fare,
 Prayers, preachings, who but he defrayed the cost?
 So, Paolo dropped, as proxy, doit by doit
 Like heart's blood, till—what's here? What notice comes?

¹ See note to I 319.

² Matthew 22.21.

³ See note to II 1285.

- 1500 The convent's self makes application bland
That, since Pompilia's health is fast o' the wane,
She may have leave to go combine her cure
Of soul with cure of body, mend her mind
Together with her thin arms and sunk eyes
1505 That want fresh air outside the convent-wall,
Say in a friendly house,—and which so fit
As a certain villa in the Pauline way,
That happens to hold Pietro and his wife,
The natural guardians? "Oh, and shift the care
1510 You shift the cost, too; Pietro pays in turn,
And lightens Guido of a load! And then,
Villa or convent, two names for one thing,
Always the sojourn means imprisonment,
Domus pro carcere—nowise we relax,
1515 Nothing abate: how answers Paolo?"

You,

- What would you answer? All so smooth and fair,
Even Paul's astuteness sniffed no harm i' the world.
He authorized the transfer, saw it made
1520 And, two months after, reaped the fruit of the same,
Having to sit down, rack his brain and find
What phrase should serve him best to notify
Our Guido that by happy providence
A son and heir, a babe was born to him
1525 I' the villa,—go tell sympathizing friends!
Yes, such had been Pompilia's privilege:
She, when she fled, was one month gone with child,
Known to herself or unknown, either way
Availing to explain (say men of art)
1530 The strange and passionate precipitance
Of maiden startled into motherhood
Which changes body and soul by nature's law.

- So when the she-dove breeds, strange yearnings come¹
 For the unknown shelter by undreamed-of shores,
 1535 And there is born a blood-pulse in her heart
 To fight if needs be, though with flap of wing,
 For the wool-flock or the fur-tuft, though a hawk
 Contest the prize,—wherefore, she knows not yet.
 Anyhow, thus to Guido came the news.
- 1540 "I shall have quitted Rome ere you arrive
 To take the one step left,"—wrote Paolo.²
 Then did the winch o' the winepress of all hate,³
 Vanity, disappointment, grudge and greed,
 Take the last turn that screws out pure revenge
- 1545 With a bright bubble at the brim beside—
 By an heir's birth he was assured at once
 O' the main prize, all the money in dispute:
 Pompilia's dowry might revert to her
 Or stay with him as law's caprice should point,—
- 1550 But now—now—what was Pietro's shall be hers,
 What was hers shall remain her own,—if hers,
 Why then,—oh, not her husband's but—her heir's!
 That heir being his too, all grew his at last
 By this road or by that road, since they join.
- 1555 Before, why, push he Pietro out o' the world,—
 The current of the money stopped, you see,
 Pompilia being proved no Pietro's child:
 Or let it be Pompilia's life he quenched,
 Again the current of the money stopped,—

¹ 1533–38 Note the use of a similar metaphor for Pompilia's instinct, ll. 1122–24.

² There is no evidence of such a letter.

³ "And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress" (Revelation 14.20).

- 1560 Guido debarred his rights as husband soon,
 So the new process¹ threatened;—now, the chance,
 Now, the resplendent minute! Clear the earth,
 Cleanse the house, let the three but disappear²
 A child remains, depositary of all,
 1565 That Guido may enjoy his own again,
 Repair all losses by a master-stroke,
 Wipe out the past, all done all left undone,
 Swell the good present to best evermore,
 Die into new life, which let blood baptize!
- 1570 So, i' the blue of a sudden sulphur-blaze,
 Both why there was one step to take at Rome,
 And why he should not meet with Paolo there,
 He saw—the ins and outs to the heart of hell—
 And took the straight line thither swift and sure.
 1575 He rushed to Vittiano, found four sons o' the soil,
 Brutes of his breeding, with one spark i' the clod
 That served for a soul, the looking up to him
 Or aught called Franceschini as life, death,
 Heaven, hell,—lord paramount, assembled these,
 1580 Harangued, equipped, instructed, pressed each clod
 With his will's imprint; then took horse, plied spur,
 And so arrived, all five of them, at Rome
 On Christmas-Eve, and forthwith found themselves
 Installed i' the vacancy and solitude
 1585 Left them by Paolo, the considerate man
 Who, good as his word, had disappeared at once
 As if to leave the stage free. A whole week
 Did Guido spend in study of his part,

¹ lawsuit.

² a reprise of the blood-baptism motif of II 1433–37.

Then played it fearless of a failure. One,
 1590 Struck the year's clock whereof the hours are days,
 And off was rung o' the little wheels the chime
 "Good will on earth and peace to man:"¹ but, two,
 Proceeded the same bell and, evening come,
 The dreadful five felt finger-wise their way
 1595 Across the town by blind cuts and black turns
 To the little lone suburban villa; knocked—
 "Who may be outside?" called a well-known voice.
 "A friend of Caponsacchi's bringing friends
 A letter."²

That's a test, the excusers say:³

1600 Ay, and a test conclusive, I return.
 What? Had that name brought touch of guilt or taste
 Of fear with it, aught to dash the present joy
 With memory of the sorrow just at end,—
 She, happy in her parents' arms at length
 1605 With the new blessing of the two weeks' babe,—
 How had that name's announcement moved the wife?
 Or, as the other slanders circulate,
 Were Caponsacchi no rare visitant⁴
 On nights and days whither safe harbour lured,
 1610 What bait had been i' the name to ope the door?
 The promise of a letter? Stealthy guests

¹ Luke 2.14.

² Note the significant difference between this version of the password and that at II 1431.

³ In the copy-text, and consequently in this edition, two half-lines are normally numbered as two lines. But in this instance (l. 1599), the copy-text counts two half-lines as one line. We have retained the inconsistency.

⁴ The Old Yellow Book contains no evidence on this point. The remark is based on the lawyer Arcangeli's innuendo contained there.

Have secret watchwords, private entrances:

The man's own self might have been found inside
And all the scheme made frustrate by a word.

1615 No: but since Guido knew, none knew so well,
The man had never since returned to Rome
Nor seen the wife's face more than villa's front,
So, could not be at hand to warn or save,—
For that, he took this sure way to the end.

1620 "Come in," bade poor Violante cheerfully,
Drawing the door-bolt: that death was the first,
Stabbed through and through. Pietro, close on her heels,
Set up a cry—"Let me confess myself!
Grant but confession!" Cold steel was the grant.

1625 Then came Pompilia's turn.

Then they escaped.

The noise o' the slaughter roused the neighbourhood.
They had forgotten just the one thing more
Which saves i' the circumstance, the ticket¹ to-wit
1630 Which puts post-horses at a traveller's use:
So, all on foot, desperate through the dark
Reeled they like drunkards along open road,
Accomplished a prodigious twenty miles
Homeward, and gained Baccano very near,
1635 Stumbled at last, deaf, dumb, blind through thefeat,
Into a grange² and, one dead heap, slept there
Till the pursuers hard upon their trace
Reached them and took them, red from head to heel,
And brought them to the prison where they lie.

¹ pass to leave Rome and cross the Tuscan frontier.

² farm or granary, but elsewhere they are said to have slept on straw by the wayside. In point of fact, they were arrested at an inn.

- 1640 The couple were laid i' the church two days ago,
And the wife lives yet by miracle.

All is told.

- You hardly need ask what Count Guido says,
Since something he must say. "I own the deed—"
- 1645 (He cannot choose,—but—) "I declare the same
Just and inevitable,—since no way else
Was left me, but by this of taking life,
To save my honour which is more than life.
I exercised a husband's rights." To which
- 1650 The answer is as prompt—"There was no fault
In any one o' the three to punish thus:
Neither i' the wife, who kept all faith to you,
Nor in the parents, whom yourself first duped,
Robbed and maltreated, then turned out of doors.
- 1655 You wronged and they endured wrong; yours the fault.
Next, had endurance overpassed the mark
And turned resentment needing remedy,—
Nay, put the absurd impossible case, for once—
You were all blameless of the blame alleged
- 1660 And they blameworthy where you fix all blame,
Still, why this violation of the law?
Yourself elected law should take its course,
Avenge wrong, or show vengeance not your right;
Why, only when the balance in law's hand
- 1665 Trembles against you and inclines the way
O' the other party, do you make protest,
Renounce arbitrament, flying out of court,
And crying 'Honour's hurt the sword must cure'?
Aha, and so i' the middle of each suit
- 1670 Trying i' the courts,—and you had three in play
With an appeal to the Pope's self beside,—

What, you may chop and change and right your wrongs
Leaving the law to lag as she thinks fit?"

That were too temptingly commodious, Count!¹

- 1675 One would have still a remedy in reserve
Should reach the safest oldest sinner, you see!
One's honour forsooth? Does that take hurt alone
From the extreme outrage? I who have no wife,
Being yet sensitive in my degree
1680 As Guido,—must discover hurt elsewhere
Which, half compounded-for in days gone by,
May profitably break out now afresh,
Need cure from my own expeditious hands.
The lie that was, as it were, imputed me
1685 When you objected to my contract's clause,—
The theft as good as, one may say, alleged,
When you, co-heir in a will, excepted, Sir,
To my administration of effects,
—Aha, do you think law disposed of these?
1690 My honour's touched and shall deal death around!
Count, that were too commodious, I repeat!
If any law be imperative on us all,
Of all are you the enemy: out with you
From the common light and air and life of man!

¹ Guido is being apostrophized by the speaker. ("commodious": convenient.)

IV

TERTIUM QUID

- TRUE, Excellency—as his Highness says,
 Though she's not dead yet, she's as good as stretched
 Symmetrical beside the other two;
 Though he's not judged yet, he's the same as judged,
- 5 So do the facts abound and superabound:
 And nothing hinders that we lift the case
 Out of the shade into the shine, allow
 Qualified persons to pronounce at last,
 Nay, edge in an authoritative word
- 10 Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools
 Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome.
 "Now for the Trial!" they roar: "the Trial to test
 The truth, weigh husband and weigh wife alike
 I' the scales of law, make one scale kick the beam!"
- 15 Law's a machine¹ from which, to please the mob,
 Truth the divinity must needs descend
 And clear things at the play's fifth act—aha!
 Hammer into their noddles who was who
 And what was what. I tell the simpletons
- 20 "Could law be competent to such a feat
 'T were done already: what begins next week
 Is end o' the Trial, last link of a chain

The time is the night of the third day after the murders. Preview: I 910–42. "Tertium Quid" is defined in the note to I 916.

¹ In the ancient Greek theater, the plot complications at the end of a play were often resolved by the arrival of a god, lowered from heaven on a crane.

Whereof the first was forged three years ago
 When law addressed herself to set wrong right,
 25 And proved so slow in taking the first step
 That ever some new grievance,—tort, retort,¹
 On one or the other side,—o'ertook i' the game,
 Retarded sentence, till this deed of death
 Is thrown in, as it were, last bale to boat
 30 Crammed to the edge with cargo—or passengers?
'Trecentos inseris: ohe, jam satis est!
*Huc appelle!'*²—passengers, the word must be.”
 Long since, the boat was loaded to my eyes.
 To hear the rabble and brabble, you'd call the case
 35 Fused and confused past human finding out.
 One calls the square round, t' other the round square—
 And pardonably in that first surprise
 O' the blood that fell and splashed the diagram:
 But now we've used our eyes to the violent hue
 40 Can't we look through the crimson and trace lines?
 It makes a man despair of history,
 Eusebius³ and the established fact—fig's end!
 Oh, give the fools their Trial, rattle away
 With the leash of lawyers, two on either side—
 45 One barks, one bites,—Masters Arcangeli
 And Spreti,⁴—that's the husband's ultimate hope
 Against the Fisc and the other kind of Fisc,⁵
 Bound to do barking for the wife: bow-wow!

¹ wrong (“tort” is a legal term); reply (with the etymological implication of a fresh wrong from the other party).

² “You're packing in hundreds!” “Hold on, that's enough!” “Bring to here!” (Horace, *Satires* 1.5.12–13).

³ the “father of ecclesiastical history” (c.264–c.349 AD).

⁴ Arcangeli's colleague in the defense of Guido.

⁵ See notes to I 165, 1117.

- Why, Excellency, we and his Highness here
 50 Would settle the matter as sufficiently
 As ever will Advocate This and Fiscal That
 And Judge the Other, with even—a word and a wink—
 We well know who for ultimate arbiter.¹
 Let us beware o' the basset-table²—lest
 55 We jog the elbow of Her Eminence,³
 Jostle his cards,—he'll rap you out a ... st!
 By the window-seat! And here's the Marquis too!
 Indulge me but a moment: if I fail
 —Favoured with such an audience, understand!—
 60 To set things right, why, class me with the mob
 As understander of the mind of man!

- The mob,—now, that's just how the error comes!
 Bethink you that you have to deal with *plebs*,
 The commonalty; this is an episode
 65 In burgess-life,⁴—why seek to aggrandize,
 Idealize, denaturalize the class?
 People talk just as if they had to do
 With a noble pair that ... Excellency, your ear!
 Stoop to me, Highness,—listen and look yourselves!
- 70 This Pietro, this Violante, live their life
 At Rome in the easy way that's far from worst
 Even for their betters,—themselves love themselves,

¹ the Pope.

² Basset was a card game.

³ a cardinal. (Browning retains the feminine gender of the Italian pronoun: "Sua Eminenza.")

⁴ life of the commoner ("bourgeois"). Throughout this book, such words—others are "cits," "mob," "plebs," "rabble and brabble," "commonalty"—carry a strong implication of social condescension.

- Spend their own oil in feeding their own lamp
That their own faces may grow bright thereby.
- 75 They get to fifty and over: how's the lamp?
Full to the depth o' the wick,—moneys so much;
And also with a remnant,—so much more
Of moneys,—which there's no consuming now,
But, when the wick shall moulder out some day,
- 80 Failing fresh twist of tow¹ to use up dregs,
Will lie a prize for the passer-by,—to-wit
Anyone that can prove himself the heir,
Seeing, the couple are wanting in a child:
Meantime their wick swims in the safe broad bowl
- 85 O' the middle rank,—not raised a beacon's height
For wind to ravage, nor dropped till lamp graze ground
Like cresset,² mudlarks³ poke now here now there,
Going their rounds to probe the ruts i' the road
Or fish the luck o' the puddle. Pietro's soul
- 90 Was satisfied when cronies smirked, "No wine
Like Pietro's, and he drinks it every day!"
His wife's heart swelled her boddice, joyed its fill
When neighbours turned heads wistfully at church,
Sighed at the load of lace that came to pray.
- 95 Well, having got through fifty years of flare,
They burn out so, indulge so their dear selves,
That Pietro finds himself in debt at last,
As he were any lordling of us all:
And, now that dark begins to creep on day,
- 100 Creditors grow uneasy, talk aside,
Take counsel, then importune all at once.

¹ hemp.

² iron vessel to hold burning grease or other substance.

³ street urchins, scavengers.

For if the good fat rosy careless man,
 Who has not laid a ducat by, decease—
 Let the lamp fall, no heir at hand to catch—
 105 Why, being childless, there's a spilth i' the street
 O' the remnant, there's a scramble for the dregs
 By the stranger: so, they grant him no long day
 But come in a body, clamour to be paid.

What's his resource? He asks and straight obtains
 110 The customary largess, dole dealt out
 To, what we call our “poor dear shame-faced ones,”
 In secret once a month to spare the shame
 O' the slothful and the spendthrift,—pauper-saints
 The Pope puts meat i' the mouth of, ravens they,
 115 And providence he¹—just what the mob admires!
 That is, instead of putting a prompt foot
 On selfish worthless human slugs whose slime
 Has failed to lubricate their path in life,
 Why, the Pope picks the first ripe fruit that falls
 120 And gracious puts it in the vermin's way.
 Pietro could never save a dollar?² Straight
 He must be subsidized at our expense:
 And for his wife—the harmless household sheep
 One ought not to see harassed in her age—
 125 Judge, by the way she bore adversity,
 O' the patient nature you ask pity for!
 How long, now, would the roughest marketman,
 Handling the creatures huddled to the knife,
 Harass a mutton ere she made a mouth
 130 Or menaced biting? Yet the poor sheep here,

¹ Psalms 147.9; Job 38.41.

² approximately 2s 11d in Victorian money.

- Violante, the old innocent burgess-wife,
In her first difficulty showed great teeth
Fit to crunch up and swallow a good round crime.
She meditates the tenure of the Trust,
- 135 *Fidei commissum* is the lawyer-phrase,
These funds that only want an heir to take—
Goes o'er the gamut o' the creditor's cry
By semitones from whine to snarl high up
And growl down low, one scale in sundry keys,—
- 140 Pauses with a little compunction for the face
Of Pietro frustrate of its ancient cheer,—
Never a bottle now for friend at need,—
Comes to a stop on her own frittered¹ lace
And neighbourly condolences thereat,
- 145 Then makes her mind up, sees the thing to do:
And so, deliberate, snaps house-book² clasp,
Posts off to vespers, missal beneath arm,
Passes the proper San Lorenzo by,
Dives down a little lane to the left, is lost
- 150 In a labyrinth of dwellings best unnamed,
Selects a certain blind one, black at base,
Blinking at top,—the sign of we know what,—
One candle in a casement set to wink
Streetward, do service to no shrine inside,—
- 155 Mounts thither by the filthy flight of stairs,
Holding the cord by the wall, to the tip-top,
Gropes for the door i' the dark, ajar of course,
Raps, opens, enters in: up starts a thing
Naked as needs be—“What, you rogue, 't is you?
- 160 Back,—how can I have taken a farthing yet?

¹ tattered.

² ledger of household expenses.

Mercy on me, poor sinner that I am!
Here's ... why, I took you for Madonna's self
With all that sudden swirl of silk i' the place!
What may your pleasure be, my bonny dame?"

- 165 Your Excellency supplies aught left obscure?
One of those women that abound in Rome,
Whose needs oblige them eke out one poor trade
By another vile one: her ostensible work
Was washing clothes, out in the open air
170 At the cistern by Citorio:¹ her true trade—
Whispering to idlers, when they stopped and praised
The ankles she let liberally shine
In kneeling at the slab by the fountain-side,
That there was plenty more to criticize²
175 At home, that eve, i' the house where candle blinked
Decorously above, and all was done
I' the holy fear of God and cheap beside.
Violante, now, had seen this woman wash,
Noticed and envied her propitious shape,³
180 Tracked her home to her house-top, noted too,
And now was come to tempt her and propose
A bargain far more shameful than the first
Which trafficked her virginity away
For a melon and three pauls at twelve years old.
185 Five minutes' talk with this poor child of Eve,
Struck was the bargain, business at an end—
"Then, six months hence, that person whom you trust,
Comes, fetches whatsoever babe it be;

¹ the Piazza di Monte Citorio.

² see.

³ But at II 570 she is said to have been only one month pregnant at the time.

I keep the price and secret, you the babe,
 190 Paying beside for mass to make all straight:
 Meantime, I pouch the earnest-money-piece."¹

Down stairs again goes fumbling by the rope
 Violante, triumphing in a flourish of fire
 From her own brain, self-lit by such success,—
 195 Gains church in time for the "*Magnificat*"
 And gives forth "My reproof is taken away,
 And blessed shall mankind proclaim me now,"²
 So that the officiating priest turns round
 To see who proffers the obstreperous praise:
 200 Then home to Pietro, the enraptured-much
 But puzzled-more when told the wondrous news—
 How orisons³ and works of charity,
 (Beside that pair of pinners and a coif,⁴
 Birth-day surprise last Wednesday was five weeks)
 205 Had borne fruit in the autumn of his life,—
 They, or the Orvieto⁵ in a double dose.
 Anyhow, she must keep house next six months,
 Lie on the settle, avoid the three-legged stool,
 And, chiefly, not be crossed in wish or whim,
 210 And the result was like to be an heir.

Accordingly, when time was come about,
 He found himself the sire indeed of this

¹ down payment.

² St. Elizabeth's words (Luke 1.25), whereas the *Magnificat* (from Luke 1.46) contains those of the Virgin Mary.

³ prayers.

⁴ A coif is a tight-fitting cap, such as that still worn by some orders of nuns, and the pinners are the large flaps attached to it.

⁵ a light wine.

- Francesca Vittoria Pompilia and the rest
 O' the names whereby he sealed her his, next day.
- 215 A crime complete in its way is here, I hope?
 Lies to God, lies to man, every way lies
 To nature and civility and the mode:
 Flat robbery of the proper heirs thus foiled
 O' the due succession,—and, what followed thence,
- 220 Robbery of God, through the confessor's ear
 Debarred¹ the most note-worthy incident
 When all else done and undone twelve-month through
 Was put in evidence at Easter-time.
 All other peccadillos!—but this one
- 225 To the priest who comes next day to dine with us?
 'T were inexpedient; decency forbade.

- Is so far clear? You know Violante now,
 Compute her capability of crime
 By this authentic instance? Black hard cold
 230 Crime like a stone you kick up with your foot
 I' the middle of a field?

- I thought as much.
 But now, a question,—how long does it lie,
 The bad and barren bit of stuff you kick,
 235 Before encroached on and encompassed round
 With minute moss, weed, wild-flower—made alive
 By worm, and fly, and foot of the free bird?
 Your Highness,—healthy minds let bygones be,
 Leave old crimes to grow young and virtuous-like
 240 I' the sun and air; so time treats ugly deeds:
 They take the natural blessing of all change.

¹ omitted.

- There was the joy o' the husband silly-sooth,
 The softening of the wife's old wicked heart,
 Virtues to right and left, profusely paid
 245 If so they might compensate the saved sin.
 And then the sudden existence, dewy-dear,
 O' the rose above the dungheap, the pure child
 As good as new created, since withdrawn
 From the horror of the pre-appointed lot
 250 With the unknown father and the mother known
 Too well,—some fourteen years of squalid youth,
 And then libertinage, disease, the grave—
 Hell in life here, hereafter life in hell:
 Look at that horror and this soft repose!
 255 Why, moralist, the sin has saved a soul!
 Then, even the palpable grievance to the heirs—
 'Faith, this was no frank setting hand to throat
 And robbing a man, but ... Excellency, by your leave,
 How did you get that marvel of a gem,
 260 The sapphire with the Graces grand and Greek?
 The story is, stooping to pick a stone
 From the pathway through a vineyard—no-man's-land—
 To pelt a sparrow with, you chanced on this:
 Why now, do those five clowns o' the family
 265 O' the vinedresser digest their porridge worse
 That not one keeps it in his goatskin pouch
 To do flint's-service with the tinder-box?
 Don't cheat me, don't cheat you, don't cheat a friend,
 But are you so hard on who jostles just
 270 A stranger with no natural sort of claim
 To the havings and the holdings¹ (here's the point)

¹ See note to III 506.

- Unless by misadventure, and defect¹
 Of that which ought to be—nay, which there's none
 Would dare so much as wish to profit by—
 275 Since who dares put in just so many words
 “May Pietro fail to have a child, please God!
 So shall his house and goods belong to me,
 The sooner that his heart will pine betimes?”
 Well then, God doesn't please, nor heart shall pine!
 280 Because he has a child at last, you see,
 Or selfsame thing as though a child it were,
 He thinks, whose sole concern it is to think:
 If he accepts it why should you demur?

- Moreover, say that certain sin there seem,
 285 The proper process of unsinning sin
 Is to begin well-doing somehow else.
 Pietro,—remember, with no sin at all
 I' the substitution,—why, this gift of God
 Flung in his lap from over Paradise wall
 290 Steadied him in a moment, set him straight
 On the good path he had been straying from.
 Henceforward no more wilfulness and waste,
 Cuppings, carousings,—these a sponge wiped out.
 All sort of self-denial was easy now
 295 For the child's sake, the chatelaine² to be,
 Who must want much and might want³ who knows
 what?
 And so, the debts were paid, habits reformed,

¹ lack.

² mistress of a palace.

³ a play on words—the first “want” means both “lack” and “desire” and the second only “desire.”

- Expense curtailed, the dowry set to grow.
 As for the wife,—I said, hers the whole sin:
- 300 So, hers the exemplary penance. 'T was a text
 Whereon folk preached and praised, the district through:
 "Oh, make us happy and you make us good!
 It all comes of God giving her a child:
 Such graces follow God's best earthly gift!"
- 305 Here you put by my guard, pass to my heart
 By the home-thrust—"There's a lie at base of all."
 Why, thou exact¹ Prince, is it a pearl or no,
 Yon globe upon the Principessa's neck?
 That great round glory of pellucid stuff,
- 310 A fish secreted round a grain of grit!
 Do you call it worthless for the worthless core?
 (She doesn't, who well knows what she changed for it.)
 So, to our brace of burgesses again!
 You see so far i' the story, who was right,
- 315 Who wrong, who neither, don't you? What, you don't?
 Eh? Well, admit there's somewhat dark i' the case,
 Let's on—the rest shall clear, I promise you.
 Leap over a dozen years: you find, these past,
 An old good easy creditable sire,
- 320 A careful housewife's beaming bustling face,
 Both wrapped up in the love of their one child,
 The strange tall pale beautiful creature grown
 Lily-like out o' the cleft i' the sun-smit rock
 To bow its white miraculous birth of buds
- 325 I' the way of wandering Joseph and his spouse,—
 So painters fancy: here it was a fact.

¹ scrupulous, rigorous (with suggestion of "niggling," "finicky").

And this their lily,—could they but transplant
And set in vase to stand by Solomon's porch¹
'Twixt lion and lion!—this Pompilia of theirs,
330 Could they see worthily married, well bestowed,
In house and home! And why despair of this
With Rome to choose from, save the topmost rank?
Themselves would help the choice with heart and soul,
Throw their late savings in a common heap
335 To go with the dowry, and be followed in time
By the heritage legitimately hers:
And when such paragon was found and fixed,
Why, they might chant their "*Nunc dimittis*"² straight.

Indeed the prize was simply full to a fault,
340 Exorbitant for the suitor they should seek,
And social class should choose among, these cits.
Yet there's a latitude: exceptional white
Amid the general brown o' the species, lurks
A burgess nearly an aristocrat,
345 Legitimately in reach: look out for him!
What banker, merchant, has seen better days,
What second-rate painter a-pushing up,
Poet a-slipping down, shall bid the best
For this young beauty with the thumping purse?
350 Alack, were it but one of such as these
So like the real thing that they pass for it,
All had gone well! Unluckily, poor souls,
It proved to be the impossible thing itself,
Truth and not sham: hence ruin to them all.

[———]

¹ 1 Kings 7.7, 10.18–20.

² "Now let thy servant depart" (Luke 2.29).

- 355 For, Guido Franceschini was the head
Of an old family in Arezzo, old
To that degree they could afford be poor
Better than most: the case is common too.
Out of the vast door 'scutcheoned overhead,
360 Creeps out a serving-man on Saturdays
To cater for the week,—turns up anon
I' the market, chaffering for the lamb's least leg,
Or the quarter-fowl, less entrails, claws and comb:
Then back again with prize,—a liver begged
365 Into the bargain, gizzard overlooked.
He's mincing these to give the beans a taste,
When, at your knock, he leaves the simmering soup,
Waits on the curious stranger-visitant,
Napkin in half-wiped hand, to show the rooms,
370 Point pictures out have hung their hundred years,
"Priceless," he tells you,—puts in his place at once
The man of money: yes, you're banker-king
Or merchant-kaiser, wallow in your wealth
While patron, the house-master, can't afford
375 To stop our ceiling-hole that rain so rots:
But he's the man of mark, and there's his shield,
And yonder's the famed Rafael, first in kind,
The painter painted for his grandfather,
And you have paid to see: "Good morning, Sir!"
380 Such is the law of compensation. Still
The poverty was getting nigh acute;
There gaped so many noble mouths to feed,
Beans must suffice unflavoured of the fowl.
The mother,—hers would be a spun-out life
385 I' the nature of things; the sisters had done well
And married men of reasonable rank:
But that sort of illumination stops,

- Throws back no heat upon the parent-hearth.
The family instinct felt out for its fire
- 390 To the Church,—the Church traditionally helps
A second son: and such was Paolo,
Established here at Rome these thirty years,
Who played the regular game,—priest and Abate,
Made friends, owned house and land, became of use
- 395 To a personage: his course lay clear enough.
The youngest caught the sympathetic flame,
And, though unfledged wings kept him still i' the cage,
Yet he shot up to be a Canon, so
Clung to the higher perch and crowded in hope.
- 400 Even our Guido, eldest brother, went
As far i' the way o' the Church as safety seemed,
He being Head o' the House, ordained to wife,—
So, could but dally with an Order or two
And testify good-will i' the cause: he clipped
- 405 His top-hair and thus far affected¹ Christ.
But main promotion must fall otherwise,
Though still from the side o' the Church: and here
was he
- At Rome, since first youth, worn threadbare of soul
By forty-six years' rubbing on hard life,
- 410 Getting fast tired o' the game whose word is—"Wait!"
When one day,—he too having his Cardinal
To serve in some ambiguous sort, as serve
To draw the coach the plumes o' the horses' heads,—
The Cardinal saw fit to dispense with him,
- 415 Ride with one plume the less; and off it dropped.

[—]

¹ imitated.

Guido thus left,—with a youth spent in vain
 And not a penny in purse to show for it,—
 Advised with Paolo, bent no doubt in chafe¹
 The black brows somewhat formidably, growled
 420 “Where is the good I came to get at Rome?
 Where the repayment of the servitude
 To a purple popinjay, whose feet I kiss,
 Knowing his father wiped the shoes of mine?”

“Patience,” pats Paolo the recalcitrant—²
 425 “You have not had, so far, the proper luck,
 Nor do my gains suffice to keep us both:
 A modest competency is mine, not more.
 You are the Count however, yours the style,
 Heirdom and state,—you can’t expect all good.
 430 Had I, now, held your hand of cards ... well, well—
 What’s yet unplayed, I’ll look at, by your leave,
 Over your shoulder,—I who made my game,
 Let’s see, if I can’t help to handle yours.
 Fie on you, all the Honours in your fist,
 435 Countship, Househeadship,—how have you misdealt!
 “Why, in the first place, these will marry a man!
*Notum tonsoribus!*³ To the Tonsor then!
 Come, clear your looks, and choose your freshest suit,
 And, after function’s done with, down we go
 440 To the woman-dealer in perukes, a wench

¹ impatience.

² resentful one (“recalcitrant” is the object of “pats”).

³ It is known to barbers (and therefore is common knowledge) (Horace *Satires* 1.7.3; see note to II 115). Browning uses the Latin tag as a means of introducing the peruke maker who actually served as a go-between for Guido and the Comparinis.

- I and some others settled in the shop
At Place Colonna: she's an oracle. Hmm!
'Dear, 't is my brother: brother, 't is my dear.
Dear, give us counsel! Whom do you suggest
445 As properest party in the quarter round
For the Count here?—he is minded to take wife,
And further tells me he intends to slip
Twenty zecchines¹ under the bottom-scalp
Of his old wig when he sends it to revive
450 For the wedding: and I add a trifle too.
You know what personage I'm potent with.”
And so plumped out Pompilia's name the first.
She told them of the household and its ways,
The easy husband and the shrewder wife
455 In Via Vittoria,—how the tall young girl,
With hair black as yon patch² and eyes as big
As yon pomander³ to make freckles fly,
Would have so much for certain, and so much more
In likelihood,—why, it suited, slipped as smooth
460 As the Pope's pantoufle⁴ does on the Pope's foot.
“I'll to the husband!” Guido ups and cries.
“Ay, so you'd play your last court-card, no doubt!”
Puts Paolo in with a groan—“Only, you see,
'T is I, this time, that supervise your lead.
465 Priests play with women, maids, wives, mothers—why?
These play with men and take them off our hands.
Did I come, counsel with some cut-beard gruff
Or rather this sleek young-old barberess?

¹ A zecchine was worth about 10s in Victorian money.

² “beauty spot” worn by fashionable women.

³ wax perfume ball.

⁴ slipper.

- 470 Go, brother, stand you rapt in the ante-room
Of Her Efficacity¹ my Cardinal
For an hour,—he likes to have lord-suitors lounge,—
While I betake myself to the grey mare,
The better horse,—how wise the people's word!—²
And wait on Madam Violante.”

475 Said and done.

He was at Via Vittoria in three skips:

Proposed at once to fill up the one want

O' the burgess-family which, wealthy enough,

And comfortable to heart's desire, yet crouched

- 480 Outside a gate to heaven,—locked, bolted, barred,
Whereof Count Guido had a key he kept
Under his pillow, but Pompilia's hand
Might slide behind his neck and pilfer thence.

The key was fairy;³ its mere mention made

Violante feel the thing shoot one sharp ray

That reached the womanly heart: so—"I ass

Yours be Pompilia, hers and ours the

To all the glories of the greater life!

There's Pietro to convince: leave that to me.

Friends Please to convince. leave that

Then was the matter broached to Bistro; then

- 490 Then was the matter broached to Pietro; then
Did Pietro make demand and get response
That in the Countship was a truth, but in
The counting up of the Count's cash, a lie.
He thereupon stroked grave his chin, looked great,
495 Declined the honour. Then the wife wiped tear,

¹ powerful one. (For "her" see note to l. 55.)

² “The grey mare is the better horse”—proverb meaning “the wife rules the husband.”

³ magic.

Winked with the other eye turned Paolo-ward,
Whispered Pompilia, stole to church at eve,
Found Guido there and got the marriage done,
And finally begged pardon at the feet
500 Of her dear lord and master. Whereupon
Quoth Pietro—"Let us make the best of things!"
"I knew your love would license us," quoth she:
Quoth Paolo once more, "Mothers, wives and maids,
These be the tools wherewith priests manage men."

- 505 Now, here take breath and ask,—which bird o' the brace
Decoyed the other into clapnet?¹ Who
Was fool, who knave? Neither and both, perchance.
There was a bargain mentally proposed
On each side, straight and plain and fair enough;
510 Mind knew its own mind: but when mind must speak,
The bargain have expression in plain terms,
There came the blunder incident to words,
And in the clumsy process, fair turned foul.
The straight backbone-thought of the crooked speech
515 Were just—"I Guido truck² my name and rank
For so much money and youth and female charms."—
"We Pietro and Violante give our child
And wealth to you for a rise i' the world thereby."
Such naked truth while chambered in the brain
520 Shocks nowise: walk it forth by way of tongue,—
Out on the cynical unseemliness!
Hence was the need, on either side, of a lie
To serve as decent wrappage: so, Guido gives
Money for money,—and they, bride for groom,

¹ net which can be closed by pulling a string.

² exchange.

- 525 Having, he, not a doit, they, not a child
Honestly theirs, but this poor waif and stray.
According to the words, each cheated each;
But in the inexpressive barter of thoughts,
Each did give and did take the thing designed,
- 530 The rank on this side and the cash on that—
Attained the object of the traffic,¹ so.
The way of the world, the daily bargain struck
In the first market! Why sells Jack his ware?
“For the sake of serving an old customer.”
- 535 Why does Jill buy it? “Simply not to break
A custom, pass the old stall the first time.”
Why, you know where the gist is of the exchange:
Each sees a profit, throws the fine words in.
Don’t be too hard o’ the pair! Had each pretence
- 540 Been simultaneously discovered, stript
From off the body o’ the transaction, just
As when a cook (will Excellency forgive?)
Strips away those long rough superfluous legs
From either side the crayfish, leaving folk
- 545 A meal all meat henceforth, no garnishry,
(With your respect, Prince!)—balance had been kept,
No party blamed the other,—so, starting fair,
All subsequent fence of wrong returned by wrong
I’ the matrimonial thrust and parry, at least
- 550 Had followed on equal terms. But, as it chanced,
One party had the advantage, saw the cheat
Of the other first and kept its own concealed:
And the luck o’ the first discovery fell, beside,
To the least adroit and self-possessed o’ the pair.
- 555 ’T was foolish Pietro and his wife saw first

¹ transaction.

The nobleman was penniless, and screamed
 “We are cheated!”

- Such unprofitable noise
 Angers at all times: but when those who plague,
 560 Do it from inside your own house and home,
 Gnats which yourself have closed the curtain round,
 Noise goes too near the brain and makes you mad.
 The gnats say, Guido used the candle-flame
 Unfairly,—worsened that first bad of his,
 565 By practising all kinds of cruelty
 To oust them and suppress the wail and whine,—
 That speedily he so scared and bullied them,
 Fain were they, long before five months had passed,
 To beg him grant, from what was once their wealth,
 570 Just so much as would help them back to Rome
 Where, when they finished paying the last doit
 O’ the dowry, they might beg from door to door.
 So say the Comparini—as if it came
 Of pure resentment for this worse than bad,
 575 That then Violante, feeling conscience prick,
 Confessed her substitution of the child
 Whence all the harm fell,—and that Pietro first
 Bethought him of advantage to himself
 I’ the deed, as part revenge, part remedy
 580 For all miscalculation in the pact.

On the other hand “Not so!” Guido retorts—
 “I am the wronged, solely, from first to last,
 Who gave the dignity¹ I engaged to give,
 Which was, is, cannot but continue gain.

¹ social rank.

- 585 My being poor was a bye-circumstance,¹
 Miscalculated piece of untowardness,²
 Might end to-morrow did heaven's windows ope,
 Or uncle die and leave me his estate.
 You should have put up with the minor flaw,
 590 Getting the main prize of the jewel. If wealth,
 Not rank, had been prime object in your thoughts,
 Why not have taken the butcher's son, the boy
 O' the baker or candlestick-maker? In all the rest,
 It was yourselves broke compact and played false,
 595 And made a life in common impossible.
 Show me the stipulation of our bond
 That you should make your profit of being inside
 My house, to hustle and edge me out o' the same,
 First make a laughing-stock of mine and me,
 600 Then round³ us in the ears from morn to night
 (Because we show wry faces at your mirth)
 That you are robbed, starved, beaten and what not!
 You fled a hell of your own lighting-up,
 Pay for your own miscalculation too:
 605 You thought nobility, gained at any price,
 Would suit and satisfy,—find the mistake,
 And now retaliate, not on yourselves, but me.
 And how? By telling me, i' the face of the world,
 I it is have been cheated all this while,
 610 Abominably and irreparably,—my name
 Given to a cur-cast mongrel, a drab's brat,

¹ side issue.

² annoyance.

³ din. (The word actually means "whisper," but Browning regularly uses it, by extension from "roundly," in the sense of loud, insistent utterance.)

A beggar's bye-blow,¹—thus depriving me
 Of what yourselves allege the whole and sole
 Aim on my part i' the marriage,—money to-wit.

- 615 This thrust I have to parry by a guard
 Which leaves me open to a counter-thrust
 On the other side,—no way but there's a pass
 Clean through me. If I prove, as I hope to do,
 There's not one truth in this your odious tale
 620 O' the buying, selling, substituting—prove
 Your daughter was and is your daughter,—well,
 And her dowry hers and therefore mine,—what then?
 Why, where's the appropriate punishment for this
 Enormous lie hatched for mere malice' sake
 625 To ruin me? Is that a wrong or no?
 And if I try revenge for remedy,
 Can I well make it strong and bitter enough?"

- I anticipate however—only ask,
 Which of the two here sinned most? A nice point!
 630 Which brownness is least black,—decide who can,
 Wager-by-battle-of-cheating! What do you say,
 Highness? Suppose, your Excellency, we leave
 The question at this stage, proceed to the next,
 Both parties step out, fight their prize upon,
 635 In the eye o' the world?

They brandish law 'gainst law;
 The grinding of such blades, each parry of each,
 Throws terrible sparks off, over and above the thrusts,
 And makes more sinister the fight, to the eye,
 640 Than the very wounds that follow. Beside the tale

¹ bastard.

- Which the Comparini have to re-assert,
 They needs must write, print, publish all abroad
 The straitnesses of Guido's household life—
 The petty nothings we bear privately
 645 But break down under when fools flock to jeer.
 What is it all to the facts o' the couple's case,
 How helps it prove Pompilia not their child,
 If Guido's mother, brother, kith and kin
 Fare ill, lie hard, lack clothes, lack fire, lack food?
 650 That's one more wrong than needs.

On the other hand,

- Guido,—whose cue is to dispute the truth
 O' the tale, reject the shame it throws on him,—
 He may retaliate, fight his foe in turn
 655 And welcome, we allow. Ay, but he can't!
 He's at home, only acts by proxy here:
 Law may meet law,—but all the gibes and jeers,
 The superfluity of naughtiness,¹
 Those libels on his House,—how reach at them?
 660 Two hateful faces, grinning all a-glow,
 Not only make parade of spoil they filched,
 But foul him from the height of a tower, you see.
 Unluckily temptation is at hand—
 To take revenge on a trifle overlooked,
 665 A pet lamb they have left in reach outside,
 Whose first bleat, when he plucks the wool away,
 Will strike the grinners grave: his wife remains
 Who, four months earlier, some thirteen years old,
 Never a mile away from mother's house
 670 And petted to the height of her desire,

¹ excessive troublemaking (James 1.21).

Was told one morning that her fate had come,
She must be married—just as, a month before,
Her mother told her she must comb her hair
And twist her curls into one knot behind.

- 675 These fools forgot their pet lamb, fed with flowers,
Then 'ticed as usual by the bit of cake
Out of the bower into the butchery.
Plague her, he plagues them threefold: but how plague?
The world may have its word to say to that:
- 680 You can't do some things with impunity.
What remains ... well, it is an ugly thought ...
But that he drive herself to plague herself—
Herself disgrace herself and so disgrace
Who seek to disgrace Guido?

- 685 There's the clue
To what else seems gratuitously vile,
If, as is said, from this time forth the rack
Was tried upon Pompilia: 't was to wrench
Her limbs into exposure that brings shame.
- 690 The aim o' the cruelty being so crueller still,
That cruelty almost grows compassion's self
Could one attribute it to mere return
O' the parents' outrage, wrong avenging wrong.
They see in this a deeper deadlier aim,
- 695 Not to vex just a body they held dear,
But blacken too a soul they boasted white,
And show the world their saint in a lover's arms,
No matter how driven thither,—so they say.

- On the other hand, so much is easily said,
700 And Guido lacks not an apologist.
The pair had nobody but themselves to blame,

- Being selfish beasts throughout, no less, no more:
 —Cared for themselves, their supposed good, nought
 else,
- And brought about the marriage; good proved bad,
 705 As little they cared for her its victim—nay,
 Meant she should stay behind and take the chance,
 If haply they might wriggle themselves free.
 They baited their own hook¹ to catch a fish
 With this poor worm, failed o' the prize, and then
 710 Sought how to unbait tackle, let worm float
 Or sink, amuse the monster while they 'scaped.
 Under the best stars Hymen² brings above,
 Had all been honesty on either side,
 A common sincere effort to good end,
 715 Still, this would prove a difficult problem, Prince!
 —Given, a fair wife, aged thirteen years,
 A husband poor, care-bitten, sorrow-sunk,
 Little, long-nosed, bush-bearded, lantern-jawed,
 Forty-six years old,—place the two grown one,
 720 She, cut off sheer from every natural aid,
 In a strange town with no familiar face—
 He, in his own parade-ground or retreat
 If need were, free from challenge, much less check
 To an irritated, disappointed will—
 725 How evolve happiness from such a match?
 'T were hard to serve up a congenial dish
 Out of these ill-agreeing morsels, Duke,
 By the best exercise of the cook's craft,
 Best interspersion of spice, salt and sweet!

¹ Compare earlier uses of the angler image at II 268–77, 321–23, 342–43, 1355–60.

² the Greek god of marriage.

- 730 But let two ghastly scullions¹ concoct mess
With brimstone, pitch, vitriol² and devil's-dung—³
Throw in abuse o' the man, his body and soul,
Kith, kin and generation, shake all slab⁴
At Rome, Arezzo, for the world to nose,
- 735 Then end by publishing, for fiend's arch-prank,
That, over and above sauce to the meat's self,
Why, even the meat, bedevilled thus in dish,
Was never a pheasant but a carrion-crow—
Prince, what will then the natural loathing be?
- 740 What wonder if this?—the compound plague o' the pair
Pricked Guido,—not to take the course they hoped,
That is, submit him to their statement's truth,
Accept its obvious promise of relief,
And thrust them out of doors the girl again
- 745 Since the girl's dowry would not enter there,
—Quit of the one if baulked of the other: no!
Rather did rage and hate so work in him,
Their product proved the horrible conceit
That he should plot and plan and bring to pass
- 750 His wife might, of her own free will and deed,
Relieve him of her presence, get her gone,
And yet leave all the dowry safe behind,
Confirmed his own henceforward past dispute,
While blotting out, as by a belch of hell,
- 755 Their triumph in her misery and death.

[———]

¹ kitchen help of the lowest order.

² sulphuric acid.

³ asafoetida, a stinking drug.

⁴ wet, slimy matter ("Make the gruel thick and slab," *Macbeth* 4.1.32).

- You see, the man was Aretine, had touch
 O' the subtle air¹ that breeds the subtle wit;
 Was noble too, of old blood thrice-refined
 That shrinks from clownish coarseness in disgust:
- 760 Allow that such an one may take revenge,
 You don't expect he'll catch up stone and fling,
 Or try cross-buttock,² or whirl quarter-staff?³
 Instead of the honest drubbing clowns bestow,
 When out of temper at the dinner spoilt,
- 765 On meddling mother-in-law and tiresome wife,—
 Substitute for the clown a nobleman,
 And you have Guido, practising, 't is said,
 Immitigably⁴ from the very first,
 The finer vengeance: this, they say, the fact
- 770 O' the famous letter shows—the writing traced
 At Guido's instance by the timid wife
 Over the pencilled words himself writ first—
 Wherein she, who could neither write nor read,
 Was made unblushingly declare a tale
- 775 To the brother, the Abate then in Rome,
 How her putative parents had impressed,
 On their departure, their enjoiment; bade
 "We being safely arrived here, follow, you!
 Poison your husband, rob, set fire to all,
- 780 And then by means o' the gallant you procure
 With ease, by helpful eye and ready tongue,

¹ Michelangelo is said to have remarked to Giorgio Vasari, the early historian of painting, "If I have anything good in me, that comes from my birth in the pure air of your country of Arezzo." See note to XII 811.

² a throw over the hip, in wrestling.

³ iron-tipped staff about six and a half feet long.

⁴ ceaselessly.

Some brave youth ready to dare, do and die,
You shall run off and merrily reach Rome
Where we may live like flies in honey-pot:”—
785 Such being exact the programme of the course
Imputed her as carried to effect.

They also say,—to keep her straight therein,
All sort of torture was piled, pain on pain,
On either side Pompilia's path of life,
790 Built round about and over against by fear,
Circumvallated month by month, and week
By week, and day by day, and hour by hour,
Close, closer and yet closer still with pain,
No outlet¹ from the encroaching pain save just
795 Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven,
Hell's arms² would strain round but for this blue gap.
She, they say further, first tried every chink,
Every imaginable break i' the fire,
As way of escape: ran to the Commissary,
800 Who bade her not malign his friend her spouse;
Flung herself thrice at the Archbishop's feet,
Where three times the Archbishop let her lie,
Spend her whole sorrow and sob full heart forth,
And then took up the slight load from the ground
805 And bore it back for husband to chastise,—
Mildly of course,—but natural right is right.
So went she slipping ever yet catching at help,
Missing the high till come to lowest and last,
To-wit a certain friar of mean degree,
810 Who heard her story in confession, wept,

¹ Compare previous uses of the figure at III 689, 780, 1039.

² Compare III 230–32.

Crossed himself, showed the man within the monk.

"Then, will you save me, you the one i' the world?

I cannot even write my woes, nor put

My prayer for help in words a friend may read,—

815 I no more own a coin than have an hour

Free of observance,—I was watched to church,

Am watched now, shall be watched back presently,—

How buy the skill of scribe i' the market-place?

Pray you, write down and send whatever I say

820 O' the need I have my parents take me hence!"

The good man rubbed his eyes and could not choose—

Let her dictate her letter in such a sense

That parents, to save breaking down a wall,

Might lift her over: she went back, heaven in heart.

825 Then the good man took counsel of his couch,

Woke and thought twice, the second thought the best:

"Here am I, foolish body that I be,

Caught all but pushing, teaching, who but I,

My betters their plain duty,—what, I dare

830 Help a case the Archbishop would not help,

Mend matters, peradventure, God loves mar?

What hath the married life but strifes and plagues

For proper dispensation?¹ So a fool

Once touched the ark,—poor Uzzah that I am!²

835 Oh married ones, much rather should I bid,

In patience all of ye possess your souls!³

This life is brief and troubles die with it:

Where were the prick to soar up homeward else?"

So saying, he burnt the letter he had writ,

¹ divinely ordained qualities.

² 2 Samuel 6.6–7. See note to I 195.

³ Luke 21.19.

- 840 Said *Ave* for her intention,¹ in its place,
 Took snuff and comfort, and had done with all.
 Then the grim arms stretched yet a little more
 And each touched each, all but one streak i' the midst,
 Whereat stood Caponsacchi, who cried, "This way,
 845 Out by me! Hesitate one moment more
 And the fire shuts out me and shuts in you!
 Here my hand holds you life out!" Whereupon
 She clasped the hand, which closed on hers and drew
 Pompilia out o' the circle² now complete.³
 850 Whose fault or shame but Guido's?—ask her friends.

- But then this is the wife's—Pompilia's tale—
 Eve's ... no, not Eve's, since Eve, to speak the truth,
 Was hardly fallen (our candour might pronounce)
 When simply saying in her own defence
 855 "The serpent tempted⁴ me and I did eat."
 So much of paradisal nature, Eve's!
 Her daughters ever since prefer to urge
 "Adam so starved me I was fain accept
 The apple any serpent pushed my way."
 860 What an elaborate theory have we here,
 Ingeniously nursed up, pretentiously
 Brought forth, pushed forward amid trumpet-blast,
 To account for the thawing of an icicle,
 Show us there needed Aetna vomit flame
 865 Ere run the crystal into dew-drops! Else,

¹ sake.

² Compare I 574, 581.

³ 844–49 A suggestion of the story of Orpheus's rescue of Eurydice from Hades, without the unhappy ending.

⁴ Compare the same plea at III 471.

- How, unless hell broke loose to cause the step,
 How could a married lady go astray?
 Bless the fools! And 't is just this way they are blessed,
 And the world wags still,—because fools are sure
 870 —Oh, not of my wife nor your daughter! No!
 But of their own: the case is altered quite.
 Look now,—last week, the lady we all love,—
 Daughter o' the couple we all venerate,
 Wife of the husband we all cap¹ before,
 875 Mother o' the babes we all breathe blessings on,—
 Was caught in converse² with a negro page.
 Hell thawed that icicle, else “Why was it—
 Why?” asked and echoed the fools. “Because, you
 fools,—”
 So did the dame's self answer, she who could,
 880 With that fine candour only forthcoming
 When 't is no odds whether withheld or no—
 “Because my husband was the saint you say,
 And,—with that childish goodness, absurd faith,
 Stupid self-satisfaction, you so praise,—
 885 Saint to you, insupportable to me.
 Had he,—instead of calling me fine names,
 Lucretia³ and Susanna⁴ and so forth,
 And curtaining Correggio carefully
 Lest I be taught that Leda had two legs,—⁵

¹ remove our hat.

² in “criminal conversation,” adultery.

³ the chaste wife of Collatinus, raped by Tarquin.

⁴ model of virtue in the apocryphal History of Susanna (ch. 13 of the Book of Daniel in the Vulgate).

⁵ The scene of Zeus visiting the nude Leda in the form of a swan, preparatory to begetting Castor and Pollux, was a favorite subject of Renaissance painters, among them Correggio.

- 890 —But once never so little tweaked my nose
For peeping through my fan at Carnival,
Confessing thereby 'I have no easy task—
I need use all my powers to hold you mine,
And then,—why 't is so doubtful if they serve,
895 That—take this, as an earnest of despair!'¹
Why, we were quits: I had wiped the harm away,
Thought 'The man fears me!' and foregone revenge."
We must not want all this elaborate work
To solve the problem why young Fancy-and-flesh
900 Slips from the dull side of a spouse in years,
Betakes it to the breast of Brisk-and-bold
Whose love-scrapes furnish talk for all the town!

- Accordingly one word on the other side
Tips over the piled-up fabric² of a tale.
905 Guido says—that is, always, his friends say—
It is unlikely, from the wickedness,
That any man treat any woman so.
The letter in question was her very own,
Unprompted and unaided: she could write—
910 As able to write as ready to sin, or free,
When there was danger, to deny both facts.
He bids you mark, herself from first to last
Attributes all the so-styled torture just
To jealousy,—jealousy of whom but just
915 This very Caponsacchi! How suits here
This with the other alleged motive, Prince?
Would Guido make a terror of the man

¹ token of hopelessness (my inability to reform you).

² structure, with (in this context) the implication of "fabrication"—a lie.

- He meant should tempt the woman, as they charge?
Do you fright your hare that you may catch your hare?
- 920 Consider too, the charge was made and met
At the proper time and place where proofs were plain—
Heard patiently and disposed of thoroughly
By the highest powers, possessors of most light,
The Governor for the law, and the Archbishop
- 925 For the gospel: which acknowledged primacies,¹
'T is impudently pleaded, he could warp
Into a tacit partnership with crime—
He being the while, believe their own account,
Impotent, penniless and miserable!
- 930 He further asks—Duke, note the knotty point!—
How he,—concede him skill to play such part
And drive his wife into a gallant's arms,—
Could bring the gallant to play his part too
And stand with arms so opportunely wide?
- 935 How bring this Caponsacchi,—with whom, friends
And foes alike agree, throughout his life
He never interchanged a civil word
Nor lifted courteous cap to—him how bend
To such observancy of beck and call,
- 940 —To undertake this strange and perilous feat
For the good of Guido, using, as the lure,
Pompilia whom, himself and she avouch,
He had nor spoken with nor seen, indeed,
Beyond sight in a public theatre,
- 945 When she wrote letters (she that could not write!)
The importunate shamelessly-protested love
Which brought him, though reluctant, to her feet,
And forced on him the plunge which, howsoe'er

¹ high authorities.

- She might swim up i' the whirl, must bury him
950 Under abysmal black: a priest contrive
No better, no amour to be hushed up,
But open flight and noon-day infamy?
Try and concoct defence for such revolt!
Take the wife's tale as true, say she was wronged,—
955 Pray, in what rubric¹ of the breviary²
Do you find it registered—the part of a priest
Is—that to right wrongs from the church he skip,
Go journeying with a woman that's a wife,
And be pursued, o'ertaken and captured ... how?
960 In a lay-dress, playing the kind sentinel
Where the wife sleeps (says he who best should know)
And sleeping, sleepless, both have spent the night!
Could no one else be found to serve at need—
No woman—or if man, no safer sort
965 Than this not well-reputed turbulence:³

- Then, look into his own account o' the case!
He, being the stranger and astonished one,
Yet received protestations of her love
From lady neither known nor cared about:
970 Love, so protested, bred in him disgust
After the wonder,—or incredulity,
Such impudence seeming impossible.
But, soon assured such impudence might be,
When he had seen with his own eyes at last
975 Letters thrown down to him i' the very street
From behind lattice where the lady lurked,

¹ heading.

² book of daily prayers for priests.

³ troublemaker.

And read their passionate summons to her side—
Why then, a thousand thoughts swarmed up and in,—
How he had seen her once, a moment's space,
980 Observed she was both young and beautiful,
Heard everywhere report she suffered much
From a jealous husband thrice her age,—in short
There flashed the propriety, expediency
Of treating, trying might they come to terms,
985 —At all events, granting the interview
Prayed for, one so adapted to assist
Decision as to whether he advance,
Stand or retire, in his benevolent mood!
Therefore the interview befell at length;
990 And at this one and only interview,
He saw the sole and single course to take—
Bade her dispose of him, head, heart and hand,
Did her behest and braved the consequence,
Not for the natural end, the love of man
995 For woman whether love be virtue or vice,
But, please you, altogether for pity's sake—
Pity of innocence and helplessness!
And how did he assure himself of both?
Had he been the house-inmate, visitor,
1000 Eye-witness of the described martyrdom,
So, competent to pronounce its remedy
Ere rush on such extreme and desperate course—
Involving such enormity of harm,
Moreover, to the husband judged thus, doomed
1005 And damned without a word in his defence?
Not he! the truth was felt by instinct here,
—Process which saves a world of trouble and time.
There's the priest's story: what do you say to it,
Trying its truth by your own instinct too,

- 1010 Since that's to be the expeditious mode?
"And now, do hear my version," Guido cries:
"I accept argument and inference both.
It would indeed have been miraculous
Had such a confidency¹ sprung to birth
- 1015 With no more fanning from acquaintanceship
Than here avowed by my wife and this priest.
Only, it did not: you must substitute
The old stale unromantic way of fault,
The commonplace adventure, mere intrigue
- 1020 In prose form with the unpoetic tricks,
Cheatings and lies: they used the hackney chair²
Satan jaunts forth with, shabby and serviceable,
No gilded gimcrack-novelty from below,
To bowl you along thither, swift and sure.
- 1025 That same officious go-between, the wench
Who gave and took the letters of the two,
Now offers self and service back to me:
Bears testimony to visits night by night
When all was safe, the husband far and away,—
- 1030 To many a timely slipping out at large
By light o' the morning-star, ere he should wake.
And when the fugitives were found at last,
Why, with them were found also, to belie
What protest they might make of innocence,
- 1035 All documents yet wanting, if need were,
To establish guilt in them, disgrace in me—
The chronicle o' the converse³ from its rise
To culmination in this outrage: read!

¹ intimacy.

² a hired one-horse vehicle.

³ See note to l. 876.

Letters from wife to priest, from priest to wife,—
 1040 Here they are, read and say where they chime in
 With the other tale, superlative purity
 O' the pair of saints! I stand or fall by these.”

But then on the other side again,—how say
 The pair of saints? That not one word is theirs—
 1045 No syllable o' the batch or writ or sent
 Or yet received by either of the two.
 “Found,” says the priest, “because he needed them,
 Failing all other proofs, to prove our fault:
 So, here they are, just as is natural.
 1050 Oh yes—we had our missives, each of us!
 Not these, but to the full as vile, no doubt:
 Hers as from me,—she could not read, so burnt,—
 Mine as from her,—I burnt because I read.
 Who forged and found them? *Cui profuerint!*¹
 1055 (I take the phrase out of your Highness' mouth)
 “He who would gain by her fault and my fall,
 The trickster, schemer and pretender—he
 Whose whole career was lie entailing lie
 Sought to be sealed truth by the worst lie last!”
 1060 Guido rejoins—“Did the other end o' the tale
 Match this beginning! 'T is alleged I prove
 A murderer at the end, a man of force
 Prompt, indiscriminate, effectual: good!
 Then what need all this trifling woman's-work,
 1065 Letters and embassies² and weak intrigue,
 When will and power were mine to end at once

¹ Who stood to gain by it?

² messages carried by a go-between.

- Safely and surely? Murder had come first
Not last with such a man, assure yourselves!
The silent *acquetta*,¹ stilling² at command—
1070 A drop a day i' the wine or soup, the dose,—
The shattering beam that breaks above the bed
And beats out brains, with nobody to blame
Except the wormy age which eats even oak,—
Nay, the staunch steel or trusty cord,—who cares
1075 I' the blind old palace, a pitfall at each step,
With none to see, much more to interpose
O' the two, three, creeping house-dog-servant-things
Born mine and bred mine? Had I willed gross death,
I had found nearer paths to thrust him prey
1080 Than this that goes meandering here and there
Through half the world and calls down in its course
Notice and noise,—hate, vengeance, should it fail,
Derision and contempt though it succeed!
Moreover, what o' the future son and heir?
1085 The unborn babe about to be called mine,—
What end in heaping all this shame on him,
Were I indifferent to my own black share?
Would I have tried these crookednesses, say,
Willing and able to effect the straight?"
- 1090 "Ay, would you!"—one may hear the priest retort,
"Being as you are, i' the stock,³ a man of guile,
And ruffianism but an added graft.
You, a born coward, try a coward's arms,
Trick and chicane,—and only when these fail

¹ poison.

² distilling, issuing in drops.

³ in the trunk, by main lineage or breed.

- 1095 Does violence follow, and like fox you bite
 Caught out in stealing. Also, the disgrace
 You hardly shrunk at, wholly shrivelled her:
 You plunged her thin white delicate hand i' the flame
 Along with your coarse horny brutish fist,
 1100 Held them a second there, then drew out both
 —Yours roughed a little, hers ruined through and
 through.
- Your hurt would heal forthwith at ointment's touch—
 Namely, succession to the inheritance
 Which bolder crime had lost you: let things change,
 1105 The birth o' the boy warrant the bolder crime,
 Why, murder was determined, dared and done.
 For me," the priest proceeds with his reply,
 "The look o' the thing, the chances of mistake,
 All were against me,—that, I knew the first:
 1110 But, knowing also what my duty was,
 I did it: I must look to men more skilled
 In reading hearts than ever was the world."

- Highness, decide! Pronounce, Her Excellency!
 Or ... even leave this argument in doubt,
 1115 Account it a fit matter, taken up
 With all its faces, manifold enough,
 To ponder on—what fronts us, the next stage,
 Next legal process? Guido, in pursuit,
 Coming up with the fugitives at the inn,
 1120 Caused both to be arrested then and there
 And sent to Rome for judgment on the case—
 Thither, with all his armoury of proofs,
 Betook himself: 't is there we'll meet him now,
 Waiting the further issue.

“And never let him henceforth dare to plead,—
 Of all pleas and excuses in the world
 For any deed hereafter to be done,—
 His irrepressible wrath at honour’s wound!

- 1130 Passion and madness irrepressible?
 Why, Count and cavalier, the husband comes
 And catches foe i’ the very act of shame!
 There’s man to man,—nature must have her way,—
 We look he should have cleared things on the spot.
- 1135 Yes, then, indeed—even tho’ it prove he erred—
 Though the ambiguous first appearance, mount
 Of solid injury, melt soon to mist,
 Still,—had he slain the lover and the wife—
 Or, since she was a woman and his wife,
- 1140 Slain him, but stript her naked to the skin
 Or at best left no more of an attire
 Than patch sufficient to pin paper to,
 Some one love-letter, infamy and all,
 As passport to the Paphos¹ fit for such,
- 1145 Safe-conduct to her natural home the stews,—²
 Good! One had recognized the power o’ the pulse.
 But when he stands, the stock-fish,³—sticks to law—
 Offers the hole in his heart, all fresh and warm,
 For scrivener’s pen to poke and play about—
- 1150 Can stand, can stare, can tell his beads perhaps,
 Oh, let us hear no syllable o’ the rage!
 Such rage were a convenient afterthought
 For one who would have shown his teeth belike,

¹ Cyprian site of the temple of Aphrodite, vulgarized in modern times into a symbol of sexual license.

² brothels.

³ hard-dried, unsalted cod.

- Exhibited unbridled rage enough,
1155 Had but the priest been found, as was to hope,
In serge, not silk, with crucifix, not sword:
Whereas the grey innocuous grub, of yore,
Had hatched a hornet, tickle to the touch,
The priest was metamorphosed into knight.
- 1160 And even the timid wife, whose cue was—shriek,
Bury her brow beneath his trampling foot,—
She too sprang at him like a pythoness:
So, gulp down rage, passion must be postponed,
Calm be the word! Well, our word is—we brand
- 1165 This part o' the business, howsoever the rest
Befall."
- "Nay," interpose as prompt his friends—
"This is the world's way! So you adjudge reward
To the forbearance and legality
- 1170 Yourselves begin by inculcating—ay,
Exacting from us all with knife at throat!
This one wrong more you add to wrong's amount,—
You publish all, with the kind comment here,
'Its victim was too cowardly for revenge.'"
- 1175 Make it your own case,—you who stand apart!
The husband wakes one morn from heavy sleep,
With a taste of poppy in his mouth,—rubs eyes,
Finds his wife flown, his strong box ransacked too,
Follows as he best can, overtakes i' the end.
- 1180 You bid him use his privilege: well, it seems
He's scarce cool-blooded enough for the right move—
Does not shoot when the game were sure, but stands
Bewildered at the critical minute,—since
He has the first flash of the fact alone
- 1185 To judge from, act with, not the steady lights
Of after-knowledge,—yours who stand at ease

- To try conclusions:¹ he's in smother and smoke,
You outside, with explosion at an end:
The sulphur may be lightning or a squib—
1190 He'll know in a minute, but till then, he doubts.
Back from what you know to what he knew not!
Hear the priest's lofty "I am innocent,"
The wife's as resolute "You are guilty!" Come!
Are you not staggered?—pause, and you lose the move!
1195 Nought left you but a low appeal to law,
"Coward" tied to your tail for compliment!
Another consideration: have it your way!
Admit the worst: his courage failed the Count,
He's cowardly like the best o' the burgesses
1200 He's grown incorporate with,—a very cur,
Kick him from out your circle by all means!
Why, trundled down this reputable stair,
Still, the Church-door lies wide to take him in,
And the Court-porch also: in he sneaks to each,—
1205 "Yes, I have lost my honour and my wife,
And, being moreover an ignoble hound,
I dare not jeopardize my life for them!"
Religion and Law lean forward from their chairs,
"Well done, thou good and faithful servant!"² Ay,
1210 Not only applaud him that he scorned the world,
But punish should he dare do otherwise.
If the case be clear or turbid,—you must say!

Thus, anyhow, it mounted to the stage
In the law-courts,—let's see clearly from this point!—
1215 Where the priest tells his story true or false,

¹ debate, try the issue.

² Matthew 25.21.

And the wife her story, and the husband his,
All with result as happy as before.

The courts would nor condemn nor yet acquit
This, that or the other, in so distinct a sense

1220 As end the strife to either's absolute loss:
Pronounced, in place of something definite,
"Each of the parties, whether goat or sheep
I' the main, has wool to show and hair to hide.

Each has brought somehow trouble, is somehow cause
1225 Of pains enough,—even though no worse were proved.

Here is a husband, cannot rule his wife
Without provoking her to scream and scratch
And scour the fields,—causelessly, it may be:

Here is that wife,—who makes her sex our plague,

1230 Wedlock, our bugbear,—perhaps with cause enough:
And here is the truant priest o' the trio, worst
Or best—each quality being conceivable.
Let us impose a little mulct¹ on each.

We punish youth in state of pupilage

1235 Who talk at hours when youth is bound to sleep,
Whether the prattle turn upon Saint Rose²
Or Donna Olimpia of the Vatican:³

'T is talk, talked wisely or unwisely talked,
I' the dormitory where to talk at all,

1240 Transgresses, and is mulct: as here we mean.
For the wife,—let her betake herself, for rest,
After her run, to a House of Convertites—

¹ a fine or penalty.

² falsely accused martyr burned at the stake but unscathed; the stake itself blossomed with roses.

³ the sister-in-law of Pope Innocent X (1644–55), who dominated and unmercifully robbed him.

- Keep there, as good as real imprisonment:
Being sick and tired, she will recover so.
- 1245 For the priest, spritely strayer out of bounds,
Who made Arezzo hot to hold him,—Rome
Profits by his withdrawal from the scene.
Let him be relegate to Civita,
Circumscribed by its bounds till matters mend:
- 1250 There he at least lies out o' the way of harm
From foes—perhaps from the too friendly fair.
And finally for the husband, whose rash rule
Has but itself to blame for this ado,—
If he be vexed that, in our judgments dealt,
- 1255 He fails obtain what he accounts his right,
Let him go comforted with the thought, no less,
That, turn each sentence howsoever he may,
There's satisfaction to extract therefrom.
For, does he wish his wife proved innocent?
- 1260 Well, she's not guilty, he may safely urge,
Has missed the stripes¹ dishonest wives endure—
This being a fatherly pat o' the cheek, no more.
Does he wish her guilty? Were she otherwise
Would she be locked up, set to say her prayers,
- 1265 Prevented intercourse with the outside world,
And that suspected priest in banishment,
Whose portion is a further help i' the case?
Oh, ay, you all of you want the other thing,
The extreme of law, some verdict neat, complete,—
- 1270 Either, the whole o' the dowry in your poke
With full release from the false wife, to boot,
And heading, hanging for the priest, beside—

¹ flogging.

Or, contrary, claim freedom for the wife,
 Repayment of each penny paid her spouse,
 1275 Amends for the past, release for the future! Such
 Is wisdom to the children of this world;¹
 But we've no mind, we children of the light,
 To miss the advantage of the golden mean,
 And push things to the steel point." Thus the courts.

- 1280 Is it settled so far? Settled or disturbed,
 Console yourselves: 't is like ... an instance, now!
 You've seen the puppets, of Place Navona,² play,—
 Punch and his mate,—how threats pass, blows are dealt,
 And a crisis comes: the crowd or clap or hiss
 1285 Accordingly as disposed for man or wife—
 When down the actors duck awhile perdue,
 Donning what novel rag-and-feather trim
 Best suits the next adventure, new effect:
 And,—by the time the mob is on the move,
 1290 With something like a judgment *pro* and *con*,—
 There's a whistle, up again the actors pop
 In t' other tatter with fresh-tinseled staves,
 To re-engage in one last worst fight more
 Shall show, what you thought tragedy was farce.
 1295 Note, that the climax and the crown of things
 Invariably is, the devil appears himself,
 Armed and accoutred, horns and hoofs and tail!
 Just so, nor otherwise it proved—you'll see:
 Move to the murder, never mind the rest!

[———]

¹ Luke 16.8.

² largest of the Roman squares, site of markets and popular entertainments.

- 1300 Guido, at such a general duck-down,
 I' the breathing-space,—of wife to convent here,
 Priest to his relegation, and himself
 To Arezzo,—had resigned his part perforce
 To brother Abate, who hustled, did his best,
 1305 Retrieved things somewhat, managed the three
 suits—¹
- Since, it should seem, there were three suits-at-law
 Behoved him look to, still, lest bad grow worse:
 First civil suit,—the one the parents brought,
 Impugning the legitimacy of his wife,
 1310 Affirming thence the nullity of her rights:
 This was before the Rota,²—Molinès,
 That's judge there, made that notable decree
 Which partly leaned to Guido, as I said,—
 But Pietro had appealed against the same
 1315 To the very court will judge what we judge now—
 Tommati and his fellows,—Suit the first.
 Next civil suit,—demand on the wife's part
 Of separation from the husband's bed
 On plea of cruelty and risk to life—
 1320 Claims restitution of the dowry paid,
 Immunity from paying any more:
 This second, the Vicegerent³ has to judge.
 Third and last suit,—this time, a criminal one,—
 Answer to, and protection from, both these,—
 1325 Guido's complaint of guilt against his wife
 In the Tribunal of the Governor,
 Venturini, also judge of the present cause.

¹ See General Note 3 (p. 769).

² ecclesiastical court of final appeal, subject only to papal authority.

³ vice governor.

- Three suits of all importance plaguing him,
 Beside a little private enterprise
 1330 Of Guido's,—essay at a shorter cut.
 For Paolo, knowing the right way at Rome,
 Had, even while superintending these three suits
 I' the regular way, each at its proper court,
 Ingeniously made interest with the Pope
 1335 To set such tedious regular forms aside,
 And, acting the supreme and ultimate judge,
 Declare for the husband and against the wife.
 Well, at such crisis and extreme of straits,—
 The man at bay, buffeted in this wise,—
 1340 Happened the strangest accident of all.
 "Then," sigh friends, "the last feather broke his back,
 Made him forget all possible remedies
 Save one—he rushed to, as the sole relief
 From horror and the abominable thing."
 1345 "Or rather," laugh foes, "then did there befall
 The luckiest of conceivable events,
 Most pregnant with impunity¹ for him,
 Which henceforth turned the flank of all attack,
 And bade him do his wickedest and worst."
 1350 —The wife's withdrawal from the Convertites,
 Visit to the villa where her parents lived,
 And birth there of his babe. Divergence here!
 I simply take the facts, ask what they show.
- First comes this thunderclap of a surprise:
 1355 Then follow all the signs and silences
 Premonitory of earthquake. Paolo first

¹ immunity, exemption from punishment.

- Vanished,¹ was swept off somewhere, lost to Rome:
(Wells dry up, while the sky is sunny and blue.)
- Then Guido girds himself for enterprise,
- 1360 Hies to Vittiano, counsels with his steward,
Comes to terms with four peasants young and bold,
And starts for Rome the Holy, reaches her
At very holiest, for 't is Christmas Eve,
And makes straight for the Abate's dried-up font,
- 1365 The lodge where Paolo ceased to work the pipes.
And then, rest taken, observation made
And plan completed, all in a grim week,
The five proceed in a body, reach the place,
—Pietro's, at the Paolina,² silent, lone,
- 1370 And stupefied by the propitious snow.
'T is one i' the evening,³ knock: a voice "Who's there?"
"Friends with a letter from the priest your friend."⁴
At the door, straight smiles old Violante's self.
She falls,—her son-in-law stabs through and through,
- 1375 Reaches through her at Pietro—"With your son
This is the way to settle suits, good sire!"
He bellows "Mercy for heaven, not for earth!
Leave to confess and save my sinful soul,
Then do your pleasure on the body of me!"
- 1380 —"Nay, father, soul with body must take its chance!"
He presently got his portion and lay still.

¹ to Venice and eventually to Spain, where, in 1708, he enlisted the aid of numerous dignitaries, including two ambassadors, an admiral, two generals, a duke, and a king in a strenuous and ultimately successful effort to obtain a pension. (See F.E. Faverty, "The Absconded Abbot in *The Ring and The Book*," *Studies in Philology* 36 [1939]: 88–104.)

² the Via Paolina, site of the Comparinis' home.

³ an hour after the Ave Maria, about seven p.m.

⁴ Compare the passwords at II 1431, III 1598–99.

And last, Pompilia rushes here and there
 Like a dove among the lightnings in her brake,
 Falls also: Guido's, this last husband's-act.

- 1385 He lifts her by the long dishevelled hair,
 Holds her away at arm's length with one hand,
 While the other tries if life come from the mouth—
 Looks out his whole heart's hate on the shut eyes,
 Draws a deep satisfied breath, "So—dead at last!"
- 1390 Throws down the burden on dead Pietro's knees,
 And ends all with "Let us away, my boys!"

And, as they left by one door, in at the other
 Tumbled the neighbours—for the shrieks had pierced
 To the mill and the grange, this cottage and that shed.

- 1395 Soon followed the Public Force; pursuit began
 Though Guido had the start and chose the road:
 So, that same night was he, with the other four,
 Overtaken near Baccano,—where they sank
 By the way-side, in some shelter meant for beasts,
 1400 And now lay heaped together, nuzzling swine,
 Each wrapped in bloody cloak, each grasping still
 His unwiped weapon, sleeping all the same
 The sleep o' the just,¹—a journey of twenty miles
 Brought just and unjust² to a level, you see.
- 1405 The only one i' the world that suffered aught
 By the whole night's toil and trouble,³ flight and chase,
 Was just the officer who took them, Head

¹ "Elle s'endormit du sommeil des justes" (Racine, *Abrége de l'histoire du Port Royal* 4.517).

² Matthew 5.45; Acts 24.15.

³ an echo of the witches' chorus in *Macbeth* 4.1.8: "Double, double,
 toil and trouble."

- O' the Public Force,—Patrizj, zealous soul,
Who, having but duty to sustain weak flesh,
1410 Got heated, caught a fever and so died:
A warning to the over-vigilant,
—Virtue in a chafe¹ should change her linen quick,
Lest pleurisy get start of providence.
(That's for the Cardinal, and told, I think!)
- 1415 Well, they bring back the company to Rome.
Says Guido, "By your leave, I fain would ask
How you found out 't was I who did the deed?
What put you on my trace, a foreigner,
Supposed in Arezzo,—and assuredly safe
1420 Except for an oversight: who told you, pray?"
"Why, naturally your wife!" Down Guido drops
O' the horse he rode,—they have to steady and stay,
At either side the brute that bore him bound,
So strange it seemed his wife should live and speak!
1425 She had prayed—at least so people tell you now—
For but one thing to the Virgin for herself,
Not simply,—as did Pietro 'mid the stabs,—
Time to confess and get her own soul saved
But time to make the truth apparent, truth
1430 For God's sake, lest men should believe a lie:
Which seems to have been about the single prayer
She ever put up, that was granted her.
With this hope in her head, of telling truth,—
Being familiarized with pain, beside,—
1435 She bore the stabbing to a certain pitch
Without a useless cry, was flung for dead

¹ overheated.

On Pietro's lap, and so attained her point.
Her friends subjoin this—have I done with them?—
And cite the miracle of continued life
1440 (She was not dead when I arrived just now)
As attestation to her probity.

Does it strike your Excellency? Why, your Highness,
The self-command and even the final prayer,
Our candour must acknowledge explicable
1445 As easily by the consciousness of guilt.
So, when they add that her confession runs
She was of wifehood one white innocence
In thought, word, act, from first of her short life
To last of it; praying, i' the face of death,
1450 That God forgive her other sins—not this,
She is charged with and must die for, that she failed
Anyway to her husband: while thereon
Comments the old Religious¹—“So much good,
Patience beneath enormity of ill,
1455 I hear to my confusion, woe is me,
Sinner that I stand, shamed in the walk and gait
I have practised and grown old in, by a child!”—
Guido's friends shrug the shoulder, “Just this same
Prodigious absolute calm in the last hour
1460 Confirms us,—being the natural result
Of a life which proves consistent to the close.
Having braved heaven and deceived earth throughout,
She braves still and deceives still, gains thereby
Two ends, she prizes beyond earth or heaven:
1465 First sets her lover free, imperilled sore

¹ Fra Celestino.

- By the new turn things take: he answers yet
For the part he played: they have summoned him indeed:
The past ripped up, he may be punished still:
What better way of saving him than this?
- 1470 Then,—thus she dies revenged to the uttermost
On Guido, drags him with her in the dark,
The lower still the better, do you doubt?
Thus, two ways, does she love her love to the end,
And hate her hate,—death, hell is no such price
- 1475 To pay for these,—lovers and haters hold.”
But there’s another parry for the thrust.
“Confession,” cry folks—“a confession, think!
Confession of the moribund is true!”
Which of them, my wise friends? This public one,
1480 Or the private other we shall never know?
The private may contain,—your casuists teach,—
The acknowledgment of, and the penitence for,
That other public one, so people say.
However it be,—we trench on delicate ground,
- 1485 Her Eminence is peeping o’er the cards,—
Can one find nothing in behalf of this
Catastrophe? Deaf folks accuse the dumb!
You criticize the drunken reel, fool’s speech,
Maniacal gesture of the man,—we grant!
- 1490 But who poured poison in his cup, we ask?
Recall the list of his excessive wrongs,
First cheated in his wife, robbed by her kin,
Rendered anon the laughing-stock o’ the world
By the story, true or false, of his wife’s birth,—
- 1495 The last seal publicly apposed to¹ shame

¹ placed on (the document of).

- By the open flight of wife and priest,—why, Sirs,
 Step out of Rome a furlong, would you know
 What anotherguess¹ tribunal than ours here,
 Mere worldly Court without the help of grace,
 1500 Thinks of just that one incident o' the flight?
 Guido preferred the same complaint before
 The court at Arezzo, bar of the Granduke,—
 In virtue of it being Tuscany
 Where the offence had rise and flight began,—
 1505 Self-same complaint he made in the sequel here
 Where the offence grew to the full, the flight
 Ended: offence and flight, one fact judged twice
 By two distinct tribunals,—what result?
 There was a sentence passed at the same time
 1510 By Arezzo and confirmed by the Granduke,
 Which nothing baulks² of swift and sure effect
 But absence of the guilty, (flight to Rome
 Frees them from Tuscan jurisdiction now)
 —Condemns the wife to the opprobrious doom
 1515 Of all whom law just lets escape from death.
 The Stinche, House of Punishment, for life,—
 That's what the wife deserves in Tuscany:
 Here, she deserves—remitting with a smile
 To her father's house, main object of the flight!
 1520 The thief presented with the thing he steals!

At this discrepancy of judgments—mad,
 The man took on himself the office, judged;
 And the only argument against the use

¹ another kind of.

² deprives.

- O' the law he thus took into his own hands
1525 Is ... what, I ask you?—that, revenging wrong,
He did not revenge sooner, kill at first
Whom he killed last! That is the final charge.
Sooner? What's soon or late i' the case?—ask we.
A wound i' the flesh no doubt wants prompt redress;
1530 It smarts a little to-day, well in a week,
Forgotten in a month; or never, or now, revenge!
But a wound to the soul? That rankles worse and worse.
Shall I comfort you, explaining—“Not this once
But now it may be some five hundred times
1535 I called you ruffian, pandar, liar and rogue:
The injury must be less by lapse of time”?
The wrong is a wrong, one and immortal too,
And that you bore it those five hundred times,
Let it rankle unrevenged five hundred years,
1540 Is just five hundred wrongs the more and worse!
Men, plagued this fashion, get to explode this way,
If left no other.

- “But we left this man
Many another way, and there's his fault,”
1545 ’T is answered—“He himself preferred our arm
O' the law to fight his battle with. No doubt
We did not open him an armoury
To pick and choose from, use, and then reject.
He tries one weapon and fails,—he tries the next
1550 And next: he flourishes wit and common sense,
They fail him,—he plies logic doughtily,
It fails him too,—thereon, discovers last
He has been blind to the combustibles—
That all the while he is a-glow with ire,
1555 Boiling with irrepressible rage, and so

May try explosives and discard cold steel,—
So hires assassins, plots, plans, executes!
Is this the honest self-forgetting rage
We are called to pardon? Does the furious bull
1560 Pick out four help-mates from the grazing herd
And journey with them over hill and dale
Till he find his enemy?"

What rejoinder? save
That friends accept our bull-similitude.
1565 Bull-like,—the indiscriminate slaughter, rude
And reckless aggravation of revenge,
Were all i' the way o' the brute who never once
Ceases, amid all provocation more,
To bear in mind the first tormentor, first
1570 Giver o' the wound that goaded him to fight:
And, though a dozen follow and reinforce
The aggressor, wound in front and wound in flank,
Continues undisturbedly pursuit,
And only after prostrating his prize
1575 Turns on the pettier, makes a general prey.
So Guido rushed against Violante, first
Author of all his wrongs, *fons et origo*
Malorum—drops first, deluge since,—which done,
He finished with the rest. Do you blame a bull?

1580 In truth you look as puzzled as ere I preached!
How is that? There are difficulties perhaps
On any supposition, and either side.
Each party wants too much, claims sympathy
For its object of compassion, more than just.
1585 Cry the wife's friends, "O the enormous crime
Caused by no provocation in the world!"

- “Was not the wife a little weak?”—inquire—
“Punished extravagantly, if you please,
But meriting a little punishment?
- 1590 One treated inconsiderately, say,
Rather than one deserving not at all
Treatment and discipline o’ the harsher sort?”
No, they must have her purity itself,
Quite angel,—and her parents angels too
- 1595 Of an aged sort, immaculate, word and deed:
At all events, so seeming, till the fiend,
Even Guido, by his folly, forced from them
The untoward avowal of the trick o’ the birth,
Which otherwise were safe and secret now.
- 1600 Why, here you have the awfulest of crimes
For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly!
A dragon born of rose-dew and the moon!
Yet here is the monster! Why he’s a mere man—
Born, bred and brought up in the usual way.
- 1605 His mother loves him, still his brothers stick
To the good fellow of the boyish games;
The Governor of his town knows and approves,
The Archbishop of the place knows and assists:
Here he has Cardinal This to vouch for the past,
- 1610 Cardinal That to trust for the future,—match
And marriage were a Cardinal’s making,—in short,
What if a tragedy be acted here
Impossible for malice to improve,
And innocent Guido with his innocent four
- 1615 Be added, all five, to the guilty three,
That we of these last days be edified
With one full taste o’ the justice of the world?

The long and the short is, truth seems what I show:—

Undoubtedly no pains ought to be spared

1620 To give the mob an inkling of our lights.

It seems unduly harsh to put the man

To the torture, as I hear the court intends,

Though readiest way of twisting out the truth;

He is noble, and he may be innocent.

1625 On the other hand, if they exempt the man

(As it is also said they hesitate

On the fair ground, presumptive guilt is weak

I' the case of nobility and privilege),—

What crime that ever was, ever will be,

1630 Deserves the torture? Then abolish it!

You see the reduction *ad absurdum*, Sirs?

Her Excellency must pronounce, in fine!

What, she prefers going and joining play?

Her Highness finds it late, intends retire?

1635 I am of their mind: only, all this talk talked,

'T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope?

Both know as much about it, now, at least,

As all Rome: no particular thanks, I beg!

(You'll see, I have not so advanced myself,

1640 After my teaching the two idiots here!)

COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

- THANKS, Sir, but, should it please the reverend Court,
 I feel I can stand somehow, half sit down
 Without help, make shift to even speak, you see,
 Fortified by the sip of ... why, 't is wine,
 5 Velletri,—and not vinegar and gall,¹
 So changed and good the times grow! Thanks, kind Sir!
 Oh, but one sip's enough! I want my head
 To save my neck, there's work awaits me still.
 How cautious and considerate ... aie, aie, aie,
 10 Nor your fault, sweet Sir! Come, you take to heart
 An ordinary matter. Law is law.
 Noblemen were exempt, the vulgar thought,
 From racking; but, since law thinks otherwise,
 I have been put to the rack: all's over now,
 15 And neither wrist—what men style, out of joint:
 If any harm be, 't is the shoulder-blade,
 The left one, that seems wrong i' the socket,—Sirs,
 Much could not happen, I was quick to faint,
 Being past my prime of life, and out of health.
 20 In short, I thank you,—yes, and mean the word.
 Needs must the Court be slow to understand
 How this quite novel form of taking pain,
 This getting tortured merely in the flesh,

The time is probably the third day after the murders, although the evidence is conflicting (compare l. 1683 below with VI 37). It will be noted also that at l. 936 Guido speaks of Pompilia as having already died, but at l. 1687 he says she is still living. She did, in fact, die four days after his attack. Preview: I 943–1015.

¹ Matthew 27.34, 38.

- Amounts to almost an agreeable change
- 25 In my case, me fastidious, plied too much
 With opposite treatment, used (forgive the joke)
 To the rasp-tooth toying with this brain of mine,
 And, in and out my heart, the play o' the probe.¹
 Four years have I been operated on
- 30 I' the soul, do you see—its tense or tremulous part—
 My self-respect, my care for a good name,
 Pride in an old one, love of kindred—just
 A mother, brothers, sisters, and the like,
 That looked up to my face when days were dim,
- 35 And fancied they found light there—no one spot,
 Foppishly sensitive, but has paid its pang.
 That, and not this you now oblige me with,
 That was the Vigil-torment,² if you please!
 The poor old noble House that drew the rags
- 40 O' the Franceschini's once superb array
 Close round her, hoped to slink unchallenged by,—
 Pluck off these! Turn the drapery inside out
 And teach the tittering town how scarlet wears!
 Show men the lucklessness, the improvidence
- 45 Of the easy-natured Count before this Count,
 The father I have some slight feeling for,
 Who let the world slide, nor foresaw that friends
 Then proud to cap and kiss their patron's shoe,
 Would, when the purse he left held spider-webs,
- 50 Properly push his child to wall one day!
 Mimic the tetchy humour, furtive glance,

¹ Note Tertium Quid's use of the same image, IV 1148–49. The latter is one of many evidences of Tertium Quid's instinctive—and politic—sympathy for Guido.

² See note to I 979–80.

- And brow where half was furious, half fatigued,
 O' the same son got to be of middle age,
 Sour, saturnine,—your humble servant here,—
- 55 When things go cross and the young wife, he finds
 Take to the window at a whistle's bid,
 And yet demurs thereon, preposterous fool!—
 Whereat the worthies judge he wants advice
 And beg to civilly ask what's evil here,
- 60 Perhaps remonstrate on the habit they deem
 He's given unduly to, of beating her:
 ... Oh, sure he beats her—why says John so else,
 Who is cousin to George who is sib to¹ Tecla's self
 Who cooks the meal and combs the lady's hair?
- 65 What! 'T is my wrist you merely dislocate
 For the future when you mean me martyrdom?
 —Let the old mother's economy alone,
 How the brocade-strips saved o' the seamy side
 O' the wedding-gown buy raiment for a year?
- 70 —How she can dress and dish up—lordly dish
 Fit for a duke, lamb's head and purtenance—²
 With her proud hands, feast household so a week?
 No word o' the wine rejoicing God and man
 The less when three-parts water? Then, I say,
- 75 A trifle of torture to the flesh, like yours,
 While soul is spared such foretaste of hell-fire,
 Is naught. But I curtail the catalogue
 Through policy,³—a rhetorician's trick,—
 Because I would reserve some choicer points
- 80 O' the practice, more exactly parallel

¹ See note to II 513.

² Exodus 12.9.

³ shrewdness, calculation.

(Having an eye to climax) with what gift,
Eventual grace the Court may have in store
I' the way of plague—what crown of punishments.
When I am hanged or headed, time enough

- 85 To prove the tenderness of only that,
Mere heading, hanging,—not their counterpart,
Not demonstration public and precise
That I, having married the mongrel of a drab,
Am bound to grant that mongrel-brat, my wife,
90 Her mother's birthright-license as is just,—
Let her sleep undisturbed, i' the family style,
Her sleep out in the embraces of a priest,
Nor disallow their bastard as my heir!
Your sole mistake,—dare I submit so much
95 To the reverend Court?—has been in all this pains
To make a stone roll down hill,—rack and wrench
And rend a man to pieces, all for what?
Why—make him ope mouth in his own defence,
Show cause for what he has done, the irregular deed,
100 (Since that he did it, scarce dispute can be)
And clear his fame a little, beside the luck
Of stopping even yet, if possible,
Discomfort to his flesh from noose or axe—
For that, out come the implements of law!
105 May it content my lords the gracious Court
To listen only half so patient-long
As I will in that sense profusely speak,
And—fie, they shall not call in screws to help!

I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;

- 110 Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,
Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,
Her father and her mother to ruin me.
There's the irregular deed: you want no more

Than right interpretation of the same,
 115 And truth so far—am I to understand?
 To that then, with convenient speed,—because
 Now I consider,—yes, despite my boast,
 There is an ailing in this omoplat¹
 May clip my speech all too abruptly short,
 120 Whatever the good-will in me. Now for truth!

I' the name of the indivisible Trinity!
 Will my lords, in the plenitude of their light,
 Weigh well that all this trouble has come on me
 Through my persistent treading in the paths
 125 Where I was trained to go,—wearing that yoke
 My shoulder was predestined to receive,
 Born to the hereditary stoop and crease?²
 Noble, I recognized my nobler still,
 The Church, my suzerain; no mock-mistress, she;
 130 The secular owned the spiritual: mates of mine
 Have thrown their careless hoofs up at her call
 “Forsake the clover and come drag my wain!”
 There they go cropping: I protruded nose
 To halter, bent my back of docile beast,³
 135 And now am whealed,⁴ one wide wound all of me,
 For being found at the eleventh hour o' the day
 Padding the mill-track, not neck-deep in grass:
 —My one fault, I am stiffened by my work,
 —My one reward, I help the Court to smile!

[— — —]

¹ shoulderblade.

² wrinkle, or possibly the furrow worn by the yoke.

³ At the end of the preceding book Guido was portrayed as a maddened bull.

⁴ flogged (leaving welts). See note to XI 1469.

- 140 I am representative of a great line,
 One of the first of the old families
 In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.
 When my worst foe is fain to challenge this,
 His worst exception runs—not first in rank
 145 But second, noble in the next degree
 Only; not malice' self maligns me more.
 So, my lord opposite has composed, we know,
 A marvel of a book, sustains the point
 That Francis boasts the primacy 'mid saints;¹
 150 Yet not inaptly hath his argument
 Obtained response from yon my other lord
 In thesis published with the world's applause
 —Rather 't is Dominic such post befits:
 Why, at the worst, Francis stays Francis still,
 155 Second in rank to Dominic it may be,
 Still, very saintly, very like our Lord;
 And I at least descend from Guido once
 Homager to the Empire,² nought below—
 Of which account as proof that, none o' the line
 160 Having a single gift beyond brave blood,
 Or able to do aught but give, give, give
 In blood and brain, in house and land and cash,
 Not get and garner as the vulgar may,
 We became poor as Francis or our Lord.
 165 Be that as it likes you, Sirs,—whenever it chanced
 Myself grew capable anyway of remark,³
 (Which was soon—penury makes wit premature)

¹ 149–56 An allusion to the rivalry between the two religious orders of Franciscans and Dominicans.

² holder of an estate under the (Holy Roman) Emperor.

³ noticing.

- This struck me, I was poor who should be rich
Or pay that fault¹ to the world which trifles not
170 When lineage lacks the flag yet lifts the pole:
On, therefore, I must move forthwith, transfer
My stranded self, born fish with gill and fin
Fit for the deep sea, now left flap bare-backed
In slush and sand, a show to crawlers vile
175 Reared of the low-tide and aright therein.
The enviable youth with the old name,
Wide chest, stout arms, sound brow and pricking²
veins,
A heartful of desire, man's natural load,
A brainful of belief, the noble's lot,—
180 All this life, cramped and gasping, high and dry
I' the wave's retreat,—the misery, good my lords,
Which made you merriment at Rome of late,—
It made me reason, rather—muse, demand³
—Why our bare dropping palace, in the street
185 Where such-an-one whose grandfather sold tripe
Was adding to his purchased pile a fourth
Tall tower,⁴ could hardly show a turret sound?
Why Countess Beatrice, whose son I am,
Cowered in the winter-time as she spun flax,
190 Blew on the earthen basket of live ash,
Instead of jaunting forth in coach and six
Like such-another widow who ne'er was wed?
I asked my fellows, how came this about?

¹ pay for being poor.

² tingling with life.

³ ask oneself, and ask others, why.

⁴ In Renaissance Tuscany, tall towers continued to be built as status symbols long after their military usefulness had ended.

- “Why, Jack, the suttler’s¹ child, perhaps the camp’s,
195 Went to the wars, fought sturdily, took a town
And got rewarded as was natural.
She of the coach and six—excuse me there!
Why, don’t you know the story of her friend?
A clown dressed vines on somebody’s estate,
200 His boy recoiled from muck, liked Latin more,
Stuck to his pen and got to be a priest,
Till one day ... don’t you mind that telling tract
Against Molinos, the old Cardinal wrote?
He penned and dropped it in the patron’s desk
205 Who, deep in thought and absent much of mind,
Licensed the thing, allowed it for his own;
Quick came promotion,—*suum cuique*,² Count!
Oh, he can pay for coach and six, be sure!”
“—Well, let me go, do likewise:³ war’s the word—
210 That way the Franceschini worked at first,
I’ll take my turn, try soldiership.”—“What, you?
The eldest son and heir and prop o’ the house,
So do you see your duty? Here’s your post,
Hard by the hearth and altar. (Roam from roof,
215 This youngster, play the gipsy out of doors,
And who keeps kith and kin that fall on us?)
Stand fast, stick tight, conserve your gods at home!”
“—Well then, the quiet course, the contrary trade!
We had a cousin amongst us once was Pope,
220 And minor glories manifold. Try the Church,
The tonsure, and,—since heresy’s but half-slain
Even by the Cardinal’s tract he thought he wrote,—

¹ peddler trading with the army.

² to each his own (Tacitus, *Annals* 4.35.4).

³ Luke 10.37.

- Have at Molinos!"—"Have at a fool's head!
 You a priest? How were marriage possible?
 225 There must be Franceschini till time ends—
 That's your vocation. Make your brothers priests,
 Paul shall be porporate,¹ and Girolamo step
 Red-stockinged² in the presence when you choose,
 But save one Franceschini for the age!
 230 Be not the vine but dig and dung its root,³
 Be not a priest but gird up priesthood's loins,⁴
 With one foot in Arezzo stride to Rome,
 Spend yourself there and bring the purchase back!
 Go hence to Rome, be guided!"

- 235 So I was.
 I turned alike from the hill-side zig-zag thread
 Of way to the table-land a soldier takes,
 Alike from the low-lying pasture-place
 Where churchmen graze, recline and ruminate,
 240 —Ventured to mount no platform like my lords
 Who judge the world, bear brain I dare not brag—
 But stationed me, might thus the expression serve,
 As who should fetch and carry, come and go,
 Meddle and make i' the cause my lords love most—
 245 The public weal, which hangs to the law, which holds
 By the Church, which happens to be through God
 himself.
 Humbly I helped the Church till here I stand,—
 Or would stand but for the omoplat, you see!

¹ a wearer of cardinal's purple.

² in cardinal's stockings.

³ Luke 13.7–8.

⁴ Luke 12.35.

- Bidden qualify for Rome, I, having a field,
 250 Went, sold it, laid the sum at Peter's foot:¹
 Which means—I settled home-accounts with speed,
 Set apart just a modicum should suffice
 To hold the villa's head above the waves
 Of weed inundating its oil and wine,
 255 And prop roof, stanchion² wall o' the palace so
 As to keep breath i' the body, out of heart
 Amid the advance of neighbouring loftiness—
 (People like building where they used to beg)—
 Till succoured one day,—shared the residue
 260 Between my mother and brothers and sisters there,
 Black-eyed babe Donna This and Donna That,
 As near to starving as might decently be,
 —Left myself journey-charges, change of suit,
 A purse to put i' the pocket of the Groom
 265 O' the Chamber of the patron, and a glove
 With a ring to it for the digits of the niece
 Sure to be helpful in his household,—then
 Started for Rome, and led the life prescribed.
 Close to the Church, though clean of it, I assumed
 270 Three or four orders of no consequence,
 —They cast out evil spirits and exorcise,
 For example; bind a man to nothing more,
 Give clerical savour to his layman's-salt,
 Facilitate his claim to loaf and fish
 275 Should miracle leave, beyond what feeds the flock,
 Fragments to brim the basket of a friend—³

¹ "And Joses, who by the apostles was named Barnabas, ... having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4.36-37).

² The words "prop" and "stanchion" are synonymous.

³ Matthew 14.19-20.

- While, for the world's sake, I rode, danced and gamed,
 Quitted me¹ like a courtier, measured mine
 With whatsoever blade had fame in fence,
 280 —Ready to let the basket go its round
 Even though my turn was come to help myself,
 Should Dives² count on me at dinner-time
 As just the understander of a joke
 And not immoderate in repartee.
 285 *Utrique sic paratus*,³ Sirs, I said,⁴
 "Here," (in the fortitude of years fifteen,
 So good a pedagogue is penury)
 "Here wait, do service,—serving and to serve!
 And, in due time, I nowise doubt at all,
 290 The recognition of my service comes.
 Next year I'm only sixteen. I can wait."

- I waited thirty years, may it please the Court:
 Saw meanwhile many a denizen o' the dung⁵
 Hop, skip, jump o'er my shoulder, make him wings
 295 And fly aloft,—succeed, in the usual phrase.
 Everyone soon or late comes round by Rome:
 Stand still here, you'll see all in turn succeed.
 Why, look you, so and so, the physician here,

¹ behaved.

² the rich man in Christ's parable, Luke 16.

³ prepared for either event.

⁴ 285–342 This detailed account of Guido's futile attempt to gain a profitable foothold in the church is almost entirely Browning's invention. We do know from the documents, however, that Guido exaggerates the lowliness of the position he held in the entourage of his patron, Cardinal Nerli. The records also indicate that he does not exaggerate his lack of success.

⁵ Compare II 295–98 (the direct antecedent of the present image) and IV 247, where Pompilia is a rose on the dung-heap.

My father's lacquey's son we sent to school,
 300 Doctored and dosed this Eminence and that,
 Salved the last Pope his certain obstinate sore,
 Soon bought land as became him, names it now:
 I grasp bell at his griffin-guarded¹ gate,
 Traverse the half-mile avenue,—a term,²
 305 A cypress, and a statue, three and three,—
 Deliver message from my Monsignor,
 With varlety³ at lounge i' the vestibule
 I'm barred from, who bear mud upon my shoe.
 My father's chaplain's nephew, Chamberlain,—
 310 Nothing less, please you!—courteous all the same,
 —He does not see me though I wait an hour
 At his staircase-landing 'twixt the brace of busts,
 A noseless Sylla, Marius⁴ maimed to match,
 My father gave him for a hexastich⁵
 315 Made on my birthday,—but he sends me down,
 To make amends, that relic I prize most—
 The unburnt end o' the very candle, Sirs,
 Purfled⁶ with paint so prettily round and round,
 He carried in such state last Peter's-day,—
 320 In token I, his gentleman and squire,
 Had held the bridle, walked his managed mule
 Without a tittup⁷ the procession through.

¹ guarded by statues of griffins, Greek mythological animals with the head and wings of an angel and the body of a lion.

² pillar surmounted by a sculptured head or bust, originally that of Terminus, god of boundaries.

³ rabble, menials.

⁴ Lucius Sulla (138–78 BC) and Gaius Marius (157–86 BC) were rival Roman generals and dictators.

⁵ six-line epigram.

⁶ fringed.

⁷ frisk, prance.

- Nay, the official,—one you know, sweet lords!—
Who drew the warrant for my transfer late
- 325 To the New Prisons from Tordinona,—he
Graciously had remembrance—“Francesc ... ha?
His sire, now—how a thing shall come about!—
Paid me a dozen florins¹ above the fee,
For drawing deftly up a deed of sale
- 330 When troubles fell so thick on him, good heart,
And I was prompt and pushing! By all means!
At the New Prisons be it his son shall lie,—
Anything for an old friend!” and thereat
Signed name with triple flourish underneath.
- 335 These were my fellows, such their fortunes now,
While I—kept fasts and feasts innumerable,
Matins and vespers, functions to no end
I’ the train of Monsignor and Eminence,
As gentleman-squire, and for my zeal’s reward
- 340 Have rarely missed a place at the table-foot
Except when some Ambassador, or such like,
Brought his own people. Brief, one day I felt
The tick of time inside me, turning-point
And slight sense there was now enough of this:
- 345 That I was near my seventh climacteric,²
Hard upon, if not over, the middle life,
And, although fed by the east-wind,³ fulsome-fine⁴
With foretaste of the Land of Promise, still
My gorge⁵ gave symptom it might play me false;

¹ gold Florentine coins.

² the age of forty-nine. A climacteric is a period of seven years.

³ Job 15.2.

⁴ fed to satiety.

⁵ stomach.

- 350 Better not press it further,—be content
 With living and dying only a nobleman,
 Who merely had a father great and rich,
 Who simply had one greater and richer yet,
 And so on back and back till first and best
 355 Began i' the night; I finish in the day.
 "The mother must be getting old," I said;
 "The sisters are well wedded away, our name
 Can manage to pass a sister off, at need,
 And do for dowry: both my brothers thrive—
 360 Regular priests they are, nor, bat-like, 'bide
 'Twixt flesh and fowl with neither privilege.
 My spare revenue must keep me and mine.
 I am tired: Arezzo's air is good to breathe;
 Vittiano,—one limes¹ flocks of thrushes there;
 365 A leatherne coat costs little and lasts long:
 Let me bid hope good-bye, content at home!"
 Thus, one day, I disbosomed me and bowed.

Whereat began the little buzz and thrill
 O' the gazers round me; each face brightened up:

- 370 As when at your Casino, deep in dawn,
 A gamester says at last, "I play no more,
 Forego gain, acquiesce in loss, withdraw
 Anyhow:" and the watchers of his ways,
 A trifle struck compunctious at the word,
 375 Yet sensible of relief, breathe free once more,
 Break up the ring, venture polite advice—
 "How, Sir? So scant of heart and hope indeed?
 Retire with neither cross nor pile² from play?—

¹ catches by spreading a sticky substance on twigs.

² the two sides of a coin (compare "heads and tails"), therefore penniless.

- So incurious, so short-casting?¹—give your chance
 380 To a younger, stronger, bolder spirit belike,
 Just when luck turns and the fine throw sweeps all?"
 Such was the chorus: and its goodwill meant—
 "See that the loser leave door handsomely!
 There's an ill look,—it's sinister, spoils sport,
 385 When an old bruised and battered year-by-year
 Fighter with fortune, not a penny in poke,
 Reels down the steps of our establishment
 And staggers on broad daylight and the world,
 In shagrag² beard and doleful doublet, drops
 390 And breaks his heart on the outside: people prate
 'Such is the profit of a trip upstairs!'
 Contrive he sidle forth, baulked of³ the blow
 Best dealt by way of moral, bidding down
 No curse but blessings rather on our heads
 395 For some poor prize he bears at tattered breast,
 Some palpable sort of kind of good to set
 Over and against the grievance: give him quick!"
 Whereon protested Paul, "Go hang yourselves!
 Leave him to me. Count Guido and brother of mine,
 400 A word in your ear! Take courage, since faint heart
 Ne'er won ... aha, fair lady, don't men say?
 There's a *sors*, there's a right Virgilian dip!⁴
 Do you see the happiness o' the hint? At worst,
 If the Church want no more of you, the Court
 405 No more, and the Camp as little, the ingrates,—come,

¹ cautious.

² shaggy, unkempt.

³ spared.

⁴ the Roman habit of opening a copy of Virgil at random in the expectation of lighting upon a particularly appropriate and helpful passage.

Count you are counted:¹ still you've coat to back,
Not cloth of gold and tissue, as we hoped,
But cloth with sparks and spangles on its frieze²
From Camp, Court, Church, enough to make a shine,
410 Entitle you to carry home a wife
With the proper dowry, let the worst betide!
Why, it was just a wife you meant to take!"

Now, Paul's advice³ was weighty: priests should know:
And Paul apprised me, ere the week was out,
415 That Pietro and Violante, the easy pair,
The cits enough, with stomach⁴ to be more,
Had just the daughter and exact the sum
To truck⁵ for the quality of myself: "She's young,
Pretty and rich: you're noble, classic, choice.
420 Is it to be a match?" "A match," said I.
Done! He proposed all, I accepted all,
And we performed all. So I said and did
Simply. As simply followed, not at first
But with the outbreak of misfortune, still
425 One comment on the saying and doing—"What?
No blush at the avowal you dared buy
A girl of age beseems your granddaughter,
Like ox or ass? Are flesh and blood a ware?
Are heart and soul a chattel?"

430 Softly, Sirs!
Will the Court of its charity teach poor me
Anxious to learn, of any way i' the world,

¹ accounted known

² coarse, shaggy woollen fabric.

³ See 1. 724 and note.

see n. 2

5 appear.
exchange

- Allowed by custom and convenience, save
 This same which, taught from my youth up, I trod?
- 435 Take me along with you; where was the wrong step?
 If what I gave in barter, style and state
 And all that hangs to Franceschinihood,
 Were worthless,—why, society goes to ground,
 Its rules are idiot's-rambling. Honour of birth,—
- 440 If that thing has no value, cannot buy
 Something with value of another sort,
 You've no reward nor punishment to give
 I' the giving or the taking honour; straight
 Your social fabric, pinnacle to base,
- 445 Comes down a-clatter like a house of cards.
 Get honour, and keep honour free from flaw,
 Aim at still higher honour,—gabble o' the goose!
 Go bid a second blockhead like myself
 Spend fifty years in guarding bubbles of breath,
- 450 Soapsuds with air i' the belly, gilded brave,
 Guarded and guided, all to break at touch
 O' the first young girl's hand and first old fool's purse!
 All my privation and endurance, all
 Love, loyalty and labour dared and did,
- 455 Fiddle-de-dee!—why, doer and darer both,—
 Count Guido Franceschini had hit the mark
 Far better, spent his life with more effect,
 As a dancer or a prizer,¹ trades that pay!
 On the other hand, bid this buffoonery cease,
- 460 Admit that honour is a privilege,
 The question follows, privilege worth what?
 Why, worth the market-price,—now up, now down,²

¹ prizefighter.

² Compare *Tertium Quid*'s account of the same bargain, IV 508–27.

- Just so with this as with all other ware:
Therefore essay the market, sell your name,
465 Style and condition to who buys them best!
"Does my name purchase," had I dared inquire,
"Your niece, my lord?" there would have been rebuff
Though courtesy, your Lordship cannot else—
"Not altogether! Rank for rank may stand:
470 But I have wealth beside, you—poverty;
Your scale flies up there: bid, a second bid,
Rank too and wealth too!" Reasoned like yourself!
But was it to you I went with goods to sell?
This time 't was my scale quietly kissed the ground,
475 Mere rank against mere wealth—some youth beside,
Some beauty too, thrown into the bargain, just
As the buyer likes or lets alone. I thought
To deal o' the square: others find fault, it seems:
The thing is, those my offer most concerned,
480 Pietro, Violante, cried they fair or foul?
What did they make o' the terms? Preposterous terms?
Why then accede so promptly, close with such
Nor take a minute to chaffer? Bargain struck,
They straight grew bilious, wished their money back,
485 Repented them, no doubt: why, so did I,
So did your Lordship, if town-talk be true,
Of paying a full farm's worth for that piece
By Pietro of Cortona—probably
His scholar Ciro Ferri¹ may have retouched—
490 You caring more for colour than design—
Getting a little tired of cupids too.
That's incident to all the folk who buy!

¹ Pietro (1597–1669) was a celebrated baroque painter, Ferri (1634–89) his pupil.

- I am charged, I know, with gilding fact by fraud;
 I falsified and fabricated, wrote
- 495 Myself down roughly richer than I prove,
 Rendered a wrong revenue,—grant it all!
 Mere grace, mere coquetry¹ such fraud, I say:
 A flourish round the figures of a sum
 For fashion's sake, that deceives nobody.
- 500 The veritable back-bone, understood
 Essence of this same bargain, blank and bare,
 Being the exchange of quality for wealth,—
 What may such fancy-flights be? Flecks of oil
 Flirted by chapmen² where plain dealing grates.
- 505 I may have dripped a drop—"My name I sell;
 Not but that I too boast my wealth"—as they,
 "—We bring you riches; still our ancestor
 Was hardly the rapscallion folk saw flogged,
 But heir to we know who, were rights of force!"³
- 510 They knew and I knew where the backbone lurked
 I' the writhings of the bargain, lords, believe!⁴
 I paid down all engaged for, to a doit,
 Delivered them just that which, their life long,
 They hungered in the hearts of them to gain—
- 515 Incorporation with nobility thus
 In word and deed: for that they gave me wealth.
 But when they came to try their gain, my gift,
 Quit Rome and qualify for Arezzo, take
 The tone o' the new sphere that absorbed the old,⁵

¹ embellishment, window-dressing.

² sprinkled by merchants.

³ were justice done.

⁴ Note the reflection of earlier snake imagery, for example II 1445–46.

⁵ Ephesians 4.22–24.

- 520 Put away gossip Jack and goody Joan
 And go become familiar with the Great,
 Greatness to touch and taste and handle now,—¹
 Why then,—they found that all was vanity,
 Vexation, and what Solomon describes!²
- 525 The old abundant city-fare was best,
 The kindly warmth o' the commons, the glad clap
 Of the equal on the shoulder, the frank grin
 Of the underling at all so many spoons
 Fire-new at neighbourly treat,—best, best and best
- 530 Beyond compare!—down to the loll itself
 O' the pot-house settle,—better such a bench
 Than the stiff crucifixion by my dais
 Under the piecemeal damask canopy
 With the coroneted coat of arms a-top!
- 535 Poverty and privation for pride's sake,
 All they engaged to easily brave and bear,—
 With the fit upon them and their brains a-work,—
 Proved unendurable to the sobered sots.
 A banished prince, now, will exude a juice
- 540 And salamander-like³ support the flame:
 He dines on chestnuts, chucks the husks to help
 The broil o' the brazier, pays the due baioc,⁴
 Goes off light-hearted: his grimace begins
 At the funny humours of the christening-feast
- 545 Of friend the money-lender,—then he's touched
 By the flame and frizzles⁵ at the babe to kiss!

¹ Colossians 2.21.

² Ecclesiastes 1.14 and elsewhere.

³ a lizard reputed in myth to live in the midst of fire.

⁴ a contemporary papal coin of small value.

⁵ that is, loses his salamander-like resistance to fire and burns, briskly and crisply.

Here was the converse trial, opposite mind:

Here did a petty nature split on rock

Of vulgar wants predestinate for such—

550 One dish at supper and weak wine to boot!

The prince had grinned and borne: the citizen shrieked,

Summoned the neighbourhood to attest the wrong,

Made noisy protest he was murdered,—stoned

And burned and drowned and hanged,—then broke

away,

555 He and his wife, to tell their Rome the rest.

And this you admire, you men o' the world, my lords?

This moves compassion, makes you doubt my faith?

Why, I appeal to ... sun and moon? Not I!

Rather to Plautus, Terence, Boccaccio's Book,¹

560 My townsman, frank Ser Franco's merry Tales,—²

To all who strip a vizard from a face,

A body from its padding, and a soul

From froth and ignorance it styles itself,—

If this be other than the daily hap

565 Of purblind³ greed that dog-like still drops bone,

Grasps shadow, and then howls the case is hard!

So much for them so far: now for myself,

My profit or loss i' the matter: married am I:

Text whereon friendly censors burst to preach.

570 Ay, at Rome even, long ere I was left

To regulate her life for my young bride

¹ all classics of comedy, with special reference to cheating and disillusionment.

² See note to III 1446. Sacchetti was not Guido's "townsman" but a Florentine.

³ stupid, uncomprehending.

Alone at Arezzo, friendliness outbroke
 (Sifting my future to predict its fault)
 "Purchase and sale being thus so plain a point,
 575 How of a certain soul bound up, may-be,
 I' the barter with the body and money-bags?
 From the bride's soul what is it you expect?"
 Why, loyalty and obedience,¹—wish and will
 To settle and suit her fresh and plastic mind
 580 To the novel, not disadvantageous mould!
 Father and mother shall the woman leave,
 Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe:²
 There is the law: what sets this law aside
 In my particular case? My friends submit
 585 "Guide, guardian, benefactor,—fee, faw, fum,
 The fact is you are forty-five years old,
 Nor very comely even for that age:
 Girls must have boys." Why, let girls say so then,
 Nor call the boys and men, who say the same,
 590 Brute this and beast the other as they do!
 Come, cards on table! When you chaunt us next
 Epithalamium³ full to overflow
 With praise and glory of white womanhood,
 The chaste and pure—troll no such lies o'er lip!
 595 Put in their stead a crudity or two,
 Such short and simple statement of the case
 As youth chalks on our walls at spring of year!
 No! I shall still think nobler of the sex,

¹ 1 Corinthians 14.34.

² "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife" (Genesis 2.24; the same statement in Matthew 19.5). Note Guido's inversion of the Biblical text.

³ wedding song.

- Believe a woman still may take a man
- 600 For the short period that his soul wears flesh,
 And, for the soul's sake, understand the fault
 Of armour frayed by fighting. Tush, it tempts
 One's tongue too much! I'll say—the law's the law:
 With a wife I look to find all wifeliness,
- 605 As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree—
 I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.¹

- Such was the pact: Pompilia from the first
 Broke it, refused from the beginning day
 Either in body or soul to cleave to mine,
- 610 And published it forthwith to all the world.
 No rupture,—you must join ere you can break,—
 Before we had cohabited a month
 She found I was a devil and no man,—
 Made common cause with those who found as much,
- 615 Her parents, Pietro and Violante,—moved
 Heaven and earth to the rescue of all three.
 In four months' time, the time o' the parents' stay,
 Arezzo was a-ringing, bells in a blaze,
 With the unimaginable story rife
- 620 I' the mouth of man, woman and child—to-wit
 My misdemeanour. First the lighter side,
 Ludicrous face of things,—how very poor
 The Franceschini had become at last,
 The meanness and the misery of each shift
- 625 To save a soldo,² stretch and make ends meet.
 Next, the more hateful aspect,—how myself

¹ Compare the image at III 235–48, and below, l. 705.

² the Tuscan equivalent of the baioc (l. 542).

With cruelty beyond Caligula's¹
 Had stripped and beaten, robbed and murdered them,
 The good old couple, I decoyed, abused,
 630 Plundered and then cast out, and happily so,
 Since,—in due course the abominable comes,—
 Woe worth² the poor young wife left lonely here!
 Repugnant in my person as my mind,
 I sought,—was ever heard of such revenge?
 635 —To lure and bind her to so cursed a couch,
 Such co-embrace with sulphur, snake and toad,
 That she was fain to rush forth, call the stones
 O' the common street to save her,³ not from hate
 Of mine merely, but ... must I burn my lips
 640 With the blister of the lie? ... the satyr-love
 Of who but my own brother, the young priest,
 Too long enforced to lenten fare belike,
 Now tempted by the morsel tossed him full
 I' the trencher where lay bread and herbs at best.
 645 Mark, this yourselves say!—this, none disallows,
 Was charged to me by the universal voice
 At the instigation of my four-months' wife!—
 And then you ask “Such charges so preferred,
 (Truly or falsely, here concerns us not)
 650 Pricked you to punish now if not before?—
 Did not the harshness double itself, the hate
 Harden?” I answer “Have it your way and will!”
 Say my resentment grew apace: what then?
 Do you cry out on the marvel? When I find
 655 That pure smooth egg which, laid within my nest,

¹ a mad, bloodthirsty Roman emperor (12–41 AD).

² woe be to.

³ Earlier (II 1400) it was the stones that cried out.

- Could not but hatch a comfort to us all,
 Issues a cockatrice¹ for me and mine,
 Do you stare to see me stamp on it? Swans are soft:
 Is it not clear that she you call my wife,
 660 That any wife of any husband, caught
 Whetting a sting like this against his breast,—
 Speckled with fragments of the fresh-broke shell,
 Married a month and making outcry thus,—
 Proves a plague-prodigy to God and man?
 665 She married: what was it she married for,
 Counted upon and meant to meet thereby?
 “Love” suggests some one, “love, a little word
 Whereof we have not heard one syllable.”
 So, the Pompilia, child, girl, wife, in one,
 670 Wanted the beating pulse, the rolling eye,
 The frantic gesture, the devotion due
 From Thyrsis² to Neaera!³ Guido’s love—
 Why not Provençal roses⁴ in his shoe,
 Plume to his cap, and trio of guitars
 675 At casement, with a bravo⁵ close beside?
 Good things all these are, clearly claimable
 When the fit price is paid the proper way.
 Had it been some friend’s wife, now, threw her fan
 At my foot, with just this pretty scrap attached,
 680 “Shame, death, damnation—fall these as they may,
 So I find you, for a minute! Come this eve!”
 —Why, at such sweet self-sacrifice,—who knows?

¹ See note to I 171.

² stock name for a lover in pastoral poetry.

³ name of several mistresses in classical literature—Horace’s (*Carmina* 3.14.21), the shepherd Aegon’s (Virgil, *Eclogues* 3.3), Bacchus’s, etc.

⁴ ribbon rosettes.

⁵ tough bodyguard.

- I might have fired up, found me at my post,
Ardent from head to heel, nor feared catch cough.
- 685 Nay, had some other friend's ... say, daughter, tripped
Upstairs and tumbled flat and frank on me,
Bareheaded and barefooted, with loose hair
And garments all at large,—cried "Take me thus!
Duke So-and-So, the greatest man in Rome—
- 690 To escape his hand and heart have I broke bounds,
Traversed the town and reached you!"—then, indeed,
The lady had not reached a man of ice!
I would have rummaged, ransacked at the word
Those old odd corners of an empty heart
- 695 For remnants of dim love the long disused,
And dusty crumblings of romance! But here,
We talk of just a marriage, if you please—
The every-day conditions and no more;
Where do these bind me to bestow one drop
- 700 Of blood shall dye my wife's true-love-knot¹ pink?
Pompilia was no pigeon, Venus' pet,²
That shuffled from between her pressing paps
To sit on my rough shoulder,—but a hawk,³
I bought at a hawk's price and carried home
- 705 To do hawk's service—at the Rotunda,⁴ say,
Where, six o' the callow nestlings in a row,
You pick and choose and pay the price for such.
I have paid my pound, await my penny's worth,⁵

¹ a complicated double knot, symbolic of fidelity.

² In Renaissance art, a dove is often an attribute of Venus.

³ At l. 606 Pompilia was a nightingale.

⁴ the Piazza della Rotonda, site of Rome's bird market.

⁵ Guido's self-serving version of the saying "in for a penny, in for a pound"—once one is involved, there is no turning back or way of escape.

So, hoodwink,¹ starve and properly train my bird,
710 And, should she prove a haggard,²—twist her neck!
Did I not pay my name and style, my hope
And trust, my all? Through spending these amiss
I am here! 'T is scarce the gravity of the Court
Will blame me that I never piped a tune,
715 Treated my falcon-gentle³ like my finch.
The obligation I incurred was just
To practise mastery, prove my mastership:—
Pompilia's duty was—submit herself,
Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile.
720 Am I to teach my lords what marriage means,
What God ordains thereby and man fulfils
Who, docile to the dictate, treads the house?
My lords have chosen the happier part with Paul
And neither marry nor burn,⁴—yet priestliness
725 Can find a parallel to the marriage-bond
In its own blessed special ordinance
Whereof indeed was marriage made the type:⁵
The Church may show her insubordinate,
As marriage her refractory. How of the Monk
730 Who finds the claustral⁶ regimen too sharp
After the first month's essay? What's the mode

¹ blindfold.

² prove untrainable. The passage echoes *Othello* 3.3.260–63.

³ female falcon.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 7.9.

⁵ "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore, as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5.22–25).

⁶ cloistral, monastic.

With the Deacon who supports indifferently¹
 The rod o' the Bishop when he tastes its smart
 Full four weeks? Do you straightway slacken hold
 735 Of the innocents, the all-unwary ones
 Who, eager to profess,² mistook their mind?—
 Remit a fast-day's rigour to the Monk
 Who fancied Francis' manna³ meant roast quails,—
 Concede the Deacon sweet society,
 740 He never thought the Levite-rule⁴ renounced,—
 Or rather prescribe short chain and sharp scourge
 Corrective of such peccant humours?⁵ This—
 I take to be the Church's mode, and mine.
 If I was over-harsh,—the worse i' the wife
 745 Who did not win from harshness as she ought,
 Wanted the patience and persuasion, lore⁶
 Of love, should cure me and console herself.
 Put case that I mishandle, flurry and fright
 My hawk through clumsiness in sportmanship,
 750 Twitch out five pens⁷ where plucking one would
 serve—
 What, shall she bite and claw to mend the case?
 And, if you find I pluck five more for that,
 Shall you weep “How he roughs the turtle⁸ there”?

[———]

¹ barely endures.

² take religious vows.

³ “Did St. Francis use the manna-metaphor when teaching his disciples to take no thought for what they should eat?” (Cook). “Quails” is from Numbers 11.31–32.

⁴ rule for deacons.

⁵ sinful self-indulgence.

⁶ teaching.

⁷ feathers.

⁸ turtledove.

- Such was the starting; now of the further step.
- 755 In lieu of taking penance in good part,
The Monk, with hue and cry, summons a mob
To make a bonfire of the convent, say,—
And the Deacon's pretty piece of virtue (save
The ears o' the Court! I try to save my head)
- 760 Instructed by the ingenuous postulant,¹
Taxes the Bishop with adultery, (mud
Needs must pair off with mud, and filth with filth)—
Such being my next experience. Who knows not—
The couple, father and mother of my wife,
- 765 Returned to Rome, published before my lords,
Put into print, made circulate far and wide
That they had cheated me who cheated them?
Pompilia, I supposed their daughter, drew
Breath first 'mid Rome's worst rankness, through the deed
- 770 Of a drab and a rogue, was by-blow bastard-babe
Of a nameless strumpet, passed off, palmed on me
As the daughter with the dowry. Daughter? Dirt
O' the kennel! Dowry? Dust o' the street! Nought more,
Nought less, nought else but—oh—ah—assuredly
- 775 A Franceschini and my very wife!
Now take this charge as you will, for false or true,—
This charge, preferred before your very selves
Who judge me now,—I pray you, adjudge again,
Classing it with the cheats or with the lies,
- 780 By which category I suffer most!
But of their reckoning, theirs who dealt with me
In either fashion,—I reserve my word,
Justify that in its place; I am now to say,
Whichever point o' the charge might poison most,

¹ candidate for admission into a religious order; see ll. 735–36.

- 785 Pompilia's duty was no doubtful one.
 You put the protestation in her mouth
 "Henceforward and forevermore, avaunt
 Ye fiends, who drop disguise and glare revealed
 In your own shape, no longer father mine
- 790 Nor mother mine! Too nakedly you hate
 Me whom you looked as if you loved once,—me
 Whom, whether true or false, your tale now damns,
 Divulged thus to my public infamy,
 Private perdition, absolute overthrow.
- 795 For, hate my husband to your hearts' content,
 I, spoil and prey of you from first to last,
 I who have done you the blind service, lured
 The lion to your pitfall,—I, thus left
 To answer for my ignorant bleating there,
- 800 I should have been remembered and withdrawn
 From the first o' the natural fury, not flung loose
 A proverb and a by-word¹ men will mouth
 At the cross-way, in the corner, up and down
 Rome and Arezzo,—there, full in my face,
- 805 If my lord, missing them and finding me,
 Content himself with casting his reproach
 To drop i' the street where such impostors die.
 Ah, but—that husband, what the wonder were!—
 If, far from casting thus away the rag²
- 810 Smeared with the plague his hand had chanced upon,
 Sewn to his pillow by Locusta's³ wile,—
 Far from abolishing, root, stem and branch,
 The misgrowth of infectious mistletoe

¹ 1 Kings 9.7.

² 809–14 Note the same combination of images at II 627–35.

³ a female poisoner in the time of Claudius and Nero.

- Foisted into his stock¹ for honest graft,—
- 815 If he repudiate not, renounce nowise,
But, guarding, guiding me, maintain my cause
By making it his own, (what other way?)
—To keep my name for me, he call it his,
Claim it of who would take it by their lie,—
- 820 To save my wealth for me—or babe of mine
Their lie was framed to beggar at the birth—
He bid them loose grasp, give our gold again:
If he become no partner with the pair
Even in a game which, played adroitly, gives
- 825 Its winner life's great wonderful new chance,—
Of marrying, to-wit, a second time,—
Ah, if he did thus, what a friend were he!
Anger he might show,—who can stamp out flame
Yet spread no black o' the brand?—yet, rough albeit
- 830 In the act, as whose bare feet feel embers scorch,
What grace were his, what gratitude were mine!”
Such protestation should have been my wife's.
Looking for this, do I exact too much?
Why, here's the,—word for word, so much, no more,—
- 835 Avowal she made, her pure spontaneous speech
To my brother the Abate at first blush,
Ere the good impulse had begun to fade:
So did she make confession for the pair,
So pour forth praises in her own behalf.
- 840 “Ay, the false letter,” interpose my lords—
“The simulated writing,—’t was a trick:
You traced the signs, she merely marked the same,
The product was not hers but yours.” Alack,
I want no more impulsion to tell truth

¹ stem on which a graft is made, lineage.

- 845 From the other trick, the torture inside there!
I confess all—let it be understood—
And deny nothing! If I baffle you so,
Can so fence, in the plenitude of right,
That my poor lathen dagger puts aside
- 850 Each pass o' the Bilboa,¹ beats you all the same,—
What matters inefficiency of blade?
Mine and not hers the letter,—conceded, lords!
Impute to me that practice!—take as proved
I taught my wife her duty, made her see
- 855 What it behoved her see and say and do,
Feel in her heart and with her tongue declare,
And, whether sluggish or recalcitrant,
Forced her to take the right step, I myself
Was marching in marital rectitude!
- 860 Why who finds fault here, say the tale be true?
Would not my lords commend the priest whose zeal
Seized on the sick, morose² or moribund,
By the palsy-smitten finger, made it cross
His brow correctly at the critical time?
- 865 —Or answered for the inarticulate babe
At baptism, in its stead declared the faith,
And saved what else would perish unprofessed?
True, the incapable hand may rally yet,
Renounce the sign with renovated strength,—
- 870 The babe may grow up man and Molinist,—
And so Pompilia, set in the good path
And left to go alone there, soon might see
That too frank-forward, all too simple-straight
Her step was, and decline to tread the rough,

¹ sword made in a Spanish town famed for its steel weapons.

² despondent.

- 875 When here lay, tempting foot, the meadow-side,
 And there the coppice rang with singing-birds!
 Soon she discovered she was young and fair,
 That many in Arezzo knew as much.
 Yes, this next cup of bitterness, my lords,¹
- 880 Had to begin go filling, drop by drop,
 Its measure up of full disgust for me,
 Filtered into by every noisome drain—
 Society's sink toward which all moisture runs.
 Would not you prophesy—"She on whose brow is
 stamped
- 885 The note of the imputation that we know,—
 Rightly or wrongly mothered with a whore,—
 Such an one, to disprove the frightful charge,
 What will she but exaggerate chastity,
 Err in excess of wifehood, as it were,
- 890 Renounce even levities permitted youth,
 Though not youth struck to age by a thunderbolt?
 Cry 'wolf' i' the sheepfold, where's the sheep dares bleat,
 Knowing the shepherd listens for a growl?"
 So you expect. How did the devil decree?
- 895 Why, my lords, just the contrary of course!
 It was in the house from the window, at the church
 From the hassock,—where the theatre lent its lodge,²
 Or staging for the public show left space,—
 That still Pompilia needs must find herself
- 900 Launching her looks forth,³ letting looks reply
 As arrows to a challenge; on all sides

¹ 879–83 At II 1267–71 the poisonous drops were *falling* on Guido.

² box, loge.

³ in the manner of a basilisk, relative of (or sometimes identified with) the cockatrice, whose mere breath or look could kill.

- Ever new contribution to her lap,
 Till one day, what is it knocks at my clenched teeth
 But the cup full, curse-collected all for me?
- 905 And I must needs drink, drink this gallant's praise,
 That minion's¹ prayer, the other fop's reproach,
 And come at the dregs to—Caponsacchi! Sirs,
 I,—chin-deep in a marsh of misery,²
 Struggling to extricate my name and fame
- 910 And fortune from the marsh would drown them all,
 My face the sole unstrangled part of me,—
 I must have this new gad-fly in that face,
 Must free me from the attacking lover too!
 Men say I battled ungracefully enough—
- 915 Was harsh, uncouth and ludicrous beyond
 The proper part o' the husband: have it so!
 Your lordships are considerate at least—
 You order me to speak in my defence
 Plainly, expect no quavering tuneful trills
- 920 As when you bid a singer solace you,—
 Nor look that I shall give it, for a grace,
Stans pede in uno.³—you remember well
 In the one case, 't is a plainsong⁴ too severe,
 This story of my wrongs,—and that I ache
- 925 And need a chair, in the other. Ask you me
 Why, when I felt this trouble flap my face,
 Already pricked with every shame could perch,—
 When, with her parents, my wife plagued me too,—

¹ servile follower, sycophant.

² 908–10 Compare other quagmire images at II 1524–29; III 493–95, 519–20, 620–21; VI 1799–1800; IX 915–23; XI 400–406. (The gad-fly of l. 912 was *life* at I 1275–76; it reappears below, l. 1539.)

³ an easy thing, done standing on one foot (Horace, *Satires* 1.4.10).

⁴ a simple, moving chant.

Why I enforced not exhortation mild

- 930 To leave whore's-tricks and let my brows alone,
With mulct¹ of comfits, promise of perfume?

"Far from that! No, you took the opposite course,
Breathed threatenings, rage and slaughter!"² What you
will!

And the end has come, the doom is verily here,

- 935 Unhindered by the threatening. See fate's flare
Full on each face of the dead guilty three!

Look at them well, and now, lords, look at this!

Tell me: if on that day when I found first

That Caponsacchi thought the nearest way

- 940 To his church was some half-mile round by my door,
And that he so admired, shall I suppose,
The manner of the swallows' come-and-go
Between the props o' the window over-head,—
That window happening to be my wife's,—

- 945 As to stand gazing by the hour on high,
Of May-eves, while she sat and let him smile,—
If I,—instead of threatening, talking big,
Showing hair-powder, a prodigious pinch,
For poison in a bottle,—making believe

- 950 At desperate doings with a bauble-sword,
And other bugaboo-and-baby-work,—
Had, with the vulgarest household implement,
Calmly and quietly cut off, clean thro' bone,
But one joint of one finger of my wife,

- 955 Saying "For listening to the serenade,
Here's your ring-finger shorter a full third:

¹ punishment—used ironically (so sweet and mild a punishment).

² Acts 9.1 (St. Paul against the disciples of the Lord).

- Be certain I will slice away next joint,
 Next time that anybody underneath
 Seems somehow to be sauntering as he hoped
- 960 A flower would eddy out of your hand to his
 While you please fidget with the branch above
 O' the rose-tree in the terrace!"—had I done so,
 Why, there had followed a quick sharp scream, some
 pain,
- Much calling for plaster, damage to the dress,
- 965 A somewhat sulky countenance next day,
 Perhaps reproaches,—but reflections too!
 I don't hear much of harm that Malchus did
 After the incident of the ear,¹ my lords!
 Saint Peter took the efficacious way;
- 970 Malchus was sore but silenced for his life:
 He did not hang himself i' the Potter's Field
 Like Judas,² who was trusted with the bag
 And treated to sops after he proved a thief.
 So, by this time, my true and obedient wife
- 975 Might have been telling beads with a gloved hand;
 Awkward a little at pricking hearts and darts
 On sampler possibly, but well otherwise:
 Not where Rome shudders now to see her lie.
 I give that for the course a wise man takes;
- 980 I took the other however, tried the fool's,
 The lighter remedy, brandished rapier dread
 With cork-ball at the tip, boxed Malchus' ear
 Instead of severing the cartilage,
 Called her a terrible nickname, and the like,

¹ John 17.10–11; but Guido omits to recall that Christ reproached Peter for cutting off Malchus's ear.

² Matthew 27.5–7; John 13.26–30.

- 985 And there an end: and what was the end of that?
 What was the good effect o' the gentle course?
 Why, one night I went drowsily to bed,
 Dropped asleep suddenly, not suddenly woke,
 But did wake with rough rousing and loud cry,
 990 To find noon in my face, a crowd in my room,
 Fumes in my brain, fire in my throat, my wife
 Gone God knows whither,—rifled vesture-chest,
 And ransacked money-coffer. "What does it mean?"
 The servants had been drugged too, stared and yawned
 995 "It must be that our lady has eloped!"
 —"Whither and with whom?"—"With whom but the
 Canon's self?
 One recognizes Caponsacchi there!"—
 (By this time the admiring¹ neighbourhood
 Joined chorus round me while I rubbed my eyes)
 1000 "T is months since their intelligence² began,—
 A comedy the town was privy to,—
 He wrote and she wrote, she spoke, he replied,
 And going in and out your house last night
 Was easy work for one ... to be plain with you ...
 1005 Accustomed to do both, at dusk and dawn
 When you were absent,—at the villa, you know,
 Where husbandry required the master-mind.
 Did not you know? Why, we all knew, you see!"
 And presently, bit by bit, the full and true
 1010 Particulars of the tale were volunteered
 With all the breathless zeal of friendship—"Thus
 Matters were managed: at the seventh hour of night" ...
 —"Later, at daybreak" ... "Caponsacchi came" ...

¹ wondering, excited.

² secret communications.

—“While you and all your household slept like death,
1015 Drugged as your supper was with drowsy stuff”...
—“And your own cousin Guillichini too—
Either or both entered your dwelling-place,
Plundered it at their pleasure, made prize of all,
Including your wife ...”—“Oh, your wife led the way,
1020 Out of doors, on to the gate ...”—“But gates are shut,
In a decent town, to darkness and such deeds:
They climbed the wall—your lady must be lithe—
At the gap, the broken bit ...”—“Torrione,¹ true!
To escape the questioning guard at the proper gate,
1025 Clemente, where at the inn, hard by, ‘the Horse,’
Just outside, a calash² in readiness
Took the two principals, all alone at last,
To gate San Spirito, which o’erlooks the road,
Leads to Perugia, Rome and liberty.”
1030 Bit by bit thus made-up mosaic-wise,
Flat lay my fortune,—tesselated³ floor,
Imperishable tracery devils should foot
And frolic it on, around my broken gods,
Over my desecrated hearth.

1035 So much
For the terrible effect of threatening, Sirs!

Well, this way I was shaken wide awake,
Doctored and drenched,⁴ somewhat unpoisoned so.
Then, set on horseback and bid seek the lost,
1040 I started alone, head of me, heart of me

¹ the Great Tower in Arezzo.

² carriage.

³ mosaic.

⁴ given a large dose of purgative medicine.

Fire, and each limb as languid ... ah, sweet lords,
 Bethink you!—poison-torture, try persuade
 The next refractory Molinist with that! ...
 Floundered thro' day and night, another day
 1045 And yet another night, and so at last,
 As Lucifer kept falling to find hell,¹
 Tumbled into the court-yard of an inn
 At the end, and fell on whom I thought to find,
 Even Caponsacchi,—what part once was priest,
 1050 Cast to the winds now with the cassock-rags.
 In cape and sword a cavalier confessed,²
 There stood he chiding dilatory grooms,
 Chafing that only horseflesh and no team
 Of eagles would supply the last relay,
 1055 Whirl him along the league, the one post more
 Between the couple and Rome and liberty.
 'T was dawn, the couple were rested in a sort,
 And though the lady, tired,—the tenderer sex,—
 Still lingered in her chamber,—to adjust
 1060 The limp hair, look for any blush astray,—
 She would descend in a twinkling,—“Have you out
 The horses therefore!”

So did I find my wife.

Is the case complete? Do your eyes here see with mine?
 1065 Even the parties dared deny no one
 Point out of all these points.

What follows next?

“Why, that then was the time,” you interpose,
 “Or then or never, while the fact was fresh,
 1070 To take the natural vengeance: there and thus

¹ Isaiah 14.12.

² manifest, avowed.

They and you,—somebody had stuck a sword
 Beside you while he pushed you on your horse,—
 'T was requisite to slay the couple, Count!"
 Just so my friends say. "Kill!" they cry in a breath,
 1075 Who presently, when matters grow to a head
 And I do kill the offending ones indeed,—
 When crime of theirs, only surmised before,
 Is patent, proved indisputably now,—
 When remedy for wrong, untried at the time,
 1080 Which law professes shall not fail a friend,
 Is thrice tried now, found threefold worse than null,—
 When what might turn to transient shade, who knows?
 Solidifies into a blot which breaks
 Hell's black off in pale flakes for fear of mine,—
 1085 Then, when I claim and take revenge—"So rash?"
 They cry—"so little reverence for the law?"

Listen, my masters, and distinguish here!
 At first, I called in law to act and help:
 Seeing I did so, "Why, 't is clear," they cry,
 1090 "You shrank from gallant readiness and risk,
 Were coward: the thing's inexplicable else."
 Sweet my lords, let the thing be! I fall flat,
 Play the reed, not the oak, to breath of man.
 Only, inform my ignorance! Say I stand
 1095 Convicted of the having been afraid,
 Proved a poltroon,¹ no lion but a lamb,—
 Does that deprive me of my right of lamb
 And give my fleece and flesh to the first wolf?
 Are eunuchs, women, children, shieldless quite
 1100 Against attack their own timidity tempts?

¹ coward.

Cowardice were misfortune and no crime!
—Take it that way, since I am fallen so low
I scarce dare brush the fly that blows my face,
And thank the man who simply spits not there,—

- 1105 Unless the Court be generous, comprehend
How one brought up at the very feet of law
As I, awaits the grave Gamaliel's nod¹
Ere he clench fist at outrage,—much less, stab!
—How, ready enough to rise at the right time,
1110 I still could recognise no time mature
Unsanctioned by a move o' the judgment-seat,
So, mute in misery, eyed my masters here
Motionless till the authoritative word
Pronounced amercement.² There's the riddle solved:
1115 This is just why I slew nor her nor him,
But called in law, law's delegate in the place,
And bade arrest the guilty couple, Sirs!
We had some trouble to do so—you have heard
They braved me,—he with arrogance and scorn,
1120 She, with a volubility of curse,
A conversancy in³ the skill of tooth
And claw to make suspicion seem absurd,
Nay, an alacrity to put to proof
At my own throat my own sword, teach me so
1125 To try conclusions better the next time,—
Which did the proper service with the mob.
They never tried to put on mask at all:
Two avowed lovers forcibly torn apart,
Upbraid the tyrant as in a playhouse scene,

¹ Acts 22.3.

² penalty.

³ familiarity with.

- 1130 Ay, and with proper clapping and applause
 From the audience that enjoys the bold and free.
 I kept still, said to myself, "There's law!" Anon
 We searched the chamber where they passed the night,
 Found what confirmed the worst was feared before,
 1135 However needless confirmation now—
 The witches' circle¹ intact, charms undisturbed
 That raised the spirit and succubus,²—letters, to-wit,
 Love-laden, each the bag o' the bee that bore
 Honey from lily and rose to Cupid's hive,—
 1140 Now, poetry in some rank blossom-burst,
 Now, prose,—"Come here, go there, wait such a while,
 He's at the villa, now he's back again:
 We are saved, we are lost, we are lovers all the same!"
 All in order, all complete,—even to a clue
 1145 To the drowsiness that happed so opportune—
 No mystery, when I read "Of all things, find
 What wine Sir Jealousy decides to drink—
 Red wine? Because a sleeping-potion, dust
 Dropped into white, discolours wine and shows."
- 1150 —"Oh, but we did not write a single word!
 Somebody forged the letters in our name!"—
 Both in a breath protested presently.
 Aha, Sacchetti again!³—"Dame,"—quoth the Duke,
 "What meaneth this epistle, counsel me,
 1155 I pick from out thy placket⁴ and peruse,

¹ Compare I 573–74, IV 849, and V 1032–34, 1512–13.

² female demon.

³ See note to I. 560. The quoted passage which follows is a pastiche of the florid style characteristic of the novella of Sacchetti's and Boccaccio's time.

⁴ either her petticoat or a pocket in her skirt.

Wherein my page averreth thou art white
And warm and wonderful 'twixt pap and pap?"

"Sir," laughed the Lady, "t is a counterfeit!

Thy page¹ did never stroke but Dian's breast,

- 1160 The pretty hound I nurture for thy sake:
To lie were losel,²—by my fay, no more!"
And no more say I too, and spare the Court.

Ah, the Court! yes, I come to the Court's self;

Such the case, so complete in fact and proof,

1165 I laid at the feet of law,—there sat my lords,

Here sit they now, so may they ever sit

In easier attitude than suits my haunch!

In this same chamber did I bare my sores

O' the soul and not the body,—shun no shame,

1170 Shrink from no probing of the ulcerous part,

Since confident in Nature,—which is God,—

That she who, for wise ends, concocts a plague,

Curbs, at the right time, the plague's virulence too:

Law renovates even Lazarus,³—cures me!

- 1175 Caesar thou seekest? To Caesar thou shalt go!⁴
Caesar's at Rome: to Rome accordingly!

The case was soon decided: both weights, cast
I' the balance, vibrate, neither kicks the beam,
Here away, there away, this now and now that.

- 1180 To every one o' my grievances law gave
Redress, could purblind eye but see the point.

¹ The same one referred to at IV 876?

² futile.

³ Luke 16.20–24.

⁴ Acts 25.12.

- The wife stood a convicted runagate¹
 From house and husband,—driven to such a course
 By what she somehow took for cruelty,
 1185 Oppression and imperilment of life—
 Not that such things were, but that so they seemed:
 Therefore, the end conceded lawful, (since
 To save life there's no risk should stay our leap)
 It follows that all means to the lawful end
 1190 Are lawful likewise,—poison, theft and flight.
 As for the priest's part, did he meddle or make,
 Enough that he too thought life jeopardized;
 Concede him then the colour charity
 Casts on a doubtful course,—if blackish white
 1195 Or whitish black, will charity hesitate?
 What did he else but act the precept out,
 Leave, like a provident shepherd,² his safe flock
 To follow the single lamb and strayaway?
 Best hope so and think so,—that the ticklish time
 1200 I' the carriage, the tempting privacy, the last
 Somewhat ambiguous accident at the inn,
 —All may bear explanation: may? then, must!
 The letters,—do they so incriminate?
 But what if the whole prove a prank o' the pen,
 1205 Flight of the fancy, none of theirs at all,
 Bred of the vapours of my brain belike,
 Or at worst mere exercise of scholar's-wit
 In the courtly Caponsacchi: verse, convict?
 Did not Catullus write less seemly once?³

¹ runaway.

² Matthew 18.12.

³ yes; in his *Carmina*.

- 1210 Yet *doctus*¹ and unblemished he abides.
Wherefore so ready to infer the worst?
Still, I did righteously in bringing doubts
For the law to solve,—take the solution now!
“Seeing that the said associates, wife and priest,
1215 Bear themselves not without some touch of blame
—Else why the pother, scandal and outcry
Which trouble our peace and require chastisement?
We, for complicity in Pompilia’s flight
And deviation,² and carnal intercourse
1220 With the same, do set aside and relegate
The Canon Caponsacchi for three years
At Civita in the neighbourhood of Rome:
And we consign Pompilia to the care
Of a certain Sisterhood of penitents
1225 I’ the city’s self, expert to deal with such.”
Word for word, there’s your judgment! Read it, lords,
Re-utter your deliberate penalty
For the crime yourselves establish!³ Your award—
Who chop a man’s right-hand off at the wrist
1230 For tracing with forefinger words in wine
O’ the table of a drinking-booth that bear
Interpretation as they mocked the Church!
—Who brand a woman black between the breasts
For sinning by connection⁴ with a Jew:
1235 While for the Jew’s self—pudency⁵ be dumb!
You mete out punishment such and such, yet so

¹ learned, wise.

² departure from the path of virtue.

³ accept as true.

⁴ sexual intercourse.

⁵ shame, modesty.

Punish the adultery of wife and priest!
 Take note of that, before the Molinists do,
 And read me right the riddle, since right must be!

- 1240 While I stood rapt away with wonderment,
 Voices broke in upon my mood and muse.
 "Do you sleep?" began the friends at either ear,
 "The case is settled,—you willed it should be so—
 None of our counsel, always recollect!
- 1245 With law's award, budge! Back into your place!
 Your betters shall arrange the rest for you.
 We'll enter a new action, claim divorce:
 Your marriage was a cheat themselves allow:
 You erred i' the person,—might have married thus
- 1250 Your sister or your daughter unaware.
 We'll gain you, that way, liberty at least,
 Sure of so much by law's own showing. Up
 And off with you and your unluckiness—
 Leave us to bury the blunder, sweep things smooth!"
- 1255 I was in humble frame of mind, be sure!
 I bowed, betook me to my place again.
 Station by station¹ I retraced the road,
 Touched at this hostel, passed this post-house by,
 Where, fresh-remembered yet, the fugitives
- 1260 Had risen to the heroic stature: still—
 "That was the bench they sat on,—there's the board
 They took the meal at,—yonder garden-ground
 They leaned across the gate of,"—ever a word
 O' the Helen and the Paris, with "Ha! you're he,

¹ The words suggest the "stations of the cross," (usually) fourteen representations, found in many churches, of events in Christ's passion that led to the crucifixion. Guido's intent is obvious.

- 1265 The ... much-commiserated husband?"¹ Step
 By step, across the pelting, did I reach
 Arezzo, underwent the archway's grin,
 Traversed the length of sarcasm in the street,
 Found myself in my horrible house once more,
 1270 And after a colloquy ... no word assists!
 With the mother and the brothers, stiffened me
 Straight out from head to foot as dead man does,
 And, thus prepared for life as he for hell,
 Marched to the public Square and met the world.
 1275 Apologize for the pincers, palliate screws?
 Ply me with such toy-trifles, I entreat!
 Trust who has tried both sulphur and sops-in-wine!

I played the man as I best might, bade friends
 Put non-essentials by and face the fact.

- 1280 "What need to hang myself as you advise?
 The paramour is banished,—the ocean's width,
 Or the suburb's length,—to Ultima Thule,² say,
 Or Proxima Civitas,³ what's the odds of name
 And place? He's banished, and the fact's the thing.
 1285 Why should law banish innocence an inch?
 Here's guilt then, what else do I care to know?
 The adulteress lies imprisoned,—whether in a well
 With bricks above and a snake for company,
 Or tied by a garter to a bed-post,—much
 1290 I mind what's little,—least's enough and to spare!

¹ Menelaus.

² a locale vaguely placed in the far north by Virgil (*Georgics* 1.30) and other ancient writers.

³ See note to II 1180.

- The little fillip¹ on the coward's cheek
 Serves as though crab-tree cudgel broke his pate.
 Law has pronounced there's punishment, less or more:
 And I take note o' the fact and use it thus—
- 1295 For the first flaw in the original bond,
 I claim release. My contract was to wed
 The daughter of Pietro and Violante. Both
 Protest they never had a child at all.
 Then I have never made a contract: good!
- 1300 Cancel me quick the thing pretended one.
 I shall be free. What matter if hurried over
 The harbour-boom² by a great favouring tide,
 Or the last of a spent ripple that lifts and leaves?
 The Abate is about it. Laugh who wins!
- 1305 You shall not laugh me out of faith in law!
 I listen, through all your noise, to Rome!"

Rome spoke.

- In three months letters thence admonished me,
 "Your plan for the divorce is all mistake.
 1310 It would hold, now, had you, taking thought to wed³
 Rachel of the blue eye and golden hair,
 Found swarth-skinned Leah cumber couch next day:
 But Rachel, blue-eyed golden-haired aright,
 Proving to be only Laban's child, not Lot's,
 1315 Remains yours all the same for ever more.
 No whit to the purpose is your plea: you err
 I' the person and the quality—nowise

¹ tap.

² barrier, often of logs roped or chained together.

³ 1310–14 A fusion of two separate episodes, Laban's tricking Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Genesis 29.16–25) and Lot's incest with his two daughters (Genesis 19.30–35).

- In the individual,—that's the case in point!
 You go to the ground,—are met by a cross-suit
 1320 For separation, of the Rachel here,
 From bed and board,—she is the injured one,
 You did the wrong and have to answer it.
 As for the circumstance of imprisonment
 And colour¹ it lends to this your new attack,
 1325 Never fear, that point is considered too!
 The durance is already at an end;
 The convent-quiet preyed upon her health,
 She is transferred now to her parents' house
 —No-parents, when that cheats and plunders you,
 1330 But parentage again confessed in full,
 When such confession pricks and plagues you more—
 As now—for, this their house is not the house
 In Via Vittoria wherein neighbours' watch
 Might incommod the freedom of your wife,
 1335 But a certain villa smothered up in vines
 At the town's edge by the gate i' the Pauline Way,
 Out of eye-reach, out of ear-shot, little and lone,
 Whither a friend,—at Civita, we hope,
 A good half-dozen-hours' ride off,—might, some eve,
 1340 Betake himself, and whence ride back, some morn,
 Nobody the wiser: but be that as it may,
 Do not afflict your brains with trifles now.
 You have still three suits to manage, all and each
 Ruinous truly should the event play false.
 1345 It is indeed the likelier so to do,
 That brother Paul, your single prop and stay,
 After a vain attempt to bring the Pope

¹ justification, legal authority.

- To set aside procedures, sit himself
 And summarily use prerogative,
 1350 Afford us the infallible¹ finger's tact
 To disentwine your tangle of affairs,
 Paul,—finding it moreover past his strength
 To stem the irruption,² bear Rome's ridicule
 Of ... since friends must speak ... to be round with
 you ...
- 1355 Of the old outwitted husband, wronged and wroth,
 Pitted against a brace of juveniles—
 A brisk priest who is versed in Ovid's art
 More than his *Summa*,³ and a gamesome wife
 Able to act Corinna⁴ without book,
- 1360 Beside the waggish parents who played dupes
 To dupe the duper—(and truly divers scenes
 Of the Arezzo palace, tickle rib
 And tease eye till the tears come, so we laugh;
 Nor wants the shock at the inn its comic force,
- 1365 And then the letters and poetry—*merum sal!*⁵)
 —Paul, finally, in such a state of things,
 After a brief temptation to go jump
 And join the fishes in the Tiber, drowns
 Sorrow another and a wiser way:
- 1370 House and goods, he has sold all off, is gone,⁶
 Leaves Rome,—whether for France or Spain, who knows?

¹ See note to X 150.

² sudden breaking in, incursion.

³ "Ovid's art" is his *Ars Amatoria*; the "Summa" is the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas. The passage by anticipation merges II 1222 with VI 484, 500; compare VI 344–45.

⁴ Ovid's mistress.

⁵ "very spicy" (Cook).

⁶ See note to IV 1356–57.

Or Britain almost divided from our orb.¹
 You have lost him anyhow."

Now,—I see my lords

- 1375 Shift in their seat,—would I could do the same!
 They probably please expect my bile was moved
 To purpose, nor much blame me: now, they judge,
 The fiery titillation² urged my flesh
 Break through the bonds. By your pardon, no, sweet Sirs!
- 1380 I got such missives in the public place;
 When I sought home,—with such news, mounted stair
 And sat at last in the sombre gallery,
 ('T was Autumn, the old mother in bed betimes,
 Having to bear that cold, the finer frame
- 1385 Of her daughter-in-law had found intolerable—
 The brother, walking misery away
 O' the mountain-side with dog and gun belike)
 As I supped, ate the coarse bread, drank the wine
 Weak once, now acrid with the toad's-head-squeeze,³
- 1390 My wife's bestowment,—I broke silence thus:
 "Let me, a man, manfully meet the fact,
 Confront the worst o' the truth, end, and have peace!
 I am irremediably beaten here,—
 The gross illiterate vulgar couple,—bah!
- 1395 Why, they have measured forces, mastered mine,
 Made me their spoil and prey from first to last.
 They have got my name,—'t is nailed now fast to theirs,
 The child or changeling is anyway my wife;
 Point by point as they plan they execute,

¹ Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.67.

² sensation, excitement.

³ a poison often referred to in literature. It was especially favored by adulterous wives who wanted to kill their husbands.

- 1400 They gain all, and I lose all—even to the lure
 That led to loss,—they have the wealth again
 They hazarded awhile to hook me with,
 Have caught the fish and find the bait entire:¹
 They even have their child or changeling back
 1405 To trade with, turn to account a second time.
 The brother presumably might tell a tale
 Or give a warning,—he, too, flies the field,
 And with him vanish help and hope of help.
 They have caught me in the cavern where I fell,
 1410 Covered my loudest cry for human aid
 With this enormous paving-stone of shame.
 Well, are we demigods or merely clay?
 Is success still attendant on desert?
 Is this, we live on, heaven and the final state,
 1415 Or earth which means probation to the end?
 Why claim escape from man's predestined lot
 Of being beaten and baffled?—God's decree,
 In which I, bowing bruised head, acquiesce.
 One of us Franceschini fell long since
 1420 I' the Holy Land, betrayed, tradition runs,
 To Paynims² by the feigning of a girl
 He rushed to free from ravisher, and found
 Lay safe enough with friends in ambuscade
 Who flayed him while she clapped her hands and
 laughed:
 1425 Let me end, falling by a like device.
 It will not be so hard. I am the last
 O' my line which will not suffer any more.

¹ a resumption of the angler motif; see earlier occurrences listed in the note to IV 708.

² pagans.

- I have attained to my full fifty years,
(About the average of us all, 't is said,
- 1430 Though it seems longer to the unlucky man)
—Lived through my share of life; let all end here,
Me and the house and grief and shame at once.
Friends my informants,—I can bear your blow!"
And I believe 't was in no unmeet match
- 1435 For the stoic's mood, with something like a smile,
That, when morose December roused me next,
I took into my hand, broke seal to read
The new epistle from Rome. "All to no use!
Whate'er the turn next injury take," smiled I,
- 1440 "Here's one has chosen his part and knows his cue.
I am done with, dead now; strike away, good friends!
Are the three suits decided in a trice?
Against me,—there's no question! How does it go?
Is the parentage of my wife demonstrated
- 1445 Infamous to her wish? Parades she now
Loosed of the cincture that so irked the loin?
Is the last penny extracted from my purse
To mulct me for demanding the first pound
Was promised in return for value paid?
- 1450 Has the priest, with nobody to court beside,
Courted the Muse in exile, hitched my hap
Into a rattling ballad-rhyme which, bawled
At tavern-doors, wakes rapture everywhere,
And helps cheap wine down throat this Christmas time,
- 1455 Beating the bagpipes? Any or all of these!
As well, good friends, you cursed my palace here
To its old cold stone face,—stuck your cap for crest
Over the shield that's extant in the Square,—
Or spat on the statue's cheek, the impatient world
- 1460 Sees cumber tomb-top in our family church:

Let him creep under covert as I shall do,
 Half below-ground already indeed. Good-bye!
 My brothers are priests, and childless so; that's well—
 And, thank God most for this, no child leave I—
 1465 None after me to bear till his heart break
 The being a Franceschini and my son!"

"Nay," said the letter, "but you have just that!
 A babe, your veritable son and heir—
 Lawful,—'t is only eight months since your wife
 1470 Left you,—so, son and heir, your babe was born
 Last Wednesday in the villa,—you see the cause
 For quitting Convent without beat of drum,
 Stealing a hurried march to this retreat
 That's not so savage as the Sisterhood
 1475 To slips and stumbles: Pietro's heart is soft,
 Violante leans to pity's side,—the pair
 Ushered you into life a bouncing boy:
 And he's already hidden away and safe
 From any claim on him you mean to make—
 1480 They need him for themselves,—don't fear, they know
 The use o' the bantling,¹—the nerve thus laid bare
 To nip at, new and nice, with finger-nail?"

Then I rose up like fire, and fire-like roared.
 What, all is only beginning not ending now?
 1485 The worm which wormed its way from skin through flesh
 To the bone and there lay biting, did its best,—
 What, it goes on to scrape at the bone's self,
 Will wind to inmost marrow and madden me?

¹ brat (with suggestion of illegitimacy).

There's to be yet my representative,

1490 Another of the name shall keep displayed

The flag with the ordure on it, brandish still

The broken sword has served to stir a jakes?¹

Who will he be, how will you call the man?

A Franceschini,—when who cut my purse,

1495 Filched my name,² hemmed me round, hustled me hard

As rogues at a fair some fool they strip i' the midst,

When these count gains, vaunt pillage presently:—

But a Caponsacchi, oh, be very sure!

When what demands its tribute of applause

1500 Is the cunning and impudence o' the pair of cheats,

The lies and lust o' the mother, and the brave

Bold carriage³ of the priest, worthily crowned

By a witness to his feat i' the following age,—

And how this three-fold cord could hook and fetch

1505 And land leviathan⁴ that king of pride!

Or say, by some mad miracle of chance,

Is he indeed my flesh and blood, this babe?

Was it because fate forged a link at last

Betwixt my wife and me, and both alike

1510 Found we had henceforth some one thing to love,

Was it when she could damn my soul indeed

She unlatched door, let all the devils o' the dark

Dance in on me to cover her escape?

Why then, the surplusage of disgrace, the spilth

1515 Over and above the measure of infamy,

¹ privy.

² an echo of *Othello* 3.3.157–61.

³ conduct.

⁴ the sea monster in Job 41.

- Failing to take effect on my coarse flesh
Seasoned with scorn now, saturate with shame,—
Is saved to instil on and corrode the brow,
The baby-softness of my first-born child—
- 1520 The child I had died to see though in a dream,
The child I was bid strike out for, beat the wave
And baffle the tide of troubles where I swam,
So I might touch shore, lay down life at last
At the feet so dim and distant and divine
- 1525 Of the apparition, as 't were Mary's Babe
Had held, through night and storm, the torch aloft,—
Born now in very deed to bear this brand
On forehead and curse me who could not save!
Rather be the town-talk true, square's jest, street's jeer
- 1530 True, my own inmost heart's confession true,
And he the priest's bastard and none of mine!
Ay, there was cause for flight, swift flight and sure!
The husband gets unruly, breaks all bounds
When he encounters some familiar face,
- 1535 Fashion of feature, brow and eyes and lips
Where he least looked to find them,—time to fly!
This bastard then, a nest for him is made,
As the manner is of vermin, in my flesh:¹
Shall I let the filthy pest buzz, flap and sting,
- 1540 Busy at my vitals and, nor hand nor foot
Lift, but let be, lie still and rot resigned?
No, I appeal to God,—what says Himself,
How lessons Nature when I look to learn?
Why, that I am alive, am still a man
- 1545 With brain and heart and tongue and right-hand too—

¹ Compare II 629.

Nay, even with friends, in such a cause as this,
 To right me if I fail to take my right.
 No more of law; a voice beyond the law
 Enters my heart, *Quis est pro Domino?*¹

- 1550 Myself, in my own Vittiano, told the tale
 To my own serving-people summoned there:
 Told the first half of it, scarce heard to end
 By judges who got done with judgment quick
 And clamoured to go execute her 'hest—
- 1555 Who cried "Not one of us that dig your soil
 And dress your vineyard, prune your olive-trees,
 But would have brained the man debauched our wife,²
 And staked the wife whose lust allured the man,
 And paunched³ the Duke, had it been possible,
- 1560 Who ruled the land yet barred us such revenge!"
 I fixed on the first whose eyes caught mine, some four
 Resolute youngsters with the heart still fresh,
 Filled my purse with the residue o' the coin
 Uncaught-up by my wife whom haste made blind,
- 1565 Donned the first rough and rural garb I found,
 Took whatsoever weapon came to hand,
 And out we flung and on we ran or reeled
 Romeward. I have no memory of our way,
 Only that, when at intervals the cloud
- 1570 Of horror about me opened to let in life,
 I listened to some song in the ear, some snatch
 Of a legend, relic of religion, stray

¹ "Who is on the Lord's side?" (Exodus 32.26).

² 1557–59 Suggested by *The Tempest* 3.2.96–98: "There thou mayst
 brain him ... or paunch [prod, poke] him with a stake."

³ disembowelled.

- Fragment of record very strong and old
 Of the first conscience, the anterior¹ right,
 1575 The God's-gift to mankind, impulse to quench
 The antagonistic spark of hell and tread
 Satan and all his malice into dust,
 Declare to the world the one law, right is right.
 Then the cloud re-encompassed me, and so
 1580 I found myself, as on the wings of winds,
 Arrived: I was at Rome on Christmas Eve.

- Festive bells—everywhere the Feast o' the Babe,
 Joy upon earth, peace and good will to man!²
 I am baptized. I started and let drop
 1585 The dagger. "Where is it, His promised peace?"
 Nine days o' the Birth-Feast did I pause and pray
 To enter into no temptation more.
 I bore the hateful house, my brother's once,
 Deserted,—let the ghost of social joy
 1590 Mock and make mouths at me from empty room
 And idle door that missed the master's step,—
 Bore the frank wonder of incredulous eyes,
 As my own people watched without a word,
 Waited, from where they huddled round the hearth
 1595 Black like all else, that nod so slow to come.
 I stopped my ears even to the inner call
 Of the dread duty, only heard the song
 "Peace upon earth," saw nothing but the face
 O' the Holy Infant and the halo there
 1600 Able to cover yet another face
 Behind it, Satan's which I else should see.

¹ early, primitive.

² Luke 2.14.

But, day by day, joy waned and withered off:
The Babe's face, premature with peak and pine,
Sank into wrinkled ruinous old age,
1605 Suffering and death, then mist-like disappeared,
And showed only the Cross at end of all,
Left nothing more to interpose 'twixt me
And the dread duty: for the angels' song,
"Peace upon earth," louder and louder pealed
1610 "O Lord, how long, how long be unavenged?"¹
On the ninth day, this grew too much for man.
I started up—"Some end must be!" At once,
Silence: then, scratching like a death-watch-tick,²
Slowly within my brain was syllabled,
1615 "One more concession, one decisive way
And but one, to determine thee the truth,—
This way, in fine, I whisper in thy ear:
Now doubt, anon decide, thereupon act!"

"That is a way, thou whisperest in my ear!
1620 I doubt, I will decide, then act," said I—
Then beckoned my companions: "Time is come!"

And so, all yet uncertain save the will
To do right, and the daring aught save leave
Right undone, I did find myself at last
1625 I' the dark before the villa with my friends,
And made the experiment, the final test,
Ultimate chance that ever was to be
For the wretchedness inside. I knocked, pronounced
The name, the predetermined touch for truth,

¹ Revelation 6.10.

² the sound of a death-watch beetle.

- 1630 "What welcome for the wanderer? Open straight—" ¹
 To the friend, physician, friar upon his rounds,
 Traveller belated, beggar lame and blind?
 No, but—"to Caponsacchi!" And the door
 Opened.
- 1635 And then,—why, even then, I think,
 I' the minute that confirmed my worst of fears,
 Surely,—I pray God that I think aright!—
 Had but Pompilia's self, the tender thing
 Who once was good and pure, was once my lamb
- 1640 And lay in my bosom, had the well-known shape
 Fronted me in the door-way,—stood there faint
 With the recent pang, perhaps, of giving birth
 To what might, though by miracle, seem my child,—
 Nay more, I will say, had even the aged fool
- 1645 Pietro, the dotard, in whom folly and age
 Wrought, more than enmity or malevolence,
 To practise and conspire against my peace,—
 Had either of these but opened, I had paused.
 But it was she the hag, she that brought hell
- 1650 For a dowry with her to her husband's house,
 She the mock-mother, she that made the match
 And married me to perdition, spring and source
 O' the fire inside me that boiled up from heart
 To brain and hailed the Fury gave it birth,—
- 1655 Violante Comparini, she it was,
 With the old grin amid the wrinkles yet,
 Opened: as if in turning from the Cross,
 With trust to keep the sight and save my soul,
 I had stumbled, first thing, on the serpent's head

¹ Compare previous versions at II 1406–31, III 1597–99 and IV 1371–72.

1660 Coiled with a leer at foot of it.

There was the end!

Then was I rapt away by the impulse, one
Immeasurable everlasting wave¹ of a need
To abolish that detested life. 'T was done:

1665 You know the rest and how the folds o' the thing,
Twisting for help, involved the other two
More or less serpent-like: how I was mad,
Blind, stamped on all, the earth-worms with the asp,
And ended so.

1670 You came on me that night,
Your officers of justice,—caught the crime
In the first natural frenzy of remorse?
Twenty miles off, sound sleeping as a child
On a cloak i' the straw which promised shelter first,
1675 With the bloody arms beside me,—was it not so?
Wherefore not? Why, how else should I be found?
I was my own self, had my sense again,
My soul safe from the serpents. I could sleep:
Indeed and, dear my lords, I shall sleep now,
1680 Spite of my shoulder, in five minutes' space,
When you dismiss me, having truth enough!
It is but a few days are passed, I find,
Since this adventure. Do you tell me, four?
Then the dead are scarce quiet where they lie,
1685 Old Pietro, old Violante, side by side
At the church Lorenzo,—oh, they know it well!
So do I. But my wife is still alive,
Has breath enough to tell her story yet,
Her way, which is not mine, no doubt at all.

¹ Compare II 1433.

- 1690 And Caponsacchi, you have summoned him,—
Was he so far to send for? Not at hand?
I thought some few o' the stabs were in his heart,
Or had not been so lavish: less had served.
Well, he too tells his story,—florid prose
- 1695 As smooth as mine is rough.¹ You see, my lords,
There will be a lying intoxicating smoke
Born of the blood,—confusion probably,—
For lies breed lies—but all that rests with you!
The trial is no concern of mine; with me
- 1700 The main of the care is over: I at least
Recognize who took that huge burthen off,
Let me begin to live again. I did
God's bidding and man's duty, so, breathe free;
Look you to the rest! I heard Himself prescribe,
- 1705 That great Physician, and dared lance the core
Of the bad ulcer; and the rage abates,
I am myself and whole now: I prove cured
By the eyes that see, the ears that hear again,
The limbs that have relearned their youthful play,
- 1710 The healthy taste of food and feel of clothes
And taking to our common life once more,
All that now urges my defence from death.
The willingness to live, what means it else?
Before,—but let the very action speak!
- 1715 Judge for yourselves, what life seemed worth to me
Who, not by proxy but in person, pitched
Head-foremost into danger as a fool
That never cares if he can swim or no—
So he but find the bottom, braves the brook.

¹ “though I be rude in speech” (2 Corinthians 11.6; also *Othello* 1.3.81).

- 1720 No man omits precaution, quite neglects
 Secrecy, safety, schemes not how retreat,
 Having schemed he might advance. Did I so scheme?
 Why, with a warrant¹ which 't is ask and have,
 With horse thereby made mine without a word,
 1725 I had gained the frontier and slept safe that night.
 Then, my companions,—call them what you please,
 Slave or stipendiary,²—what need of one
 To me whose right-hand did its owner's work?
 Hire an assassin yet expose yourself?
- 1730 As well buy glove and then thrust naked hand
 I' the thorn-bush. No, the wise man stays at home,
 Sends only agents out, with pay to earn:
 At home, when they come back,—he straight discards³
 Or else disowns. Why use such tools at all
- 1735 When a man's foes are of his house, like mine,
 Sit at his board, sleep in his bed? Why noise,
 When there's the *acquetta* and the silent way?
 Clearly my life was valueless.

But now

- 1740 Health is returned, and sanity of soul
 Nowise indifferent to the body's harm.
 I find the instinct bids me save my life;
 My wits, too, rally round me; I pick up
 And use the arms that strewed the ground before,
 1745 Unnoticed or spurned aside: I take my stand,
 Make my defence. God shall not lose a life
 May do Him further service, while I speak

¹ the “ticket” of III 1629.

² paid employee, hireling.

³ disposes of (by killing).

- And you hear, you my judges and last hope!
 You are the law: 't is to the law I look.
- 1750 I began life by hanging to the law,
 The law it is I hang till life shall end.
 My brother made appeal to the Pope, 't is true,
 To stay proceedings, judge my cause himself
 Nor trouble law,—some fondness of conceit¹
- 1755 That rectitude, sagacity sufficed
 The investigator in a case like mine,
 Dispensed with the machine of law. The Pope
 Knew better, set aside my brother's plea
 And put me back to law,—referred the cause
- 1760 *Ad judices meos*,—doubtlessly did well.
 Here, then, I clutch my judges,—I claim law—
 Cry, by the higher law whereof your law
 O' the land is humbly representative,—
 Cry, on what point is it, where either accuse,
- 1765 I fail to furnish you defence? I stand
 Acquitted, actually or virtually,
 By every intermediate kind of court
 That takes account of right or wrong in man,
 Each unit in the series that begins
- 1770 With God's throne, ends with the tribunal here.
 God breathes, not speaks, his verdicts, felt not heard,
 Passed on successively to each court I call
 Man's conscience, custom, manners, all that make
 More and more effort to promulgate, mark
- 1775 God's verdict in determinable² words,
 Till last come human jurists—solidify

¹ silly idea.

² explicit.

- Fluid result,—what's fixable lies forged,
Statute,¹—the residue escapes in fume,
Yet hangs aloft, a cloud, as palpable
1780 To the finer sense as word the legist² welds.
Justinian's Pandects³ only make precise
What simply sparkled in men's eyes before,
Twitched in their brow or quivered on their lip,
Waited the speech they called but would not come.
1785 These courts then, whose decree your own confirms,—
Take my whole life, not this last act alone,
Look on it by the light reflected thence!
What has Society to charge me with?
Come, unreservedly,—favour none nor fear,—
1790 I am Guido Franceschini, am I not?
You know the courses I was free to take?
I took just that which let me serve the Church,
I gave it all my labour in body and soul
Till these broke down i' the service. "Specify?"
1795 Well, my last patron was a Cardinal.
I left him unconvicted of a fault—
Was even helped, by way of gratitude,
Into the new life that I left him for,
This very misery of the marriage,—he
1800 Made it, kind soul, so far as in him lay—
Signed the deed where you yet may see his name.
He is gone to his reward,—dead, being my friend
Who could have helped here also,—that, of course!
So far, there's my acquittal, I suppose.
1805 Then comes the marriage itself—no question, lords,

¹ fixed by law.

² lawyer.

³ See note to I 223.

- Of the entire validity of that!
In the extremity of distress, 't is true,
For after-reasons, furnished abundantly,
I wished the thing invalid, went to you
1810 Only some months since, set you duly forth
My wrong and prayed your remedy, that a cheat
Should not have force to cheat my whole life long.
"Annul a marriage? 'T is impossible!
Though ring about your neck be brass not gold,
1815 Needs must it clasp, gangrene you all the same!"
Well, let me have the benefit, just so far,
O' the fact announced,—my wife then is my wife,
I have allowance for a husband's right.
I am charged with passing right's due bound,—such acts
1820 As I thought just, my wife called cruelty,
Complained of in due form,—convoked no court
Of common gossipry, but took her wrongs—
And not once, but so long as patience served—
To the town's top, jurisdiction's pride of place,
1825 To the Archbishop and the Governor.
These heard her charge with my reply, and found
That futile, this sufficient: they dismissed
The hysterick querulous rebel, and confirmed
Authority in its wholesome exercise,
1830 They, with directest access to the facts.
"—Ay, for it was their friendship favoured you,
Hereditary alliance against a breach
I' the social order: prejudice for the name
Of Franceschini!"—So I hear it said:
1835 But not here. You, lords, never will you say
"Such is the nullity of grace and truth,
Such the corruption of the faith, such lapse
Of law, such warrant have the Molinists

- For daring reprehend us as they do,—
- 1840 That we pronounce it just a common case,
Two dignitaries, each in his degree
First, foremost, this the spiritual head, and that
The secular arm o' the body politic,
Should, for mere wrongs' love and injustice' sake,
1845 Side with, aid and abet in cruelty
This broken beggarly noble,—bribed perhaps
By his watered wine and mouldy crust of bread—
Rather than that sweet tremulous flower-like wife
Who kissed their hands and curled about their feet
1850 Looking the irresistible loveliness
In tears that takes man captive, turns" ... enough!
Do you blast your predecessors? What forbids
Posterity to trebly blast yourselves
Who set the example and instruct their tongue?
- 1855 You dreaded the crowd, succumbed to the popular cry,
Or else, would nowise seem defer thereto
And yield to public clamour though i' the right!
You ridded your eye of my unseemliness,
The noble whose misfortune wearied you,—
- 1860 Or, what's more probable, made common cause
With the cleric section, punished in myself
Maladroit uncomplaisant laity,
Defective in behaviour to a priest
Who claimed the customary partnership
- 1865 I' the house and the wife. Lords, any lie will serve!
Look to it,—or allow me freed so far!

Then I proceed a step, come with clean hands
Thus far, re-tell the tale told eight months since.
The wife, you allow so far, I have not wronged,
1870 Has fled my roof, plundered me and decamped

- In company with the priest her paramour:
And I gave chase, came up with, caught the two
At the wayside inn where both had spent the night,
Found them in flagrant fault, and found as well,
1875 By documents with name and plan and date,
The fault was furtive then that's flagrant now,
Their intercourse a long established crime.
I did not take the license law's self gives
To slay both criminals o' the spot at the time,
1880 But held my hand,—preferred play prodigy
Of patience which the world calls cowardice,
Rather than seem anticipate the law
And cast discredit on its organs,—you.
So, to your bar I brought both criminals,
1885 And made my statement: heard their counter-charge,
Nay,—their corroboration of my tale,
Nowise disputing its allegations, not
I' the main, not more than nature's decency
Compels men to keep silence in this kind,—
1890 Only contending that the deeds avowed
Would take another colour and bear excuse.
You were to judge between us; so you did.
You disregard the excuse, you breathe away
The colour of innocence and leave guilt black,
1895 "Guilty" is the decision of the court,
And that I stand in consequence untouched,
One white integrity from head to heel.
Not guilty? Why then did you punish them?
True, punishment has been inadequate—
1900 'T is not I only, not my friends that joke,
My foes that jeer, who echo "inadequate"—
For, by a chance that comes to help for once,
The same case simultaneously was judged

- At Arezzo, in the province of the Court
1905 Where the crime had its beginning but not end.
They then, deciding on but half o' the crime,
The effraction,¹ robbery,—features of the fault
I never cared to dwell upon at Rome,—
What was it they adjudged as penalty
1910 To Pompilia,—the one criminal o' the pair
Amenable² to their judgment, not the priest
Who is Rome's? Why, just imprisonment for life
I' the Stinche. There was Tuscany's award
To a wife that robs her husband: you at Rome—
1915 Having to deal with adultery in a wife
And, in a priest, breach of the priestly vow—
Give gentle sequestration for a month
In a manageable Convent, then release,
You call imprisonment, in the very house
1920 O' the very couple, which the aim and end
Of the culprits' crime was—just to reach and rest
And there take solace and defy me: well,—
This difference 'twixt their penalty and yours
Is immaterial: make your penalty less—
1925 Merely that she should henceforth wear black gloves
And white fan, she who wore the opposite—
Why, all the same the fact o' the thing subsists.
Reconcile to your conscience as you may,
Be it on your own heads, you pronounced but half
1930 O' the penalty for heinousness like hers
And his, that pays a fault at Carnival
Of comfit-pelting past discretion's law,
Or accident to handkerchief in Lent

¹ burglary.

² subject.

- Which falls perversely as a lady kneels
 1935 Abruptly, and but half conceals her neck!
 I acquiesce for my part: punished, though
 By a pin-point scratch, means guilty: guilty means
 —What have I been but innocent hitherto?
 Anyhow, here the offence, being punished, ends.
- 1940 Ends?—for you deemed so, did you not, sweet lords?
 That was throughout the veritable aim
 O' the sentence light or heavy,—to redress
 Recognized wrong? You righted me, I think?
 Well then,—what if I, at this last of all,
 1945 Demonstrate you, as my whole pleading proves,
 No particle of wrong received thereby
 One atom of right?—that cure grew worse disease?
 That in the process you call “justice done”
 All along you have nipped away just inch¹
 1950 By inch the creeping climbing length of plague
 Breaking my tree of life from root to branch,
 And left me, after all and every act
 Of your interference,—lightened of what load?
 At liberty wherein? Mere words and wind!
 1955 “Now I was saved, now I should feel no more
 The hot breath, find a respite from fixed eye
 And vibrant tongue!”² Why, scarce your back was
 turned,
 There was the reptile, that feigned death at first,
 Renewing its detested spire and spire
 1960 Around me, rising to such heights of hate

¹ 1949–51 Resumes the image of ll. 812–14.

² This association of the eye and tongue of the serpent with the “tree of life” sheds light on the meaning of the Eden tree image at III 235.

- That, so far from mere purpose now to crush
And coil itself on the remains of me,
Body and mind, and there flesh fang content,
Its aim is now to evoke life from death,
- 1965 Make me anew, satisfy in my son
The hunger I may feed but never sate,
Tormented on to perpetuity,—
My son, whom, dead, I shall know, understand,
Feel, hear, see, never more escape the sight
- 1970 In heaven that's turned to hell, or hell returned
(So rather say) to this same earth again,—
Moulded into the image and made one,
Fashioned of soul as featured like in face,
First taught to laugh and lisp and stand and go
- 1975 By that thief, poisoner and adulteress
I call Pompilia, he calls ... sacred name,
Be unpronounced, be unpolluted here!
And last led up to the glory and prize of hate
By his ... foster-father, Caponsacchi's self,
- 1980 The perjured priest, pink¹ of conspirators,
Tricksters and knaves, yet polished, superfine,
Manhood to model adolescence by!
Lords, look on me, declare,—when, what I show,
Is nothing more nor less than what you deemed
- 1985 And doled me out for justice,—what did you say?
For reparation, restitution and more,—
Will you not thank, praise, bid me to your breasts
For having done the thing you thought to do,
And thoroughly trampled out sin's life at last?
- 1990 I have heightened phrase to make your soft speech serve,

¹ the flower of, perfection.

Doubled the blow you but essayed to strike,
 Carried into effect your mandate here
 That else had fallen to ground: mere duty done,
 Oversight of the master just supplied

1995 By zeal i' the servant. I, being used to serve,
 Have simply ... what is it they charge me with?
 Blackened again, made legible once more
 Your own decree, not permanently writ,
 Rightly conceived but all too faintly traced.

2000 It reads efficient,¹ now, comminatory,²
 A terror to the wicked, answers so
 The mood o' the magistrate, the mind of law.
 Absolve, then, me, law's mere executant!
 Protect your own defender,—save me, Sirs!

2005 Give me my life, give me my liberty,
 My good name and my civic rights again!
 It would be too fond, too complacent play
 Into the hands o' the devil, should we lose
 The game here, I for God: a soldier-bee

2010 That yields his life, exenterate³ with the stroke
 O' the sting that saves the hive. I need that life.
 Oh, never fear! I'll find life plenty use
 Though it should last five years more, aches and all!
 For, first thing, there's the mother's age to help—

2015 Let her come break her heart upon my breast,
 Not on the blank stone of my nameless tomb!
 The fugitive brother has to be bidden back
 To the old routine, repugnant to the tread,
 Of daily suit and service to the Church,—

¹ effective, productive of results.

² threatening.

³ disembowelled.

- 2020 Thro' gibe and jest, those stones that Shimei¹ flung!
Ay, and the spirit-broken youth at home,
The awe-struck altar-ministrant, shall make
Amends for faith now palsied at the source,
Shall see truth yet triumphant, justice yet
2025 A victor in the battle of this world!
Give me—for last, best gift—my son again,
Whom law makes mine,—I take him at your word,
Mine be he, by miraculous mercy, lords!
Let me lift up his youth and innocence
- 2030 To purify my palace, room by room
Purged of the memories, lend from his bright brow
Light to the old proud paladin² my sire
Shrunk now for shame into the darkest shade
O' the tapestry, showed him once and shrouds him now!
- 2035 Then may we,—strong from that rekindled smile,—
Go forward, face new times, the better day.
And when, in times made better through your brave
Decision now,—might but Eutopia³ be!—
Rome rife with honest women and strong men,
- 2040 Manners reformed, old habits back once more,
Customs that recognize the standard worth,—
The wholesome household rule in force again,
Husbands once more God's representative,
Wives like the typical Spouse once more, and Priests
- 2045 No longer men of Belial,⁴ with no aim

¹ 2 Samuel 16.5–13 (the stones were thrown at David).

² perfect knight.

³ the ideal commonwealth described in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Browning inexplicably changed the spelling to "Eutopia" in both the Dykes Campbell volumes and the Brown University lists of corrections.

⁴ 1 Samuel 2.12, 22 ("they knew not the Lord").

At leading silly women captive, but
Of rising to such duties as yours now,—
Then will I set my son at my right-hand¹
And tell his father's story to this point,
2050 Adding "The task seemed superhuman, still
I dared and did it, trusting God and law:
And they approved of me: give praise to both!"
And if, for answer, he shall stoop to kiss
My hand, and peradventure start thereat,—
2055 I engage to smile "That was an accident
I' the necessary process,—just a trip
O' the torture-irons in their search for truth,—
Hardly misfortune, and no fault at all."

¹ Acts 2.25,34.

GIUSEPPE CAPONSACCHI

- ANSWER you, Sirs? Do I understand aright?
 Have patience! In this sudden smoke from hell,—
 So things disguise themselves,—I cannot see
 My own hand held thus broad before my face
- 5 And know it again. Answer you? Then that means
 Tell over twice what I, the first time, told
 Six months ago: 't was here, I do believe,
 Fronting you same three in this very room,
 I stood and told you: yet now no one laughs,
- 10 Who then ... nay, dear my lords, but laugh you did,
 As good as laugh, what in a judge we style
 Laughter—no levity, nothing indecorous, lords!
 Only,—I think I apprehend the mood:
 There was the blameless shrug, permissible smirk,
- 15 The pen's pretence at play with the pursed mouth,
 The titter stifled in the hollow palm
 Which rubbed the eyebrow and caressed the nose,
 When I first told my tale: they meant, you know,
 "The sly one, all this we are bound believe!"
- 20 Well, he can say no other than what he says.
 We have been young, too,—come, there's greater guilt!
 Let him but decently disemboil himself,
 Scramble from out the scrape nor move the mud,—
 We solid ones may risk a finger-stretch!"
- 25 And now you sit as grave, stare as aghast

The time is the day following Guido's appearance before the court.
 Preview: I 1016-75.

- As if I were a phantom: now 't is—"Friend,
 Collect yourself!"—no laughing matter more—
 "Counsel the Court in this extremity,
 Tell us again!"—tell that, for telling which,
 30 I got the jocular piece of punishment,
 Was sent to lounge a little in the place
 Whence now of a sudden here you summon me
 To take the intelligence from just—your lips!—
 You, Judge Tommati, who then tittered most,—
 35 That she I helped eight months since to escape
 Her husband, was retaken by the same,
 Three days ago, if I have seized your sense,—
 (I being disallowed to interfere,
 Meddle or make in a matter none of mine,
 40 For you and law were guardians quite enough
 O' the innocent, without a pert priest's help)—
 And that he has butchered her accordingly,
 As she foretold and as myself believed,—
 And, so foretelling and believing so,
 45 We were punished, both of us, the merry way:
 Therefore, tell once again the tale! For what?
 Pompilia is only dying while I speak!
 Why does the mirth hang fire and miss the smile?
 My masters, there's an old book, you should con
 50 For strange adventures, applicable yet,
 'T is stuffed with. Do you know that there was once
 This thing: a multitude of worthy folk¹
 Took recreation, watched a certain group
 Of soldiery intent upon a game,—
 55 How first they wrangled, but soon fell to play,
 Threw dice,—the best diversion in the world.
 A word in your ear,—they are now casting lots,

¹ 52–59 John 19.23–24.

Ay, with that gesture quaint and cry uncouth,
For the coat of One murdered an hour ago!

- 60 I am a priest,—talk of what I have learned.
Pompilia is bleeding out her life belike,
Gasping away the latest breath of all,
This minute, while I talk—not while you laugh?

Yet, being sobered now, what is it you ask

- 65 By way of explanation? There's the fact!
It seems to fill the universe with sight
And sound,—from the four corners of this earth¹
Tells itself over, to my sense at least.
But you may want it lower set i' the scale,—
70 Too vast, too close it clangs in the ear, perhaps;
You'd stand back just to comprehend it more.
Well then, let me, the hollow rock, condense
The voice o' the sea and wind, interpret you
The mystery of this murder. God above!
75 It is too paltry, such a transference
O' the storm's roar to the cranny of the stone!

This deed, you saw begin—why does its end

Surprise you? Why should the event enforce
The lesson, we ourselves learned, she and I,

- 80 From the first o' the fact, and taught you, all in vain?
This Guido from whose throat you took my grasp,
Was this man to be favoured, now, or feared,
Let do his will, or have his will restrained,
In the relation with Pompilia? Say!
85 Did any other man need interpose
—Oh, though first comer, though as strange at the work

¹ Revelation 7.1.

- As fribble must be, coxcomb,¹ fool that's near
To knave as, say, a priest who fears the world—
Was he bound brave the peril, save the doomed,
90 Or go on, sing his snatch and pluck his flower,
Keep the straight path and let the victim die?
I held so; you decided otherwise,
Saw no such peril, therefore no such need
To stop song, loosen flower, and leave path. Law,
95 Law was aware and watching, would suffice,
Wanted no priest's intrusion, palpably
Pretence, too manifest a subterfuge!
Whereupon I, priest, coxcomb, fribble and fool,
Ensconced me in my corner, thus rebuked,
100 A kind of culprit, over-zealous hound
Kicked for his pains to kennel; I gave place
To you, and let the law reign paramount:
I left Pompilia to your watch and ward,
And now you point me—there and thus she lies!
- 105 Men, for the last time, what do you want with me?
Is it,—you acknowledge, as it were, a use,
A profit in employing me?—at length
I may conceivably help the august law?
I am free to break the blow, next hawk that swoops
110 On next dove, nor miss much of good repute?
Or what if this your summons, after all,
Be but the form of mere release, no more,
Which turns the key and lets the captive go?
I have paid enough in person at Civita,
115 Am free,—what more need I concern me with?
Thank you! I am rehabilitated then,

¹ The words "fribble" and "coxcomb" both mean "trifler," "playboy."

- A very reputable priest. But she—
 The glory of life, the beauty of the world,
 The splendour of heaven, ... well, Sirs, does no one move?
- 120 Do I speak ambiguously? The glory, I say,
 And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still say I,
 Who, priest and trained to live my whole life long
 On beauty and splendour, solely at their source,
 God,—have thus recognized my food in her,
- 125 You tell me, that's fast dying while we talk,
 Pompilia! How does lenity¹ to me,
 Remit one death-bed pang to her? Come, smile!
 The proper wink at the hot-headed youth
 Who lets his soul show, through transparent words,
- 130 The mundane love that's sin and scandal too!
 You are all struck acquiescent now, it seems:
 It seems the oldest, gravest signor here,
 Even the redoubtable Tommati, sits
 Chop-fallen,²—understands how law might take
- 135 Service like mine, of brain and heart and hand,
 In good part. Better late than never, law!
 You understand of a sudden, gospel too
 Has a claim here, may possibly pronounce
 Consistent with my priesthood, worthy Christ,
- 140 That I endeavoured to save Pompilia?

Then,

- You were wrong, you see: that's well to see, though late:
 That's all we may expect of man, this side
 The grave: his good is—knowing he is bad:
 145 Thus will it be with us when the books ope

¹ lenience.

² dejected.

- And we stand at the bar on judgment-day.
 Well then, I have a mind to speak, see cause
 To relume the quenched flax by this dreadful light,¹
 Burn my soul out in showing you the truth.
- 150 I heard, last time I stood here to be judged,
 What is priest's-duty,—labour to pluck tares
 And weed the corn² of Molinism; let me
 Make you hear, this time, how, in such a case,
 Man, be he in the priesthood or at plough,
- 155 Mindful of Christ or marching step by step
 With ... what's his style, the other potentate³
 Who bids have courage and keep honour safe,
 Nor let minuter admonition tease?—
 How he is bound, better or worse, to act.
- 160 Earth will not end through this misjudgment, no!
 For you and the others like you sure to come
 Fresh work is sure to follow,—wickedness
 That wants notwithstanding. Many a man of blood,
 Many a man of guile will clamour yet,
- 165 Bid you redress his grievance,—as he clutched
 The prey, forsooth a stranger stepped between,
 And there's the good gripe in pure waste! My part
 Is done; i' the doing it, I pass away
 Out of the world. I want no more with earth.
- 170 Let me, in heaven's name, use the very snuff
 O' the taper in one last spark shall show truth
 For a moment, show Pompilia who was true!
 Not for her sake, but yours: if she is dead,
 Oh, Sirs, she can be loved by none of you

¹ Isaiah 42.3, perhaps by way of *Othello* 5.2.8–13.

² See note to II 175.

³ “civility and the mode” (IV 217)—civilized custom, worldly or temporal power.

[—]

¹ plausibility.

² put in an unfavorable position (but here, almost synonymous with "trouble").

Why, good and wise you are!

- 205 You might at the beginning stop my mouth:
 So, none would be to speak for her, that knew.
 I talk impertinently, and you bear,
 All the same. This it is to have to do
 With honest hearts: they easily may err,
 210 But in the main they wish well to the truth.
 You are Christians; somehow, no one ever plucked
 A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,
 To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,
 He looked the greater and was the better. Yes,
 215 I shall go on now. Does she need or not
 I keep calm? Calm I'll keep as monk that croons
 Transcribing battle, earthquake, famine, plague,
 From parchment to his cloister's chronicle.
 Not one word more from the point now!

220

I begin.

- Yes, I am one of your body and a priest.
 Also I am a younger son o' the House
 Oldest now, greatest once, in my birth-town
 Arezzo, I recognize no equal there—
 225 (I want all arguments, all sorts of arms
 That seem to serve,—use this for a reason, wait!)
 Not therefore thrust into the Church, because
 O' the piece of bread one gets there. We were first
 Of Fiesole,¹ that rings still with the fame
 230 Of Capo-in-Sacco² our progenitor:
 When Florence ruined Fiesole, our folk³

¹ a town overlooking Florence.

² See note to II 1249–50.

³ The event is mentioned in Dante, *Paradiso* 16.121.

- Migrated to the victor-city, and there
Flourished,—our palace and our tower attest,
In the Old Mercato,¹—this was years ago,
235 Four hundred, full,—no, it wants fourteen just.
Our arms are those of Fiesole itself,
The shield quartered with white and red: a branch
Are the Salviati² of us, nothing more.
That were good help to the Church? But better still—
240 Not simply for the advantage of my birth
I' the way of the world, was I proposed for priest;
But because there's an illustration,³ late
I' the day, that's loved and looked to as a saint
Still in Arezzo, he was bishop of,
245 Sixty years since: he spent to the last doit
His bishop's-revenue among the poor,
And used to tend the needy and the sick,
Barefoot, because of his humility.
He it was,—when the Granduke Ferdinand
250 Swore he would raze our city, plough the place
And sow it with salt, because we Aretines
Had tied a rope about the neck, to hale
The statue of his father from its base
For hate's sake,—he availed by prayers and tears
255 To pacify the Duke and save the town.
This was my father's father's brother. You see,
For his sake, how it was I had a right
To the self-same office, bishop in the egg,
So, grew i' the garb and prattled in the school,
260 Was made expect, from infancy almost,

¹ the old market in Florence.

² a distinguished Roman family.

³ illustrious person.

The proper mood o' the priest;¹ till time ran by
 And brought the day when I must read the vows,
 Declare the world renounced and undertake
 To become priest and leave probation,—leap
 265 Over the ledge into the other life,
 Having gone trippingly hitherto up to the height
 O'er the wan water. Just a vow to read!

I stopped short awe-struck. "How shall holiest flesh
 Engage to keep such vow inviolate,
 270 How much less mine? I know myself too weak,
 Unworthy! Choose a worthier stronger man!"
 And the very Bishop smiled and stopped my mouth
 In its mid-protestation. "Incapable?
 Qualmish of conscience? Thou ingenuous boy!
 275 Clear up the clouds and cast thy scruples far!
 I satisfy thee there's an easier sense
 Wherein to take such vow than suits the first
 Rough rigid reading. Mark what makes all smooth,
 Nay, has been even a solace to myself!
 280 The Jews who needs must, in their synagogue,
 Utter sometimes the holy name of God,
 A thing their superstition boggles at,
 Pronounce aloud the ineffable sacrosanct,—²
 How does their shrewdness help them? In this wise;
 285 Another set of sounds they substitute,
 Jumble so consonants and vowels—how
 Should I know?—that there grows from out the old
 Quite a new word that means the very same—
 And o'er the hard place slide they with a smile.

¹ anticipate the correct priestly conduct.

² indescribably holy.

- 290 Giuseppe Maria Caponsacchi mine,
 Nobody wants you in these latter days
 To prop the Church by breaking your back-bone,—
 As the necessary way was once, we know,
 When Diocletian¹ flourished and his like.
- 295 That building of the buttress-work was done
 By martyrs and confessors: let it bide,
 Add not a brick, but, where you see a chink,
 Stick in a sprig of ivy or root a rose
 Shall make amends and beautify the pile!
- 300 We profit as you were the painfulest
 O' the martyrs, and you prove yourself a match
 For the cruelest confessor ever was,
 If you march boldly up and take your stand
 Where their blood soaks, their bones yet strew the soil,
- 305 And cry 'Take notice, I the young and free
 And well-to-do i' the world, thus leave the world,
 Cast in my lot thus with no gay young world
 But the grand old Church: she tempts me of the two!'
 Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give it us!
- 310 Let us have you, and boast of what you bring.
 We want the pick o' the earth to practise with,
 Not its offscouring, halt and deaf and blind
 In soul and body. There's a rubble-stone
 Unfit for the front o' the building, stuff to stow
- 315 In a gap behind and keep us weather-tight;
 There's porphyry for the prominent place. Good lack!
 Saint Paul has had enough and to spare, I trow,
 Of ragged run-away Onesimus:²

¹ Roman emperor (245–313 AD), persecutor of Christians.

² a servant who, after robbing and running away from his master, became a disciple of St. Paul (Philemon 10.18–19).

- He wants the right-hand with the signet-ring
 320 Of King Agrippa,¹ now, to shake and use.
 I have a heavy scholar cloistered up,
 Close under lock and key, kept at his task
 Of letting Fénelon² know the fool he is,
 In a book I promise Christendom next Spring.
 325 Why, if he covets so much meat, the clown,
 As a lark's wing next Friday, or, any day,
 Diversion beyond catching his own fleas,
 He shall be properly swinged,³ I promise him.
 But you, who are so quite another paste⁴
 330 Of a man,—do you obey me? Cultivate
 Assiduous that superior gift you have
 Of making madrigals—(who told me? Ah!)
 Get done a Marinesque Adoniad⁵ straight
 With a pulse o' the blood a-pricking, here and there,
 335 That I may tell the lady 'And he's ours!"'

So I became a priest: those terms changed all,
 I was good enough for that, nor cheated so;

¹ Agrippa II (27–c.93 AD), last Jewish king of Palestine, before whom St. Paul pleaded his case (Acts 25–26).

² François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon (1651–1715), French theologian. He defended the Quietist Madame Guyon when she was accused of sharing the more extreme views of Molinos (*Explication des maximes des saints sur la vie intérieure*, 1697, a book Louis XIV prevailed upon Innocent XII to condemn). Thus the bitter controversy engendered by Fénelon's unorthodox theology was reaching its climax in Rome concurrently with that arising from the Franceschini case.

³ flogged.

⁴ quality, make.

⁵ by the fashionable Italian poet Giovanni Battista Marino (1569–1625), a colorful treatment of the Venus and Adonis story that is twice as long as *The Ring and the Book*.

- I could live thus and still hold head erect.
Now you see why I may have been before
- 340 A fribble and coxcomb, yet, as priest, break word
Nowise, to make you disbelieve me now.
I need that you should know my truth. Well, then,
According to prescription did I live,
—Conformed myself, both read the breviary
- 345 And wrote the rhymes, was punctual to my place
I' the Pieve, and as diligent at my post
Where beauty and fashion rule. I throve apace,
Sub-deacon, Canon, the authority
For delicate play at tarocs,¹ and arbiter
- 350 O' the magnitude of fan-mounts: all the while
Wanting no whit the advantage of a hint
Benignant² to the promising pupil,—thus:
“Enough attention to the Countess now,
The young one; 't is her mother rules the roast,
- 355 We know where, and puts in a word: go pay
Devoir to-morrow morning after mass!
Break that rash promise to preach, Passion-week!
Has it escaped you the Archbishop grunts
And snuffles when one grieves to tell his Grace
- 360 No soul dares treat the subject of the day³
Since his own masterly handling it (ha, ha!)
Five years ago,—when somebody could help
And touch up an odd phrase in time of need,
(He, he!)—and somebody helps you, my son!
- 365 Therefore, don't prove so indispensable

¹ a card game played with a seventy-eight-card pack. (Trump in tarocs is the twenty-two-card set of “tarots,” fortune-telling cards.)

² useful.

³ Molinism.

- At the Pieve, sit more loose i' the seat, nor grow
 A fixture by the attendance morn and eve!
 Arezzo's just a haven midway Rome—
 Rome's the eventual harbour,—make for port,
 370 Crowd sail, crack cordage!¹ And your cargo be
 A polished presence, a genteel manner, wit
 At will, and tact at every pore of you!
 I sent our lump of learning, Brother Clout,
 And Father Slouch, our piece of piety,
 375 To see Rome and try suit the Cardinal.
 Thither they clump-clumped, beads and book in hand,
 And ever since 't is meat for man and maid
 How both flopped down, prayed blessing on bent pate
 Bald many an inch beyond the tonsure's need,
 380 Never once dreaming, the two moony dolts,
 There's nothing moves his Eminence so much
 As—far from all this awe at sanctitude—
 Heads that wag, eyes that twinkle, modified mirth
 At the closet-lectures² on the Latin tongue
 385 A lady learns so much by, we know where.
 Why, body o' Bacchus,³ you should crave his rule
 For pauses in the elegiac couplet, chasms
 Permissible only to Catullus!⁴ There!
 Now go to duty: brisk, break Priscian's head⁵

¹ hoist an unusual number of sails and strain the rigging, for the sake of speed. ("Crack" also means "clap on full sail.")

² informal, intimate discourses.

³ the profane (heathen) equivalent of the Eucharist—a most unsuitable oath to pass ecclesiastical lips.

⁴ Catullus violated metrical rules by leaving an unelided syllable ("chasm") in the middle of the second line of an elegiac couplet.

⁵ break the rules of the sixth-century grammarian Priscian (write unclassical, and therefore uncouth, Latin).

- 390 By reading the day's office—there's no help.
You've Ovid in your poke to plaster that;
Amen's at the end of all: then sup with me!"
- Well, after three or four years of this life,
In prosecution of my calling, I
- 395 Found myself at the theatre one night
With a brother Canon, in a mood and mind
Proper enough for the place, amused or no:
When I saw enter, stand, and seat herself
A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad.
- 400 It was as when, in our cathedral once,
As I got yawningly through matin-song,
I saw *facchini*¹ bear a burden up,
Base it on the high-altar, break away
A board or two, and leave the thing inside
- 405 Lofty and lone: and lo, when next I looked,
There was the Rafael! I was still one stare,
When—"Nay, I'll make her give you back your gaze"—
Said Canon Conti; and at the word he tossed
A paper-twist of comfits to her lap,
- 410 And dodged and in a trice was at my back
Nodding from over my shoulder. Then she turned,
Looked our way, smiled the beautiful sad strange smile.
"Is not she fair? 'T is my new cousin," said he:
"The fellow lurking there i' the black o' the box
- 415 Is Guido, the old scapegrace: she's his wife,
Married three years since: how his Countship sulks!
He has brought little back from Rome beside,
After the bragging, bullying. A fair face,
And—they do say—a pocketful of gold

¹ porters.

- 420 When he can worry both her parents dead.
 I don't go much there, for the chamber's cold
 And the coffee pale. I got a turn at first
 Paying my duty: I observed they crouched
 —The two old frightened family spectres—close
 425 In a corner, each on each like mouse on mouse
 I' the cat's cage: ever since, I stay at home.
 Hallo, there's Guido, the black, mean and small,
 Bends his brows on us—please to bend your own
 On the shapely nether limbs of Light-skirts there
 430 By way of a diversion! I was a fool
 To fling the sweetmeats. Prudence, for God's love!
 To-morrow I'll make my peace, e'en tell some fib,
 Try if I can't find means to take you there."

- That night and next day did the gaze endure,
 435 Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes,
 And not once changed the beautiful sad strange smile.
 At vespers Conti leaned beside my seat
 I' the choir,—part said, part sung—“*In ex-cel-sis*—
 All's to no purpose; I have louted¹ low,
 440 But he saw you staring—*quia sub*—don't incline
 To know you nearer: him we would not hold
 For Hercules,—the man would lick your shoe
 If you and certain efficacious friends
 Managed him warily,—but there's the wife:
 445 Spare her, because he beats her, as it is,
 She's breaking her heart quite fast enough—*jam tu*—
 So, be you rational and make amends
 With little Light-skirts yonder—*in secula*

¹ bowed in obeisance or apology.

- Secu-lo-o-o-o-rum.* Ah, you rogue! Every one knows
 450 What great dame she makes jealous: one against one,
 Play, and win both!"

Sirs, ere the week was out,
 I saw and said to myself "Light-skirts hides teeth
 Would make a dog sick,—the great dame shows spite
 455 Should drive a cat mad: 't is but poor work this—
 Counting one's fingers till the sonnet's crowned.
 I doubt much if Marino¹ really be
 A better bard than Dante after all.
 'T is more amusing to go pace at eve
 460 I' the Duomo,²—watch the day's last gleam outside
 Turn, as into a skirt of God's own robe,
 Those lancet-windows' jewelled miracle,—
 Than go eat the Archbishop's ortolans,³
 Digest his jokes. Luckily Lent is near:
 465 Who cares to look will find me in my stall
 At the Pieve, constant to this faith at least—
 Never to write a canzonet⁴ any more."

So, next week, 't was my patron spoke abrupt,
 In altered guise. "Young man, can it be true
 470 That after all your promise of sound fruit,
 You have kept away from Countess young or old
 And gone play truant in church all day long?
 Are you turning Molinist?" I answered quick:
 "Sir, what if I turned Christian? It might be.
 475 The fact is, I am troubled in my mind,

¹ See note to l. 333.

² cathedral.

³ birds which were a cherished table delicacy.

⁴ light love song.

Beset and pressed hard by some novel thoughts.
This your Arezzo is a limited world;
There's a strange Pope,—'t is said, a priest who thinks.
Rome is the port, you say: to Rome I go.

- 480 I will live alone, one does so in a crowd,
And look into my heart a little." "Lent
Ended,"—I told friends—"I shall go to Rome."

One evening I was sitting in a muse
Over the opened "Summa," darkened round
485 By the mid-March twilight, thinking how my life
Had shaken under me,—broke short indeed
And showed the gap 'twixt what is, what should be,—
And into what abyss the soul may slip,
Leave aspiration here, achievement there,

- 490 Lacking omnipotence to connect extremes—
Thinking moreover ... oh, thinking, if you like,
How utterly dissociated was I
A priest and celibate, from the sad strange wife
Of Guido,—just as an instance to the point,
495 Nought more,—how I had a whole store of strengths
Eating into my heart, which craved employ,
And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help,—
And yet there was no way in the wide world
To stretch out mine and so relieve myself,—
500 How when the page o' the Summa preached its best,
Her smile kept glowing out of it, as to mock
The silence we could break by no one word,—
There came a tap without the chamber-door,
And a whisper; when I bade who tapped speak out,
505 And, in obedience to my summons, last
In glided a masked muffled mystery,
Laid lightly a letter on the opened book,

Then stood with folded arms and foot demure,
Pointing as if to mark the minutes' flight.

510 I took the letter, read to the effect
That she, I lately flung the comfits to,
Had a warm heart to give me in exchange,
And gave it,—loved me and confessed it thus,
And bade me render thanks by word of mouth,
515 Going that night to such a side o' the house
Where the small terrace overhangs a street
Blind and deserted, not the street in front:
Her husband being away, the surly patch,¹
At his villa of Vittiano.

520 "And you?"—I asked:
"What may you be?" "Count Guido's kind of maid—
Most of us have two functions in his house.
We all hate him, the lady suffers much,
'T is just we show compassion, furnish help,
525 Specially since her choice is fixed so well.
What answer may I bring to cheer the sweet
Pompilia?"

Then I took a pen and wrote
"No more of this! That you are fair, I know:
530 But other thoughts now occupy my mind.
I should not thus have played the insensible
Once on a time. What made you,—may one ask,—
Marry your hideous husband? 'T was a fault,
And now you taste the fruit of it. Farewell."

[— — — — —]

¹ fool.

- 535 "There!" smiled I as she snatched it and was gone—
 "There, let the jealous miscreant,—Guido's self,
 Whose mean soul grins through this transparent trick,—
 Be baulked so far, defrauded of his aim!
 What fund of satisfaction to the knave,
 540 Had I kicked this his messenger down stairs,
 Trussed to the middle of her impudence,
 And set his heart at ease so! No, indeed!
 There's the reply which he shall turn and twist
 At pleasure, snuff at till his brain grow drunk,
 545 As the bear does when he finds a scented glove
 That puzzles him,—a hand and yet no hand,
 Of other perfume than his own foul paw!
 Last month, I had doubtless chosen to play the dupe,
 Accepted the mock-invitation, kept
 550 The sham appointment, cudgel beneath cloak,
 Prepared myself to pull the appointer's self
 Out of the window from his hiding-place
 Behind the gown of this part-messenger
 Part-mistress who would personate the wife.
 555 Such had seemed once a jest permissible:
 Now I am not i' the mood."

Back next morn brought

- The messenger, a second letter in hand.
 "You are cruel, Thyrsis, and Myrtilla¹ moans
 560 Neglected but adores you, makes request
 For mercy: why is it you dare not come?
 Such virtue is scarce natural to your age.
 You must love someone else; I hear you do,

¹ stock names of characters in pastoral poetry. In the love letters quoted in the Old Yellow Book, the writers actually used such names for each other.

- The Baron's daughter or the Advocate's wife,
565 Or both,—all's one, would you make me the third—
I take the crumbs from table gratefully
Nor grudge who feasts there. 'Faith, I blush and blaze!
Yet if I break all bounds, there's reason sure.
Are you determinedly bent on Rome?
- 570 I am wretched here, a monster tortures me:
Carry me with you! Come and say you will!
Concert¹ this very evening! Do not write!
I am ever at the window of my room
Over the terrace, at the *Ave*. Come!"
- 575 I questioned—lifting half the woman's mask
To let her smile loose. "So, you gave my line
To the merry lady?" "She kissed off the wax,
And put what paper was not kissed away,
In her bosom to go burn: but merry, no!
- 580 She wept all night when evening brought no friend,
Alone, the unkind missive at her breast;
Thus Philomel,² the thorn at her breast too,
Sings" ... "Writes this second letter?" "Even so!
Then she may peep at vespers forth?"—"What risk
- 585 Do we run o' the husband?"—"Ah,—no risk at all!
He is more stupid even than jealous. Ah—
That was the reason? Why, the man's away!
Beside, his bugbear is that friend of yours,
Fat little Canon Conti. He fears him,
- 590 How should he dream of you? I told you truth:
He goes to the villa at Vittiano—'t is

¹ arrange, agree on.

² According to legend, the melancholy song of the nightingale (Philomel) was caused by a thorn in its breast.

The time when Spring-sap rises in the vine—
 Spends the night there. And then his wife's a child:
 Does he think a child outwits him? A mere child:
 595 Yet so full grown, a dish for any duke.
 Don't quarrel longer with such cates,¹ but come!"

I wrote "In vain do you solicit me.
 I am a priest: and you are wedded wife,
 Whatever kind of brute your husband prove.
 600 I have scruples, in short. Yet should you really show
 Sign at the window ... but nay, best be good!
 My thoughts are elsewhere." "Take her that!"

"Again

Let the incarnate meanness, cheat and spy,
 605 Mean to the marrow of him, make his heart
 His food, anticipate hell's worm² once more!
 Let him watch shivering at the window—ay,
 And let this hybrid, this his light-of-love
 And lackey-of-lies,—a sage economy,—
 610 Paid with embracings for the rank brass coin,—
 Let her report and make him chuckle o'er
 The break-down of my resolution now,
 And lour at disappointment in good time!
 —So tantalize and so enrage by turns,
 615 Until the two fall each on the other like
 Two famished spiders, as the coveted fly
 That toys long, leaves their net and them at last!"

And so the missives followed thick and fast
 For a month, say,—I still came at every turn

¹ delicacies.

² Mark 9.48.

- 620 On the soft sly adder, endlong 'neath my tread.
I was met i' the street, made sign to in the church,
A slip was found i' the door-sill, scribbled word
'Twixt page and page o' the prayer-book in my place.
A crumpled thing dropped even before my feet,
625 Pushed through the blind, above the terrace-rail,
As I passed, by day, the very window once.
And ever from corners would be peering up
The messenger, with the self-same demand
"Obdurate still, no flesh but adamant?"
- 630 Nothing to cure the wound, assuage the throe
O' the sweetest lamb that ever loved a bear?"
And ever my one answer in one tone—
"Go your ways, temptress! Let a priest read, pray,
Unplagued of vain talk, visions not for him!
635 In the end, you'll have your will and ruin me!"

- One day, a variation: thus I read:
"You have gained little by timidity.
My husband has found out my love at length,
Sees cousin Conti was the stalking-horse,
640 And you the game he covered, poor fat soul!
My husband is a formidable foe,
Will stick at nothing to destroy you. Stand
Prepared, or better, run till you reach Rome!
I bade you visit me, when the last place
645 My tyrant would have turned suspicious at,
Or cared to seek you in, was ... why say, where?
But now all's changed: beside, the season's past
At the villa,—wants the master's eye no more.
Anyhow, I beseech you, stay away
650 From the window! He might well be posted there."

I wrote—"You raise my courage, or call up
My curiosity, who am but man.

Tell him he owns the palace, not the street
Under—that's his and yours and mine alike.

- 655 If it should please me pad the path this eve,
Guido will have two troubles, first to get
Into a rage and then get out again.
Be cautious, though: at the *Ave!*"

You of the Court!

- 660 When I stood question here and reached this point
O' the narrative,—search notes and see and say
If someone did not interpose with smile
And sneer, "And prithee why so confident
That the husband must, of all needs, not the wife,
665 Fabricate thus,—what if the lady loved?
What if she wrote the letters?"

Learned Sir,

I told you there's a picture in our church.

Well, if a low-browed verger sidled up¹

- 670 Bringing me, like a blotch, on his prod's point,
A transfixed scorpion, let the reptile writhe,
And then said "See a thing that Rafael made—
This venom issued from Madonna's mouth!"
I should reply, "Rather, the soul of you
675 Has issued from your body, like from like,
By way of the ordure-corner!"

But no less,

I tired of the same long black teasing lie

Obtruded thus at every turn; the pest

- 680 Was far too near the picture, anyhow:

¹ 669–73 Compare the similar image at III 1165–67, and see below, ll. 1484–85.

One does Madonna service, making clowns
Remove their dung-heap from the sacristy.
“I will to the window, as he tempts,” said I:
“Yes, whom the easy love has failed allure,
685 This new bait of adventure tempts,—thinks he.
Though the imprisoned lady keeps afar,
There will they lie in ambush, heads alert,
Kith, kin, and Count mustered to bite my heel.
No mother nor brother viper of the brood
690 Shall scuttle off without the instructive bruise!”

So I went: crossed street and street: “The next street’s
turn,
I stand beneath the terrace, see, above,
The black of the ambush-window. Then, in place
Of hand’s throw of soft prelude over lute,
695 And cough that clears way for the ditty last,”—
I began to laugh already—“he will have
‘Out of the hole you hide in, on to the front,
Count Guido Franceschini, show yourself!
Hear what a man thinks of a thing like you,
700 And after, take this foulness in your face!”

The words lay living on my lip, I made
The one-turn more—and there at the window stood,
Framed in its black square length, with lamp in hand,
Pompilia; the same great, grave, grievful air
705 As stands i’ the dusk, on altar that I know,
Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,
Our Lady of all the Sorrows.¹ Ere I knelt—

¹ the Virgin.

Assured myself that she was flesh and blood—
She had looked one look and vanished.

- 710 I thought—"Just so:
It was herself, they have set her there to watch—
Stationed to see some wedding-band go by,
On fair pretence that she must bless the bride,
Or wait some funeral with friends wind past,
715 And crave peace for the corpse that claims its due.
She never dreams they used her for a snare,
And now withdraw the bait has served its turn.
Well done, the husband, who shall fare the worse!"
And on my lip again was—"Out with thee,
720 Guido!" When all at once she re-appeared;
But, this time, on the terrace overhead,
So close above me, she could almost touch
My head if she bent down; and she did bend,
While I stood still as stone, all eye, all ear.
- 725 She began—"You have sent me letters, Sir:
I have read none, I can neither read nor write;
But she you gave them to, a woman here,
One of the people in whose power I am,
Partly explained their sense, I think, to me
730 Obliged to listen while she inculcates
That you, a priest, can dare love me, a wife,
Desire to live or die as I shall bid,
(She makes me listen if I will or no)
Because you saw my face a single time.
735 It cannot be she says the thing you mean;
Such wickedness were deadly to us both:
But good true love would help me now so much—
I tell myself, you may mean good and true.
You offer me, I seem to understand,

- 740 Because I am in poverty and starve,
Much money, where one piece would save my life.
The silver cup upon the altar-cloth
Is neither yours to give nor mine to take;
But I might take one bit of bread therefrom,
- 745 Since I am starving, and return the rest,
Yet do no harm: this is my very case.
I am in that strait, I may not dare abstain
From so much of assistance as would bring
The guilt of theft on neither you nor me;
- 750 But no superfluous particle of aid.
I think, if you will let me state my case,
Even had you been so fancy-fevered here,
Not your sound self, you must grow healthy now—
Care only to bestow what I can take.
- 755 That it is only you in the wide world,
Knowing me nor in thought nor word nor deed,
Who, all unprompted save by your own heart,
Come proffering assistance now,—were strange
But that my whole life is so strange: as strange
- 760 It is, my husband whom I have not wronged
Should hate and harm me. For his own soul's sake,
Hinder the harm! But there is something more,
And that the strangest: it has got to be
Somehow for my sake too, and yet not mine,
- 765 —This is a riddle—for some kind of sake
Not any clearer to myself than you,
And yet as certain as that I draw breath,—
I would fain live, not die—oh no, not die!
My case is, I was dwelling happily
- 770 At Rome with those dear Comparini, called
Father and mother to me; when at once
I found I had become Count Guido's wife:

- Who then, not waiting for a moment, changed
Into a fury of fire, if once he was
775 Merely a man: his face threw fire at mine,
He laid a hand on me that burned all peace,
All joy, all hope, and last all fear away,
Dipping the bough of life, so pleasant once,
In fire which shrivelled leaf and bud alike,
780 Burning not only present life but past,
Which you might think was safe beyond his reach.
He reached it, though, since that beloved pair,
My father once, my mother all those years,
That loved me so, now say I dreamed a dream
785 And bid me wake, henceforth no child of theirs,
Never in all the time their child at all.
Do you understand? I cannot: yet so it is.
Just so I say of you that proffer help:
I cannot understand what prompts your soul,
790 I simply needs must see that it is so,
Only one strange and wonderful thing more.
They came here with me, those two dear ones, kept
All the old love up, till my husband, till
His people here so tortured them, they fled.
795 And now, is it because I grow in flesh
And spirit one with him their torturer,
That they, renouncing him, must cast off me?
If I were graced by God to have a child,
Could I one day deny God graced me so?
800 Then, since my husband hates me, I shall break
No law that reigns in this fell house of hate,
By using—letting have effect so much
Of hate as hides me from that whole of hate
Would take my life which I want and must have—
805 Just as I take from your excess of love

- Enough to save my life with, all I need.
The Archbishop said to murder me were sin:
My leaving Guido were a kind of death
With no sin,—more death, he must answer for.
- 810 Hear now what death to him and life to you
I wish to pay and owe. Take me to Rome!
You go to Rome, the servant makes me hear.
Take me as you would take a dog, I think,
Masterless left for strangers to maltreat:
- 815 Take me home like that—leave me in the house
Where the father and the mother are; and soon
They'll come to know and call me by my name,
Their child once more, since child I am, for all
They now forget me, which is the worst o' the dream—
- 820 And the way to end dreams is to break them, stand,
Walk, go: then help me to stand, walk and go!
The Governor said the strong should help the weak:
You know how weak the strongest women are.
How could I find my way there by myself?
- 825 I cannot even call out, make them hear—
Just as in dreams: I have tried and proved the fact.
I have told this story and more to good great men,
The Archbishop and the Governor: they smiled.
'Stop your mouth, fair one!'—presently they frowned,
- 830 'Get you gone, disengage you from our feet!'
I went in my despair to an old priest,
Only a friar, no great man like these two,
But good, the Augustinian, people name
Romano,—he confessed me two months since:
- 835 He fears God, why then needs he fear the world?
And when he questioned how it came about
That I was found in danger of a sin—
Despair of any help from providence,—

- 'Since, though your husband outrage you,' said he,
- 840 'That is a case too common, the wives die
Or live, but do not sin so deep as this'—
Then I told—what I never will tell you—
How, worse than husband's hate, I had to bear
The love,—soliciting to shame called love,—
- 845 Of his brother,—the young idle priest i' the house
With only the devil to meet there. 'This is grave—
Yes, we must interfere: I counsel,—write
To those who used to be your parents once,
Of dangers here, bid them convey you hence!'
- 850 'But,' said I, 'when I neither read nor write?'
Then he took pity and promised 'I will write.'
If he did so,—why, they are dumb or dead:
Either they give no credit to the tale,
Or else, wrapped wholly up in their own joy
- 855 Of such escape, they care not who cries, still
I' the clutches. Anyhow, no word arrives.
All such extravagance and dreadfulness
Seems incident to dreaming, cured one way,—
Wake me! The letter I received this morn,
- 860 Said—if the woman spoke your very sense—
'You would die for me:' I can believe it now:
For now the dream gets to involve yourself.
First of all, you seemed wicked and not good,
In writing me those letters: you came in
- 865 Like a thief upon me. I this morning said
In my extremity, entreat the thief!
Try if he have in him no honest touch!
A thief might save me from a murderer.
'T was a thief said the last kind word to Christ:¹

¹ Luke 23.42.

- 870 Christ took the kindness and forgave the theft:
And so did I prepare what I now say.
But now, that you stand and I see your face,
Though you have never uttered word yet,—well, I know,
Here too has been dream-work, delusion too,
875 And that at no time, you with the eyes here,
Ever intended to do wrong by me,
Nor wrote such letters therefore. It is false,
And you are true, have been true, will be true.
To Rome then,—when is it you take me there?
880 Each minute lost is mortal. When?—I ask.”

- I answered “It shall be when it can be.
I will go hence and do your pleasure, find
The sure and speedy means of travel, then
Come back and take you to your friends in Rome.
885 There wants a carriage, money and the rest,—
A day’s work by to-morrow at this time.
How shall I see you and assure escape?”

- She replied, “Pass, to-morrow at this hour.
If I am at the open window, well:
890 If I am absent, drop a handkerchief
And walk by! I shall see from where I watch,
And know that all is done. Return next eve,
And next, and so till we can meet and speak!”
“To-morrow at this hour I pass,” said I.
895 She was withdrawn.

- Here is another point
I bid you pause at. When I told thus far,
Someone said, subtly, “Here at least was found
Your confidence in error,—you perceived
900 The spirit of the letters, in a sort,

Had been the lady's, if the body should be
Supplied by Guido: say, he forged them all!
Here was the unforged fact—she sent for you,
Spontaneously elected you to help,
905 —What men call, loved you: Guido read her mind,
Gave it expression to assure the world
The case was just as he foresaw: he wrote,
She spoke."

Sirs, that first simile serves still,—

910 That falsehood of a scorpion hatched, I say,
Nowhere i' the world but in Madonna's mouth.
Go on! Suppose, that falsehood foiled, next eve
Pictured Madonna raised her painted hand,
Fixed the face Rafael bent above the Babe,
915 On my face as I flung me at her feet:
Such miracle vouchsafed and manifest,
Would that prove the first lying tale was true?
Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
Accepted my own fact, my miracle
920 Self-authorized and self-explained,—she chose
To summon me and signify her choice.
Afterward,—oh! I gave a passing glance
To a certain ugly cloud-shape, goblin-shred
Of hell-smoke hurrying past the splendid moon
925 Out now to tolerate no darkness more,
And saw right through the thing that tried to pass
For truth and solid, not an empty lie:
"So, he not only forged the words for her
But words for me, made letters he called mine:
930 What I sent, he retained, gave these in place,
All by the mistress-messenger! As I
Recognized her, at potency of truth,
So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me,

Never mistook the signs. Enough of this—
 935 Let the wraith go to nothingness again,
 Here is the orb, have only thought for her!"

"Thought?" nay, Sirs, what shall follow was not thought:
 I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard.
 I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,
 940 Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close,
 As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar.
 God and man, and what duty I owe both,—
 I dare to say I have confronted these
 In thought: but no such faculty helped here.
 945 I put forth no thought,—powerless, all that night
 I paced the city: it was the first Spring.
 By the invasion I lay passive to,
 In rushed new things, the old were rapt away;¹
 Alike abolished—the imprisonment
 950 Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world
 That pulled me down. Death meant, to spurn the
 ground,
 Soar to the sky,—die well and you do that.
 The very immolation made the bliss;
 Death was the heart of life, and all the harm
 955 My folly had crouched to avoid, now proved a veil
 Hiding all gain my wisdom strove to grasp:
 As if the intense centre of the flame
 Should turn a heaven to that devoted fly
 Which hitherto, sophist alike and sage,
 960 Saint Thomas² with his sober grey goose-quill,

¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17; Revelation 21.4–5.

² St. Thomas Aquinas.

And sinner Plato by Cephisian reed,¹
 Would fain, pretending just the insect's good,
 Whisk off, drive back, consign to shade again.

Into another state, under new rule

- 965 I knew myself was passing swift and sure;
 Whereof the initiatory pang approached,
 Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet
 As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste,²
 Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,
 970 And rise with something of a rosy shame
 Into immortal nakedness: so I
 Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
 Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain.

I' the grey of dawn it was I found myself

- 975 Facing the pillared front o' the Pieve—mine,
 My church: it seemed to say for the first time
 "But am not I the Bride, the mystic love
 O' the Lamb,³ who took thy plighted troth, my priest,
 To fold thy warm heart on my heart of stone
 980 And freeze thee nor unfasten any more?
 This is a fleshly woman,—let the free
 Bestow their life-blood, thou art pulseless now!"
 See! Day by day I had risen and left this church
 At the signal waved me by some foolish fan,
 985 With half a curse and half a pitying smile
 For the monk I stumbled over in my haste,
 Prostrate and corpse-like at the altar-foot

¹ "sinner" because (in contrast to St. Thomas) a pagan. The Cephissus is the river flowing past Athens.

² possibly suggested by Revelation 14.4.

³ Revelation 21.9.

- Intent on his *corona*:¹ then the church
 Was ready with her quip, if word conduced,
- 990 To quicken my pace nor stop for prating—"There!
 Be thankful you are no such ninny, go
 Rather to teach a black-eyed novice cards
 Than gabble Latin and protrude that nose
 Smoothed to a sheep's through no brains and much
 faith!"
- 995 That sort of incentive! Now the church changed tone—
 Now, when I found out first that life and death
 Are means to an end, that passion uses both,
 Indisputably mistress of the man
 Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice:
- 1000 Now, from the stone lungs sighed the scrannel² voice
 "Leave that live passion, come be dead with me!"
 As if, i' the fabled garden, I had gone³
 On great adventure, plucked in ignorance
 Hedge-fruit, and feasted to satiety,
- 1005 Laughing at such high fame for hips and haws,⁴
 And scorned the achievement: then come all at once
 O' the prize o' the place, the thing of perfect gold,
 The apple's self: and, scarce my eye on that,
 Was 'ware as well o' the seven-fold dragon's watch.
- 1010 Sirs, I obeyed. Obedience was too strange,—
 This new thing that had been struck into me
 By the look o' the lady,—to dare disobey

¹ rosary.

² shrill (in Milton's use in *Lycidas*, as here, the word is associated with the voice of a decadent church).

³ 1002–09 See note to III 384.

⁴ the ripened fruit of the rose and the hawthorn, respectively.

The first authoritative word. 'T was God's.
I had been lifted to the level of her,
1015 Could take such sounds into my sense. I said
"We two are cognisant o' the Master now;
She it is bids me bow the head: how true,
I am a priest! I see the function here;
I thought the other way self-sacrifice:
1020 This is the true, seals up the perfect sum.
I pay it, sit down, silently obey."

So, I went home. Dawn broke, noon broadened, I—
I sat stone-still, let time run over me.
The sun slanted into my room, had reached
1025 The west. I opened book,—Aquinas blazed
With one black name only on the white page.
I looked up, saw the sunset: vespers rang:
"She counts the minutes till I keep my word
And come say all is ready. I am a priest.
1030 Duty to God is duty to her: I think
God, who created her, will save her too
Some new way, by one miracle the more,
Without me. Then, prayer may avail perhaps."
I went to my own place i' the Pieve, read
1035 The office: I was back at home again
Sitting i' the dark. "Could she but know—but know
That, were there good in this distinct from God's,
Really good as it reached her, though procured
By a sin of mine,—I should sin: God forgives.
1040 She knows it is no fear withdraws me: fear?
Of what? Suspense here is the terrible thing.
If she should, as she counts the minutes, come
On the fantastic notion that I fear
The world now, fear the Archbishop, fear perhaps

1045 Count Guido, he who, having forged the lies,
May wait the work, attend the effect,—I fear
The sword of Guido! Let God see to that—
Hating lies, let not her believe a lie!”

Again the morning found me. “I will work,
1050 Tie down my foolish thoughts. Thank God so far!
I have saved her from a scandal, stopped the tongues
Had broken else into a cackle and hiss
Around the noble name. Duty is still
Wisdom: I have been wise.” So the day wore.

1055 At evening—“But, achieving victory,
I must not blink the priest’s peculiar part,
Nor shrink to counsel, comfort: priest and friend—
How do we discontinue to be friends?
I will go minister, advise her seek
1060 Help at the source,—above all, not despair:
There may be other happier help at hand.
I hope it,—wherefore then neglect to say?”

There she stood—leaned there, for the second time,
Over the terrace, looked at me, then spoke:
1065 “Why is it you have suffered me to stay
Breaking my heart two days more than was need?
Why delay help, your own heart yearns to give?
You are again here, in the self-same mind,
I see here, steadfast in the face of you,—
1070 You grudge to do no one thing that I ask.
Why then is nothing done? You know my need.
Still, through God’s pity on me, there is time
And one day more: shall I be saved or no?”
I answered—“Lady, waste no thought, no word

- 1075 Even to forgive me! Care for what I care—
 Only! Now follow me as I were fate!
 Leave this house in the dark to-morrow night,
 Just before daybreak:—there's new moon this eve—
 It sets, and then begins the solid black.
- 1080 Descend, proceed to the Torrione, step
 Over the low dilapidated wall,
 Take San Clemente, there's no other gate
 Unguarded at the hour: some paces thence
 An inn stands; cross to it; I shall be there."
- 1085 She answered, "If I can but find the way.
 But I shall find it. Go now!"

- I did go,
 Took rapidly the route myself prescribed,
 Stopped at Torrione, climbed the ruined place,
- 1090 Proved that the gate was practicable, reached
 The inn, no eye, despite the dark, could miss,
 Knocked there and entered, made the host secure:
 "With Caponsacchi it is ask and have;
 I know my betters. Are you bound for Rome?
- 1095 I get swift horse and trusty man," said he.

- Then I retraced my steps, was found once more
 In my own house for the last time: there lay
 The broad pale opened Summa. "Shut his book,
 There's other showing! 'T was a Thomas too¹
 1100 Obtained,—more favoured than his namesake here,—

¹ According to legend, St. Thomas, who was not present when the other disciples witnessed the assumption of the Virgin, remained sceptical until she threw down her girdle to him; he was then cured of doubt.

A gift, tied faith fast, foiled the tug of doubt,—
 Our Lady's girdle; down he saw it drop
 As she ascended into heaven, they say:
 He kept that safe and bade all doubt adieu.

1105 I too have seen a lady and hold a grace."

I know not how the night passed: morning broke;
 Presently came my servant. "Sir, this eve—
 Do you forget?" I started. "How forget?
 What is it you know?" "With due submission, Sir,

1110 This being last Monday in the month but one
 And a vigil, since to-morrow is Saint George,
 And feast day, and moreover day for copes,¹
 And Canon Conti now away a month,
 And Canon Crispi sour because, forsooth,
 1115 You let him sulk in stall and bear the brunt
 Of the octave² ... Well, Sir, 't is important!"

"True!

Hearken, I have to start for Rome this night.

No word, lest Crispi overboil and burst!

1120 Provide me with a laic dress! Throw dust
 I' the Canon's eye, stop his tongue's scandal so!
 See there's a sword in case of accident."

I knew the knave, the knave knew me.

And thus

1125 Through each familiar hindrance of the day
 Did I make steadily for its hour and end,—
 Felt time's old barrier-growth of right and fit
 Give way through all its twines, and let me go.

¹ Copes (mantles) were worn by clergy on festive occasions.

² the eight days after Easter.

- Use and wont recognized the excepted¹ man,
1130 Let speed the special service,—and I sped
Till, at the dead between midnight and morn,
There was I at the goal, before the gate,
With a tune in the ears, low leading up to loud,
A light in the eyes, faint that would soon be flare,
1135 Ever some spiritual witness new and new
In faster frequence, crowding solitude
To watch the way o' the warfare,—till, at last,
When the ecstatic minute must bring birth,
Began a whiteness in the distance, waxed
1140 Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near,
Till it was she: there did Pompilia come:
The white I saw shine through her was her soul's,
Certainly, for the body was one black,
Black from head down to foot. She did not speak,
1145 Glided into the carriage,—so a cloud
Gathers the moon up. "By San Spirito,
To Rome, as if the road burned underneath!
Reach Rome, then hold my head in pledge, I pay
The run and the risk to heart's content!" Just that,
1150 I said,—then, in another tick of time,
Sprang, was beside her, she and I alone.

So it began, our flight thro' dusk to clear,
Through day and night and day again to night
Once more, and to last dreadful dawn of all.

- 1155 Sirs, how should I lie quiet in my grave
Unless you suffer me wring, drop by drop,
My brain dry, make a riddance of the drench
Of minutes with a memory in each,

¹ exceptional.

Recorded motion, breath or look of hers,

- 1160 Which poured forth would present you one pure glass,
 Mirror you plain,—as God's sea, glassed in gold,¹
 His saints,—the perfect soul Pompilia? Men,
 You must know that a man gets drunk with truth
 Stagnant inside him! Oh, they've killed her, Sirs!
 1165 Can I be calm?

Calmly! Each incident

- Proves, I maintain, that action of the flight
 For the true thing it was. The first faint scratch
 O' the stone will test its nature, teach its worth
 1170 To idiots who name Parian²—coprolite.³
 After all, I shall give no glare—at best
 Only display you certain scattered lights
 Lamping the rush and roll of the abyss:
 Nothing but here and there a fire-point pricks
 1175 Wavelet from wavelet: well!

For the first hour

We both were silent in the night, I know:

Sometimes I did not see nor understand.

Blackness engulphed me,—partial stupor, say—

- 1180 Then I would break way, breathe through the surprise,
 And be aware again, and see who sat
 In the dark vest⁴ with the white face and hands.
 I said to myself—"I have caught it, I conceive
 The mind o' the mystery: 't is the way they wake
 1185 And wait, two martyrs somewhere in a tomb
 Each by each as their blessing was to die;

¹ Revelation 15.2.

² marble.

³ the petrified excrement of reptiles.

⁴ clothing.

Some signal they are promised and expect,—
 When to arise before the trumpet scares:
 So, through the whole course of the world they wait
 1190 The last day, but so fearless and so safe!
 No otherwise, in safety and not fear,
 I lie, because she lies too by my side.”
 You know this is not love, Sirs,—it is faith,
 The feeling that there’s God, he reigns and rules
 1195 Out of this low world: that is all; no harm!
 At times she drew a soft sigh—music seemed
 Always to hover just above her lips,
 Not settle,—break a silence music too.

In the determined¹ morning, I first found
 1200 Her head erect, her face turned full to me,
 Her soul intent on mine through two wide eyes.
 I answered them. “You are saved hitherto.²
 We have passed Perugia,—gone round by the wood,
 Not through, I seem to think,—and opposite
 1205 I know Assisi; this is holy ground.”
 Then she resumed. “How long since we both left
 Arezzo?” “Years—and certain hours beside.”

It was at ... ah, but I forget the names!
 ’T is a mere post-house and a hovel or two;
 1210 I left the carriage and got bread and wine
 And brought it her. “Does it detain to eat?”
 “They stay perforce, change horses,—therefore eat!
 We lose no minute: we arrive, be sure!”

¹ the “clear” of l. 1152.

² thus far.

This was—I know not where—there's a great hill
1215 Close over, and the stream has lost its bridge,
One fords it. She began—"I have heard say
Of some sick body that my mother knew,
'T was no good sign when in a limb diseased
All the pain suddenly departs,—as if
1220 The guardian angel discontinued pain
Because the hope of cure was gone at last:
The limb will not again exert itself,
It needs be pained no longer: so with me,
—My soul whence all the pain is past at once:
1225 All pain must be to work some good in the end.
True, this I feel now, this may be that good,
Pain was because of,—otherwise, I fear!"

She said,—a long while later in the day,
When I had let the silence be,—abrupt—
1230 "Have you a mother?" "She died, I was born."
"A sister then?" "No sister." "Who was it—
What woman were you used to serve this way,
Be kind to, till I called you and you came?"
I did not like that word. Soon afterward—
1235 "Tell me, are men unhappy, in some kind
Of mere unhappiness at being men,
As women suffer, being womanish?
Have you, now, some unhappiness, I mean,
Born of what may be man's strength overmuch,
1240 To match the undue susceptibility,
The sense at every pore when hate is close?
It hurts us if a baby hides its face
Or child strikes at us punily, calls names
Or makes a mouth,—much more if stranger men
1245 Laugh or frown,—just as that were much to bear!

Yet rocks split,—and the blow-ball¹ does no more,
 Quivers to feathery nothing at a touch;
 And strength may have its drawback weakness scapes.”

Once she asked “What is it that made you smile,
 1250 At the great gate with the eagles and the snakes,
 Where the company entered, ’t is a long time since?”
 “—Forgive—I think you would not understand:
 Ah, but you ask me,—therefore, it was this.
 That was a certain bishop’s villa-gate,
 1255 I knew it by the eagles,—and at once
 Remembered this same bishop was just he
 People of old were wont to bid me please
 If I would catch preferment: so, I smiled
 Because an impulse came to me, a whim—
 1260 What if I prayed the prelate leave to speak,
 Began upon him in his presence-hall
 —‘What, still at work so grey and obsolete?
 Still rocheted and mitred² more or less?
 Don’t you feel all that out of fashion now?
 1265 I find out when the day of things is done!”

At eve we heard the *angelus*.³ she turned—
 “I told you I can neither read nor write.
 My life stopped with the play-time; I will learn,
 If I begin to live again: but you—
 1270 Who are a priest—wherefore do you not read
 The service at this hour? Read Gabriel’s song,⁴

¹ seed head of the dandelion.

² clad in ecclesiastical garb. (The rochet is a short surplice, the mitre the headdress of a bishop.)

³ bell calling to prayer.

⁴ the words of the Annunciation (Luke 1.26–35).

The lesson, and then read the little prayer
 To Raphael,¹ proper for us travellers!"
 I did not like that, neither, but I read.

- 1275 When we stopped at Foligno² it was dark.
 The people of the post came out with lights:
 The driver said, "This time to-morrow, may
 Saints only help, relays continue good,
 Nor robbers hinder, we arrive at Rome."
- 1280 I urged, "Why tax your strength a second night?
 Trust me, alight here and take brief repose!
 We are out of harm's reach, past pursuit: go sleep
 If but an hour! I keep watch, guard the while
 Here in the doorway." But her whole face changed,
- 1285 The misery grew again about her mouth,
 The eyes burned up from faintness, like the fawn's
 Tired to death in the thicket, when she feels
 The probing spear o' the huntsman. "Oh, no stay!"
 She cried, in the fawn's cry, "On to Rome, on, on—
- 1290 Unless 't is you who fear,—which cannot be!"

We did go on all night; but at its close
 She was troubled, restless, moaned low, talked at whiles
 To herself, her brow on quiver with the dream:
 Once, wide awake, she menaced, at arms' length
 1295 Waved away something—"Never again with you!
 My soul is mine, my body is my soul's:
 You and I are divided ever more
 In soul and body: get you gone!" Then I—

¹ Raphael was "the Sociable spirit, that deigned / To travel with Tobias" (*Paradise Lost* 5.221–22). See the apocryphal Book of Tobit.

² a town between Perugia and Assisi.

- “Why, in my whole life I have never prayed!
1300 Oh, if the God, that only can, would help!
Am I his priest with power to cast out fiends?
Let God arise and all his enemies
Be scattered!”¹ By morn, there was peace, no sigh
Out of the deep sleep.

- 1320 In the broad day, I dared entreat, "Descend!"
I told a woman, at the garden-gate
By the post-house, white and pleasant in the sun,
"It is my sister,—talk with her apart!
She is married and unhappy, you perceive;
1325 I take her home because her head is hurt;
Comfort her as you women understand!"
So, there I left them by the garden-wall,

¹ Psalms 68.1.

- Paced the road, then bade put the horses to,
Came back, and there she sat: close to her knee,
1330 A black-eyed child still held the bowl of milk,
Wondered to see how little she could drink,
And in her arms the woman's infant lay.
She smiled at me "How much good this has done!
This is a whole night's rest and how much more!
1335 I can proceed now, though I wish to stay.
How do you call that tree with the thick top
That holds in all its leafy green and gold
The sun now like an immense egg of fire?"
(It was a million-leaved mimosa.) "Take
1340 The babe away from me and let me go!"
And in the carriage "Still a day, my friend!
And perhaps half a night, the woman fears.
I pray it finish since it cannot last:
There may be more misfortune at the close,
1345 And where will you be? God suffice me then!"
And presently—for there was a roadside-shrine—
"When I was taken first to my own church
Lorenzo in Lucina, being a girl,
And bid confess my faults, I interposed
1350 'But teach me what fault to confess and know?'
So, the priest said—"You should bethink yourself:
Each human being needs must have done wrong!"
Now, be you candid and no priest but friend—
Were I surprised and killed here on the spot,
1355 A runaway from husband and his home,
Do you account it were in sin I died?
My husband used to seem to harm me, not ...
Not on pretence he punished sin of mine,
Nor for sin's sake and lust of cruelty,
1360 But as I heard him bid a farming-man

- At the villa take a lamb once to the wood
 And there ill-treat it, meaning that the wolf
 Should hear its cries, and so come, quick be caught,
 Enticed to the trap: he practised thus with me
- 1365 That so, whatever were his gain thereby,
 Others than I might become prey and spoil.
 Had it been only between our two selves,—
 His pleasure and my pain,—why, pleasure him
 By dying, nor such need to make a coil!¹
- 1370 But this was worth an effort, that my pain
 Should not become a snare, prove pain threefold
 To other people—strangers—or unborn—
 How should I know? I sought release from that—
 I think, or else from,—dare I say, some cause
- 1375 Such as is put into a tree, which turns
 Away from the north wind with what nest it holds,—
 The woman said that trees so turn: now, friend,
 Tell me, because I cannot trust myself!
 You are a man: what have I done amiss?"
- 1380 You must conceive my answer,—I forget—
 Taken up wholly with the thought, perhaps,
 This time she might have said,—might, did not say—
 "You are a priest." She said, "my friend."

Day wore,

- 1385 We passed the places, somehow the calm went,
 Again the restless eyes began to rove
 In new fear of the foe mine could not see.
 She wandered in her mind,—addressed me once
 "Gaetano!"—that is not my name: whose name?
 1390 I grew alarmed, my head seemed turning too.
 I quickened pace with promise now, now threat:

¹ disturbance.

Bade drive and drive, nor any stopping more.

“Too deep i’ the thick of the struggle, struggle through!

Then drench her in repose though death’s self pour

1395 The plenitude of quiet,—help us, God,

Whom the winds carry!”¹

Suddenly I saw

The old tower, and the little white-walled clump

Of buildings and the cypress-tree or two,—

1400 “Already Castelnuovo—Rome!” I cried,

“As good as Rome,—Rome is the next stage, think!

This is where travellers’ hearts are wont to beat.

Say you are saved, sweet lady!” Up she woke.

The sky was fierce with colour from the sun

1405 Setting. She screamed out “No, I must not die!

Take me no farther, I should die: stay here!

I have more life to save than mine!”

She swooned.

We seemed safe: what was it foreboded so?

1410 Out of the coach into the inn I bore

The motionless and breathless pure and pale

Pompilia,—bore her through a pitying group

And laid her on a couch, still calm and cured

By deep sleep of all woes at once. The host

1415 Was urgent “Let her stay an hour or two!

Leave her to us, all will be right by morn!”

Oh, my foreboding! But I could not choose.

I paced the passage, kept watch all night long.

I listened,—not one movement, not one sigh.

1420 “Fear not: she sleeps so sound!” they said: but I

¹ Psalms 28.10.

- Feared, all the same, kept fearing more and more,
 Found myself throb with fear from head to foot,
 Filled with a sense of such impending woe,
 That, at first pause of night, pretence of gray,
 1425 I made my mind up it was morn.—“Reach Rome,
 Lest hell reach her! A dozen miles to make,
 Another long breath, and we emerge!” I stood
 I’ the court-yard, roused the sleepy grooms. “Have out
 Carriage and horse, give haste, take gold!” said I.
 1430 While they made ready in the doubtful morn,—
 ’T was the last minute,—needs must I ascend
 And break her sleep; I turned to go.

And there

- Faced me Count Guido, there posed the mean man
 1435 As master,—took the field, encamped his rights,
 Challenged the world: there leered new triumph, there
 Scowled the old malice in the visage bad
 And black o’ the scamp. Soon triumph suppled the
 tongue
 A little, malice glued to his dry throat,
 1440 And he part howled, part hissed ... oh, how he kept
 Well out o’ the way, at arm’s length and to spare!—
 “My salutation to your priesthood! What?
 Matutinal,¹ busy with book so soon
 Of an April day that’s damp as tears that now
 1445 Deluge Arezzo at its darling’s flight?—
 ’T is unfair, wrongs feminity at large,
 To let a single dame monopolize
 A heart the whole sex claims, should share alike:
 Therefore I overtake you, Canon! Come!
 1450 The lady,—could you leave her side so soon?

¹ early in the morning.

You have not yet experienced at her hands
 My treatment, you lay down undrugged, I see!
 Hence this alertness—hence no death-in-life
 Like what held arms fast when she stole from mine.

1455 To be sure, you took the solace and repose
 That first night at Foligno!—news abound
 O' the road by this time,—men regaled me much,
 As past them I came halting after you,
 Vulcan pursuing Mars, as poets sing,—¹

1460 Still at the last here pant I, but arrive,
 Vulcan—and not without my Cyclops too,
 The Commissary and the unpoisoned arm
 O' the Civil Force, should Mars turn mutineer.
 Enough of fooling: capture the culprits, friend!

1465 Here is the lover in the smart disguise
 With the sword,—he is a priest, so mine lies still.
 There upstairs hides my wife the runaway,
 His leman:² the two plotted, poisoned first,
 Plundered me after, and eloped thus far

1470 Where now you find them. Do your duty quick!
 Arrest and hold him! That's done: now catch her!"

During this speech of that man,—well, I stood
 Away, as he managed,—still, I stood as near
 The throat of him,—with these two hands, my own,—
 1475 As now I stand near yours, Sir,—one quick spring,
 One great good satisfying gripe, and lo!
 There had he lain abolished with his lie,
 Creation purged o' the miscreate,³ man redeemed,
 A spittle wiped off from the face of God!

¹ See III 1450–55 and note. The Cyclops were servants of Vulcan.

² mistress.

³ misbegotten, badly made.

- 1480 I, in some measure, seek a poor excuse
For what I left undone, in just this fact
That my first feeling at the speech I quote
Was—not of what a blasphemy was dared,
Not what a bag of venomous purulence¹

1485 Was split and noisome,—but how splendidly
Mirthful, how ludicrous a lie was launched!
Would Molière's self² wish more than hear such man
Call, claim such woman for his own, his wife,
Even though, in due amazement at the boast,

1490 He had stammered, she moreover was divine?
She to be his,—were hardly less absurd
Than that he took her name into his mouth,
Licked, and then let it go again, the beast,
Signed with his slaver. Oh, she poisoned him,

1495 Plundered him, and the rest! Well, what I wished
Was, that he would but go on, say once more
So to the world, and get his meed of men,
The fist's reply to the filth. And while I mused,
The minute, oh the misery, was gone!

1500 On either idle hand of me there stood
Really an officer, nor laughed i' the least:
Nay, rendered justice to his reason, laid
Logic to heart, as 't were submitted them
"Twice two makes four."

1505 "And now, catch her!" he cri
That sobered me. "Let myself lead the way—
Ere you arrest me, who am somebody,
Being, as you hear, a priest and privileged,—

1 plus

² an allusion to the French dramatist's *Dom Juan*, in which Juan claims Donna Elyire as his wife.

- To the lady's chamber! I presume you—men
1510 Expert, instructed how to find out truth,
Familiar with the guise of guilt. Detect
Guilt on her face when it meets mine, then judge
Between us and the mad dog howling there!"
Up we all went together, in they broke
1515 O' the chamber late my chapel. There she lay,
Composed as when I laid her, that last eve,
O' the couch, still breathless, motionless, sleep's self,
Wax-white, seraphic, saturate with the sun
O' the morning that now flooded from the front
1520 And filled the window with a light like blood.
"Behold the poisoner, the adulteress,
—And feigning sleep too! Seize, bind!" Guido hissed.

- She started up, stood erect, face to face
With the husband: back he fell, was buttressed there
1525 By the window all a-flame with morning-red,
He the black figure, the opprobrious blur
Against all peace and joy and light and life.
"Away from between me and hell!" she cried:
"Hell for me, no embracing any more!"
1530 I am God's, I love God, God—whose knees I clasp,
Whose utterly most just award I take,
But bear no more love-making devils: hence!"
I may have made an effort to reach her side
From where I stood i' the door-way,—anyhow
1535 I found the arms, I wanted,¹ pinioned fast,
Was powerless in the clutch to left and right
O' the rabble pouring in, rascality

¹ needed to use.

- Enlisted, rampant on the side of hearth
 Home and the husband,—pay in prospect too!
- 1540 They heaped themselves upon me. “Ha!—and him
 Also you outrage? Him, too, my sole friend,
 Guardian and saviour? That I baulk you of,
 Since—see how God can help at last and worst!”
 She sprang at the sword that hung beside him, seized,
- 1545 Drew, brandished it, the sunrise burned for joy
 O’ the blade, “Die,” cried she, “devil, in God’s name!”
 Ah, but they all closed round her, twelve to one
 —The unmanly men, no woman-mother made,
 Spawned somehow! Dead-white and disarmed she lay.
- 1550 No matter for the sword, her word sufficed
 To spike the coward through and through: he shook,
 Could only spit between the teeth—“You see?
 You hear? Bear witness, then! Write down ... but no—
 Carry these criminals to the prison-house,
- 1555 For first thing! I begin my search meanwhile
 After the stolen effects, gold, jewels, plate,
 Money and clothes, they robbed me of and fled,
 With no few amorous pieces, verse and prose,
 I have much reason to expect to find.”
- 1560 When I saw that—no more than the first mad speech,
 Made out the speaker mad and a laughing-stock,
 So neither did this next device explode
 One listener’s indignation,—that a scribe
 Did sit down, set himself to write indeed,
- 1565 While sundry knaves began to peer and pry
 In corner and hole,—that Guido, wiping brow
 And getting him a countenance,¹ was fast

¹ gaining support or composure.

- Losing his fear, beginning to strut free
O' the stage of his exploit, snuff here, sniff there,—
- 1570 Then I took truth in, guessed sufficiently
The service for the moment. "What I say,
Slight at your peril! We are aliens here,
My adversary and I, called noble both;
I am the nobler, and a name men know.
- 1575 I could refer our cause to our own Court
In our own country, but prefer appeal
To the nearer jurisdiction. Being a priest,
Though in a secular garb,—for reasons good
I shall adduce in due time to my peers,—
- 1580 I demand that the Church I serve, decide
Between us, right the slandered lady there.
A Tuscan noble, I might claim the Duke:
A priest, I rather choose the Church,—bid Rome
Cover the wronged with her inviolate shield."
- 1585 There was no refusing this: they bore me off,
They bore her off, to separate cells o' the same
Ignoble prison, and, separate, thence to Rome.
Pompilia's face, then and thus, looked on me
The last time in this life: not one sight since,
- 1590 Never another sight to be! And yet
I thought I had saved her. I appealed to Rome:
It seems I simply sent her to her death.
You tell me she is dying now, or dead;
I cannot bring myself to quite believe
- 1595 This is a place you torture people in:
What if this your intelligence were just
A subtlety, an honest wile to work
On a man at unawares? 'T were worthy you.

No, Sirs, I cannot have the lady dead!

- 1600 That erect form, flashing brow, fulgurant¹ eye,
 That voice immortal (oh, that voice of hers!)
 That vision in the blood-red day-break—that
 Leap to life of the pale electric sword
 Angels go armed with,—that was not the last
 1605 O' the lady! Come, I see through it, you find—
 Know the manoeuvre! Also herself said
 I had saved her: do you dare say she spoke false?
 Let me see for myself if it be so!
 Though she were dying, a Priest might be of use,
 1610 The more when he's a friend too,—she called me
 Far beyond "friend." Come, let me see her—indeed
 It is my duty, being a priest: I hope
 I stand confessed, established, proved a priest?
 My punishment had motive that, a priest
 1615 I, in a laic garb, a mundane mode,
 Did what were harmlessly done otherwise.
 I never touched her with my finger-tip
 Except to carry her to the couch, that eve,
 Against my heart, beneath my head, bowed low,
 1620 As we priests carry the paten:² that is why
 —To get leave and go see her of your grace—
 I have told you this whole story over again.
 Do I deserve grace? For I might lock lips,
 Laugh at your jurisdiction: what have you
 1625 To do with me in the matter? I suppose
 You hardly think I donned a bravo's³ dress

¹ flashing like lightning.

² plate holding the Eucharist.

³ ruffian's (that is, like that of one of Guido's henchmen).

- To have a hand in the new crime; on the old,
Judgment's delivered, penalty imposed,
I was chained fast at Civita hand and foot—
- 1630 She had only you to trust to, you and Rome,
Rome and the Church, and no pert meddling priest
Two days ago, when Guido, with the right,
Hacked her to pieces. One might well be wroth;
I have been patient, done my best to help:
- 1635 I come from Civita and punishment
As friend of the Court—and for pure friendship's sake
Have told my tale to the end,—nay, not the end—
For, wait—I'll end—not leave you that excuse!

- When we were parted,—shall I go on there?
- 1640 I was presently brought to Rome—yes, here I stood
Opposite yonder very crucifix—
And there sat you and you, Sirs, quite the same.
I heard charge, and bore question, and told tale
Noted down in the book there,—turn and see
- 1645 If, by one jot or tittle, I vary now!
I' the colour the tale takes, there's change perhaps;
'T is natural, since the sky is different,
Eclipse in the air now; still, the outline stays.
I showed you how it came to be my part
- 1650 To save the lady. Then your clerk produced
Papers, a pack of stupid and impure
Banalities called letters about love—
Love, indeed,—I could teach who styled them so,
Better, I think, though priest and loveless both!
- 1655 “—How was it that a wife, young, innocent,
And stranger to your person, wrote this page?”—
“—She wrote it when the Holy Father wrote
The bestiality that posts thro' Rome,

- Put in his mouth by Pasquin."¹ "Nor perhaps
 1660 Did you return these answers, verse and prose,
 Signed, sealed and sent the lady? There's your hand!"
 "—This precious piece of verse, I really judge,
 Is meant to copy my own character,²
 A clumsy mimic; and this other prose,
 1665 Not so much even; both rank forgery:
 Verse, quotha? Bembo's verse!³ When Saint John wrote
 The tract '*De Tribus*',⁴ I wrote this to match."
 "—How came it, then, the documents were found
 At the inn on your departure?"—"I opine,
 1670 Because there were no documents to find
 In my presence,—you must hide before you find.
 Who forged them hardly practised in my view;
 Who found them waited till I turned my back."
 "—And what of the clandestine visits paid,
 1675 Nocturnal passage in and out the house
 With its lord absent? 'T is alleged you climbed ...'"
 "—Flew on a broomstick to the man i' the moon!
 Who witnessed or will testify this trash?"
 "—The trusty servant, Margherita's self,
 1680 Even she who brought you letters, you confess,
 And, you confess, took letters in reply:
 Forget not we have knowledge of the facts!"

¹ originally, a fifteenth-century Roman tailor (or cobbler), said to be a skilful epigrammatist; later, a disinterred statue named for him on the site of his shop in the Piazza Navona. On this broken statue were affixed coarse satirical comments (pasquinades) on current events and public figures.

² handwriting.

³ the elegant verse of the scholar Pietro Bembo (1470–1547).

⁴ a medieval tract on "three impostors" (Moses, Christ, Mohammed) ascribed to one Ochinus.

- “—Sirs, who have knowledge of the facts, defray
 The expenditure of wit I waste in vain,
 1685 Trying to find out just one fact of all!
 She who brought letters from who could not write,
 And took back letters to who could not read,—
 Who was that messenger, of your charity?”¹
 “—Well, so far favours you the circumstance
 1690 That this same messenger ... how shall we say? ...
Sub imputatione meretricis
Laborat,²—which makes accusation null:
 We waive this woman’s: nought makes void the next.
 Borsi, called Venerino, he who drove,
 1695 O’ the first night when you fled away, at length
 Deposes to your kissings in the coach,
 —Frequent, frenetic ... ” “When deposed he so?”
 “After some weeks of sharp imprisonment ... ”
 “—Granted by friend the Governor, I engage—”
 1700 “—For his participation in your flight!
 At length his obduracy melting made
 The avowal mentioned ... ” “Was dismissed forthwith
 To liberty, poor knave, for recompense.
 Sirs, give what credit to the lie you can!
 1705 For me, no word in my defence I speak,
 And God shall argue for the lady!”

So

- Did I stand question, and make answer, still
 With the same result of smiling disbelief,
 1710 Polite impossibility of faith
 In such affected virtue in a priest;
 But a showing fair play, an indulgence, even,

¹ pray tell?

² had the reputation of being a prostitute. See III 1097–1108.

To one no worse than others after all—
Who had not brought disgrace to the order, played
1715 Discreetly, ruffled gown nor ripped the cloth¹
In a bungling game at romps: I have told you, Sirs—
If I pretended simply to be pure
Honest and Christian in the case,—absurd!
As well go boast myself above the needs
1720 O' the human nature, careless how meat smells,
Wine tastes,—a saint above the smack!² But once
Abate my crest,³ own flaws i' the flesh, agree
To go with the herd, be hog no more nor less,
Why, hogs in common herd have common rights:
1725 I must not be unduly borne upon,
Who just romanced a little, sowed wild oats,
But 'scaped without a scandal, flagrant fault.
My name helped to a mirthful circumstance:
"Joseph" would do well to amend his plea:
1730 Undoubtedly—some toying with the wife,
But as for ruffian violence and rape,
Potiphar⁴ pressed too much on the other side!
The intrigue, the elopement, the disguise,—well charged!
The letters and verse looked hardly like the truth.
1735 Your apprehension was—of guilt enough
To be compatible with innocence,
So, punished best a little and not too much.
Had I struck Guido Franceschini's face,
You had counselled me withdraw for my own sake,
1740 Baulk him of bravo-hiring. Friends came round,

¹ Note the pun on "cloth" as a metaphor (metonymy) for the clergy.

² sensual appetite.

³ do away with my pride or dignity.

⁴ Genesis 39.

- Congratulated, "Nobody mistakes!
 The pettiness o' the forfeiture defines
 The peccadillo: Guido gets his share:
 His wife is free of husband and hook-nose,
 1745 The mouldy viands and the mother-in-law.
 To Civita with you and amuse the time,
 Travesty us '*De Raptu Helenae!*'¹
 A funny figure must the husband cut
 When the wife makes him skip,—too ticklish, eh?
 1750 Do it in Latin, not the Vulgar,² then!
 Scazons³—we'll copy and send his Eminence.
 Mind—one iambus in the final foot!
 He'll rectify it, be your friend for life!"
 Oh, Sirs, depend on me for much new light
 1755 Thrown on the justice and religion here
 By this proceeding, much fresh food for thought!

- And I was just set down to study these
 In relegation, two short days ago,
 Admiring⁴ how you read the rules, when, clap,
 1760 A thunder comes into my solitude—
 I am caught up in a whirlwind and cast here,
 Told of a sudden, in this room where so late
 You dealt out law adroitly, that those scales,
 I meekly bowed to, took my allotment from,
 1765 Guido has snatched at, broken in your hands,
 Metes to himself the murder of his wife,

¹ a Greek poem on the rape (abduction) of Helen of Troy, written in Egypt about 500 AD.

² Dante's name for vernacular Italian.

³ A scazon is an iambic line ending in a spondee or trochee (and therefore defective if it ends instead in an iamb: see ll. 1752–53).

⁴ a double-edged word here.

- Full measure, pressed down, running over now!¹
 Can I assist to an explanation?—Yes,
 I rise in your esteem, sagacious Sirs,
 1770 Stand up a renderer of reasons, not
 The officious priest would personate Saint George²
 For a mock Princess in undragoned days.
 What, the blood startles you? What, after all
 The priest who needs must carry sword on thigh
 1775 May find imperative use for it? Then, there was
 A Princess, was a dragon belching flame,
 And should have been a Saint George also? Then,
 There might be worse schemes than to break the bonds
 At Arezzo, lead her by the little hand,
 1780 Till she reached Rome, and let her try to live?
 But you were law and gospel,—would one please
 Stand back, allow your faculty elbow-room?
 You blind guides who must needs lead eyes that see!³
 Fools, alike ignorant of man and God!
 1785 What was there here should have perplexed your wit
 For a wink of the owl-eyes of you? How miss, then,
 What's now forced on you by this flare of fact—
 As if Saint Peter failed to recognize
 Nero as no apostle, John or James,
 1790 Till someone burned a martyr, made a torch
 O' the blood and fat to show his features by!
 Could you fail read this cartulary⁴ aright
 On head and front⁵ of Franceschini there,

¹ Luke 6.38.

² See note to III 1065–66.

³ Matthew 23.24.

⁴ record.

⁵ face.

- Large-lettered like hell's masterpiece of print,—
1795 That he, from the beginning pricked at heart
By some lust, letch¹ of hate against his wife,
Plotted to plague her into overt sin
And shame, would slay Pompilia body and soul,
And save his mean self—miserably caught
1800 I' the quagmire of his own tricks, cheats and lies?
—That himself wrote those papers,—from himself
To himself,—which, i' the name of me and her,
His mistress-messenger gave her and me,
Touching us with such pustules² of the soul
1805 That she and I might take the taint, be shown
To the world and shuddered over, speckled so?
—That the agent put her sense into my words,
Made substitution of the thing she hoped,
For the thing she had and held, its opposite,
1810 While the husband in the background bit his lips
At each fresh failure of his precious plot?
—That when at the last we did rush each on each,
By no chance but because God willed it so—
The spark of truth was struck from out our souls—
1815 Made all of me, descried in the first glance,
Seem fair and honest and permissible love
O' the good and true—as the first glance told me
There was no duty patent in the world
Like daring try be good and true myself,
1820 Leaving the shows of things to the Lord of Show
And Prince o' the Power of the Air. Our very flight,
Even to its most ambiguous circumstance,
Irrefragably proved how futile, false ...

¹ abnormal possession, frenzy.

² (running?) pimples.

- Why, men—men and not boys—boys and not babes—
1825 Babes and not beasts—beasts and not stocks and
stones!—
- Had the liar's lie been true one pin-point speck,
Were I the accepted suitor, free o' the place,
Disposer of the time, to come at a call
And go at a wink as who should say me nay,—
1830 What need of flight, what were the gain therefrom
But just damnation, failure or success?
Damnation pure and simple to her the wife
And me the priest—who bartered private bliss
For public reprobation, the safe shade
1835 For the sunshine which men see to pelt me by:
What other advantage,—we who led the days
And nights alone i' the house,—was flight to find?
In our whole journey did we stop an hour,
Diverge a foot from straight road till we reached
1840 Or would have reached—but for that fate of ours—
The father and mother, in the eye of Rome,
The eye of yourselves we made aware of us
At the first fall of misfortune? And indeed
You did so far give sanction to our flight,
1845 Confirm its purpose, as lend helping hand,
Deliver up Pompilia not to him
She fled, but those the flight was ventured for.
Why then could you, who stopped short, not go on
One poor step more, and justify the means,
1850 Having allowed the end?—not see and say
“Here's the exceptional conduct that should claim
To be exceptionally judged on rules
Which, understood, make no exception here”—
Why play instead into the devil's hands
1855 By dealing so ambiguously as gave

Guido the power to intervene like me,
 Prove one exception more? I saved his wife
 Against law: against law he slays her now:
 Deal with him!

- 1860 I have done with being judged.
 I stand here guiltless in thought, word and deed,
 To the point that I apprise you,—in contempt
 For all misapprehending ignorance
 O' the human heart, much more the mind of Christ,—
- 1865 That I assuredly did bow, was blessed
 By the revelation of Pompilia. There!
 Such is the final fact I fling you, Sirs,
 To mouth and mumble and misinterpret: there!
 “The priest’s in love,” have it the vulgar way!
- 1870 Unpriest me, rend the rags o’ the vestment, do—
 Degrade deep, disenfranchise all you dare—
 Remove me from the midst, no longer priest
 And fit companion for the like of you—
 Your gay Abati with the well-turned leg
- 1875 And rose i’ the hat-rim, Canons, cross at neck
 And silk mask in the pocket of the gown,
 Brisk Bishops with the world’s musk still unbrushed
 From the rochet; I’ll no more of these good things:
 There’s a crack somewhere, something that’s unsound
- 1880 I’ the rattle!

- For Pompilia—be advised,
 Build churches, go pray! You will find me there,
 I know, if you come,—and you will come, I know.
 Why, there’s a Judge weeping! Did not I say
 1885 You were good and true at bottom? You see the truth—
 I am glad I helped you: she helped me just so.

- But for Count Guido,—you must counsel there!
I bow my head, bend to the very dust,
Break myself up in shame of faultiness.
- 1890 I had him one whole moment, as I said—
As I remember, as will never out
O' the thoughts of me,—I had him in arm's reach
There,—as you stand, Sir, now you cease to sit,—
I could have killed him ere he killed his wife,
- 1895 And did not: he went off alive and well
And then effected this last feat—through me!
Me—not through you—dismiss that fear! 'T was you
Hindered me staying here to save her,—not
From leaving you and going back to him
- 1900 And doing service in Arezzo. Come,
Instruct me in procedure! I conceive—
In all due self-abasement might I speak—
How you will deal with Guido: oh, not death!
Death, if it let her life be: otherwise
- 1905 Not death,—your lights will teach you clearer! I
Certainly have an instinct of my own
I' the matter: bear with me and weigh its worth!
Let us go away—leave Guido all alone
Back on the world again that knows him now!
- 1910 I think he will be found (indulge so far!)
Not to die so much as slide out of life,
Pushed by the general horror and common hate
Low, lower,—left o' the very ledge of things,
I seem to see him catch convulsively
- 1915 One by one at all honest forms of life,
At reason, order, decency and use—
To cramp¹ him and get foothold by at least;

¹ give him a secure grip.

- And still they disengage them from his clutch.
"What, you are he, then, had Pompilia once
1920 And so forwent her? Take not up with us!"
And thus I see him slowly and surely edged
Off all the table-land whence life upsprings
Aspiring to be immortality,
As the snake, hatched on hill-top by mischance,
1925 Despite his wriggling, slips, slides, slidders down
Hill-side, lies low and prostrate on the smooth
Level of the outer place, lapsed in the vale:
So I lose Guido in the loneliness,
Silence and dusk, till at the doleful end,
1930 At the horizontal line, creation's verge,
From what just is to absolute nothingness—
Whom is it, straining onward still, he meets?
What other man deep further in the fate,
Who, turning at the prize of a footfall
1935 To flatter him and promise fellowship,
Discovers in the act a frightful face—
Judas, made monstrous by much solitude!
The two are at one now! Let them love their love
That bites and claws like hate, or hate their hate
1940 That mops and mows and makes as it were love!
There, let them each tear each in devil's-fun,
Or fondle this the other while malice aches—
Both teach, both learn detestability!
Kiss him the kiss, Iscariot!¹ Pay that back,
1945 That smatch² o' the slaver blistering on your lip,
By the better trick, the insult he spared Christ—

¹ Matthew 26.48–49.

² smack, flavor.

- Lure him the lure o' the letters,¹ Aretine!
 Lick him o'er slimy-smooth with jelly-filth
 O' the verse-and-prose pollution in love's guise!
- 1950 The cockatrice is with the basilisk!²
 There let them grapple, denizens o' the dark,
 Foes or friends, but indissolubly bound,
 In their one spot out of the ken of God
 Or care of man, for ever and ever more!
- 1955 Why, Sirs, what's this? Why, this is sorry and strange!
 Futility, divagation:³ this from me
 Bound to be rational, justify an act
 Of sober man!—whereas, being moved so much,
 I give you cause to doubt the lady's mind:
- 1960 A pretty sarcasm for the world! I fear
 You do her wit injustice,—all through me!
 Like my fate all through,—ineffective help!
 A poor rash advocate I prove myself.
 You might be angry with good cause: but sure
- 1965 At the advocate,—only at the undue zeal
 That spoils the force of his own plea, I think?
 My part was just to tell you how things stand,
 State facts and not be flustered at their fume.
 But then 't is a priest speaks: as for love,—no!
- 1970 If you let buzz a vulgar fly like that
 About your brains, as if I loved, forsooth,

¹ primarily the love letters allegedly exchanged by Pompilia and Caponsacchi, but the word "Aretine" supplies an overtone of reference to the three to four thousand published letters of Pietro Aretino (see IX 1202 and note), many of which reveal his vicious character.

² See note to V 900.

³ digression, wandering.

- Indeed, Sirs, you do wrong! We had no thought
Of such infatuation, she and I:
There are many points that prove it: do be just!
- 1975 I told you,—at one little roadside-place
I spent a good half-hour, paced to and fro
The garden; just to leave her free awhile,
I plucked a handful of Spring herb and bloom:
I might have sat beside her on the bench
- 1980 Where the children were: I wish the thing had been,
Indeed: the event could not be worse, you know:
One more half-hour of her saved! She's dead now, Sirs!
While I was running on at such a rate,
Friends should have plucked me by the sleeve: I went
- 1985 Too much o' the trivial outside of her face
And the purity that shone there—plain to me,
Not to you, what more natural? Nor am I
Infatuated,—oh, I saw, be sure!
Her brow had not the right line, leaned too much,
- 1990 Painters would say; they like the straight-up Greek:
This seemed bent somewhat with an invisible crown
Of martyr and saint, not such as art approves.
And how the dark orbs dwelt deep underneath,
Looked out of such a sad sweet heaven on me!
- 1995 The lips, compressed a little, came forward too,
Careful for a whole world of sin and pain.
That was the face, her husband makes his plea,
He sought just to disfigure,—no offence
Beyond that! Sirs, let us be rational!
- 2000 He needs must vindicate his honour,—ay,
Yet slinks, the coward, in a clown's disguise,
Away from the scene, endeavours to escape.
Now, had he done so, slain and left no trace
O' the slayer,—what were vindicated, pray?

- 2005 You had found his wife disfigured or a corpse,
For what and by whom? It is too palpable!
Then, here's another point involving law:
I use this argument to show you meant
No calumny against us by that title¹
- 2010 O' the sentence,—liars try to twist it so:
What penalty it bore, I had to pay
Till further proof should follow of innocence—
Probationis ob defectum,²—proof?
How could you get proof without trying us?
- 2015 You went through the preliminary form,
Stopped there, contrived this sentence to amuse
The adversary. If the title ran
For more than fault imputed and not proved,
That was a simple penman's error, else
- 2020 A slip i' the phrase,—as when we say of you
"Charged with injustice"—which may either be
Or not be,—t is a name that sticks meanwhile.
Another relevant matter: fool that I am!
Not what I wish true, yet a point friends urge:
- 2025 It is not true,—yet, since friends think it helps,—
She only tried me when some others failed—
Began with Conti, whom I told you of,
And Guillichini, Guido's kinsfolk both,
And when abandoned by them, not before,
- 2030 Turned to me. That's conclusive why she turned.
Much good they got by the happy cowardice!
Conti is dead,³ poisoned a month ago:
Does that much strike you as a sin? Not much,

¹ setting-forth of reasons.

² in lack of proof (of adultery).

³ The rumor is reported in a document in the Old Yellow Book.

- After the present murder,—one mark more
 2035 On the Moor's skin,¹—what is black by blacker still?
 Conti had come here and told truth. And so
 With Guillichini; he's condemned of course
 To the galleys,² as a friend in this affair,
 Tried and condemned for no one thing i' the world,
 2040 A fortnight since by who but the Governor?—
 The just judge, who refused Pompilia help
 At first blush, being her husband's friend, you know.
 There are two tales to suit the separate courts,
 Arezzo and Rome: he tells you here, we fled
 2045 Alone, unhelped,—lays stress on the main fault,
 The spiritual sin, Rome looks to: but elsewhere
 He likes best we should break in, steal, bear off,
 Be fit to brand and pillory and flog—
 That's the charge goes to the heart of the Governor:
 2050 If these unpriest me, you and I may yet
 Converse, Vincenzo Marzi-Medici!³
 Oh, Sirs, there are worse men than you, I say!
 More easily duped, I mean; this stupid lie,
 Its liar never dared propound in Rome,
 2055 He gets Arezzo to receive,—nay more,
 Gets Florence and the Duke to authorize!
 This is their Rota's⁴ sentence, their Granduke
 Signs and seals! Rome for me henceforward—Rome,
 Where better men are,—most of all, that man
 2060 The Augustinian⁵ of the Hospital,

¹ a possible allusion to *Othello*.

² a fact reported in the Old Yellow Book. (Guillichini appears at II 934–36.)

³ the governor of Arezzo.

⁴ See note to IV 1311.

⁵ Fra Celestino.

Who writes the letter,—he confessed, he says,
Many a dying person, never one
So sweet and true and pure and beautiful.
A good man! Will you make him Pope one day?

2065 Not that he is not good too, this we have—
But old,—else he would have his word to speak,
His truth to teach the world: I thirst for truth,
But shall not drink it till I reach the source.

Sirs, I am quiet again. You see, we are

2070 So very pitiable, she and I,
Who had conceivably been otherwise.
Forget distemperature¹ and idle heat!²

Apart from truth's sake, what's to move so much?
Pompilia will be presently with God;

2075 I am, on earth, as good as out of it,
A relegated priest; when exile ends,
I mean to do my duty and live long.³

She and I are mere strangers now: but priests
Should study passion; how else cure mankind,

2080 Who come for help in passionate extremes?
I do but play with an imagined life
Of who, unfettered by a vow, unblessed
By the higher call,—since you will have it so,—
Leads it companioned by the woman there.

2085 To live, and see her learn, and learn by her,
Out of the low obscure and petty world—
Or only see one purpose and one will

¹ disordered state of mind.

² unproductive passion.

³ All that is subsequently heard of him is that in 1702 he resigned as canon of the church of St. Maria delle Pieve.

- Evolve themselves i' the world, change wrong to right:
To have to do with nothing but the true,
2090 The good, the eternal—and these, not alone
In the main current of the general life,
But small experiences of every day,
Concerns of the particular hearth and home:
To learn not only by a comet's rush
2095 But a rose's birth,—not by the grandeur, God—
But the comfort, Christ. All this, how far away!
Mere delectation, meet for a minute's dream!—
Just as a drudging student trims his lamp,
Opens his Plutarch,¹ puts him in the place
2100 Of Roman, Grecian; draws the patched gown close,
Dreams, "Thus should I fight, save or rule the world!"—
Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes
To the old solitary nothingness.
So I, from such communion, pass content ...
- 2105 O great, just, good God! Miserable me!

¹ In Plutarch's series of *Parallel Lives* the biographies of great Romans and somehow related Greeks are set side by side for the sake of instructive comparison.

VII
POMPILIA

- I AM just seventeen years and five months old,
And, if I lived one day more, three full weeks;
'T is writ so in the church's register,
Lorenzo in Lucina, all my names
- 5 At length, so many names for one poor child,
—Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela
Pompilia Comparini,—laughable!
Also 't is writ that I was married there
Four years ago: and they will add, I hope,
- 10 When they insert my death, a word or two,—
Omitting all about the mode of death,—
This, in its place, this which one cares to know,
That I had been a mother of a son
Exactly two weeks. It will be through grace
- 15 O' the Curate, not through any claim I have;
Because the boy was born at, so baptized
Close to, the Villa, in the proper church:
A pretty church, I say no word against,
Yet stranger-like,—while this Lorenzo seems
- 20 My own particular place, I always say.
I used to wonder, when I stood scarce high
As the bed here, what the marble lion¹ meant,
With half his body rushing from the wall,
Eating the figure of a prostrate man—

The time is the fourth day after the murders, the same day Caponsacchi appeared before the court. Preview: I 1076–1104.

¹ There were lions in the portico of the church of San Lorenzo.

- 25 (To the right, it is, of entry by the door)
 An ominous sign to one baptized like me,
 Married, and to be buried there, I hope.
 And they should add, to have my life complete,
 He is a boy and Gaetan by name—
- 30 Gaetano, for a reason,¹—if the friar
 Don Celestine will ask this grace for me
 Of Curate Ottoboni: he it was
 Baptized me: he remembers my whole life
 As I do his grey hair.

- 35 All these few things
 I know are true,—will you remember them?
 Because time flies. The surgeon cared for me,
 To count my wounds,—twenty-two dagger-wounds,
 Five deadly, but I do not suffer much—
- 40 Or too much pain,—and am to die to-night.

- Oh how good God is that my babe was born,
 —Better than born, baptized and hid away
 Before this happened, safe from being hurt!
 That had been sin God could not well forgive:
- 45 He was too young to smile and save himself.
 When they took, two days after he was born,
 My babe away from me to be baptized
 And hidden awhile, for fear his foe should find,—
 The country-woman, used to nursing babes,
- 50 Said “Why take on so? where is the great loss?
 These next three weeks he will but sleep and feed,
 Only begin to smile at the month’s end;
 He would not know you, if you kept him here,

¹ See l. 103 and the next note.

- Sooner than that; so, spend three merry weeks
55 Snug in the Villa, getting strong and stout,
And then I bring him back to be your own,
And both of you may steal to—we know where!"
The month—there wants of it two weeks this day!
Still, I half fancied when I heard the knock
60 At the Villa in the dusk, it might prove she—
Come to say "Since he smiles before the time,
Why should I cheat you out of one good hour?
Back I have brought him; speak to him and judge!"
Now I shall never see him; what is worse,
65 When he grows up and gets to be my age,
He will seem hardly more than a great boy;
And if he asks "What was my mother like?"
People may answer "Like girls of seventeen"—
And how can he but think of this and that,
70 Lucias, Marias, Sofias, who titter or blush
When he regards them as such boys may do?
Therefore I wish someone will please to say
I looked already old though I was young;
Do I not ... say, if you are by to speak ...
75 Look nearer twenty? No more like, at least,
Girls who look arch or redder when boys laugh,
Than the poor Virgin that I used to know
At our street-corner in a lonely niche,—
The babe, that sat upon her knees, broke off,—
80 Thin white glazed clay, you pitied her the more:
She, not the gay ones, always got my rose.

How happy those are who know how to write!
Such could write what their son should read in time,
Had they a whole day to live out like me.

- 85 Also my name is not a common name,

- “Pompilia,” and may help to keep apart
 A little the thing I am from what girls are.
 But then how far away, how hard to find
 Will anything about me have become,
 90 Even if the boy bethink himself and ask!
 No father that he ever knew at all,
 Nor ever had—no, never had, I say!
 That is the truth,—nor any mother left,
 Out of the little two weeks that she lived,
 95 Fit for such memory as might assist:
 As good too as no family, no name,
 Not even poor old Pietro’s name, nor hers,
 Poor kind unwise Violante, since it seems
 They must not be my parents any more.
 100 That is why something put it in my head
 To call the boy “Gaetano”—no old name
 For sorrow’s sake; I looked up to the sky
 And took a new saint¹ to begin anew.
 One who has only been made saint—how long?
 105 Twenty-five years: so, carefuller, perhaps,
 To guard a namesake than those old saints grow,
 Tired out by this time,—see my own five saints!²

- On second thoughts, I hope he will regard
 The history of me as what someone dreamed,
 110 And get to disbelieve it at the last:
 Since to myself it dwindleth fast to that,
 Sheer dreaming and impossibility,—
 Just in four days too! All the seventeen years,
 Not once did a suspicion visit me

¹ St. Gaetano, canonized in 1671.

² those in ll. 6–7.

- 115 How very different a lot is mine
From any other woman's in the world.
The reason must be, 't was by step and step
It got to grow so terrible and strange.
These strange woes stole on tiptoe, as it were,
120 Into my neighbourhood and privacy,
Sat down where I sat, laid them where I lay;
And I was found familiarised with fear,
When friends broke in, held up a torch and cried
"Why, you Pompilia in the cavern thus,
125 How comes that arm of yours about a wolf?
And the soft length,—lies in and out your feet
And laps you round the knee,—a snake it is!"
And so on.

- Well, and they are right enough,
130 By the torch they hold up now: for first, observe,
I never had a father,—no, nor yet
A mother: my own boy can say at least
"I had a mother whom I kept two weeks!"
Not I, who little used to doubt ... *I doubt*
135 Good Pietro, kind Violante, gave me birth?
They loved me always as I love my babe
(—Nearly so, that is—quite so could not be—)
Did for me all I meant to do for him,
Till one surprising day, three years ago,
140 They both declared, at Rome, before some judge
In some Court where the people flocked to hear,
That really I had never been their child,
Was a mere castaway, the careless crime
Of an unknown man, the crime and care too much
145 Of a woman known too well,—little to these,
Therefore, of whom I was the flesh and blood:

What then to Pietro and Violante, both
 No more my relatives than you or you?
 Nothing to them! You know what they declared.

- 150 So with my husband,—just such a surprise,
 Such a mistake, in that relationship!
 Everyone says that husbands love their wives,
 Guard them and guide them, give them happiness;
 'T is duty, law, pleasure, religion: well,
 155 You see how much of this comes true in mine!
 People indeed would fain have somehow proved
 He was no husband: but he did not hear,
 Or would not wait, and so has killed us all.

Then there is ... only let me name one more!

- 160 There is the friend,—men will not ask about,
 But tell untruths of, and give nicknames to,
 And think my lover, most surprise of all!
 Do only hear, it is the priest they mean,
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi: a priest—love,
 165 And love me! Well, yet people think he did.
 I am married, he has taken priestly vows,
 They know that, and yet go on, say, the same,
 "Yes, how he loves you!" "That was love"—they say,
 When anything is answered that they ask:
 170 Or else "No wonder you love him"—they say.
 Then they shake heads, pity much, scarcely blame—
 As if we neither of us lacked excuse,
 And anyhow are punished to the full,
 And downright love atones for everything!
 175 Nay, I heard read out in the public Court
 Before the judge, in presence of my friends,
 Letters 't was said the priest had sent to me,
 And other letters sent him by myself,

We being lovers!

180

Listen what this is like!

When I was a mere child, my mother ... that's

Violante, you must let me call her so

Nor waste time, trying to unlearn the word ...

She brought a neighbour's child of my own age

185 To play with me of rainy afternoons;

And, since there hung a tapestry on the wall,

We two agreed to find each other out

Among the figures. "Tisbe, that is you,¹

With half-moon on your hair-knot, spear in hand,

190 Flying, but no wings, only the great scarf

Blown to a bluish rainbow at your back:

Call off your hound and leave the stag alone!"

"—And there you are, Pompilia, such green leaves²

Flourishing out of your five finger-ends,

195 And all the rest of you so brown and rough:

Why is it you are turned a sort of tree?"

You know the figures never were ourselves

Though we nicknamed them so. Thus, all my life,—

As well what was, as what, like this, was not,—

200 Looks old, fantastic and impossible:

I touch a fairy thing that fades and fades.

—Even to my babe! I thought, when he was born,

Something began for once that would not end,

Nor change into a laugh at me, but stay

205 For evermore, eternally quite mine.

Well, so he is,—but yet they bore him off,

The third day, lest my husband should lay traps

¹ the figure of Diana the huntress (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.151–252).

² 193–96 An allusion to the story of Daphne, who when chased by Apollo was turned into a bay (laurel) tree (*Metamorphoses* 1.452–567).

- And catch him, and by means of him catch me.
Since they have saved him so, it was well done:
- 210 Yet thence comes such confusion of what was
With what will be,—that late seems long ago,
And, what years should bring round, already come,
Till even he withdraws into a dream
As the rest do: I fancy him grown great,
- 215 Strong, stern, a tall young man who tutors me,
Frowns with the others “Poor imprudent child!
Why did you venture out of the safe street?
Why go so far from help to that lone house?
Why open at the whisper and the knock?”
- 220 Six days ago when it was New Year’s-day,
We bent above the fire and talked of him,
What he should do when he was grown and great.
Violante, Pietro, each had given the arm
I leant on, to walk by, from couch to chair
- 225 And fireside,—laughed, as I lay safe at last,
“Pompilia’s march from bed to board is made,
Pompilia back again and with a babe,
Shall one day lend his arm and help her walk!”
Then we all wished each other more New Years.
- 230 Pietro began to scheme—“Our cause is gained;
The law is stronger than a wicked man:
Let him henceforth go his way, leave us ours!
We will avoid the city, tempt no more
The greedy ones by feasting and parade,—
- 235 Live at the other villa,¹ we know where,
Still farther off, and we can watch the babe
Grow fast in the good air; and wood is cheap

¹ See note to II 206–07.

- And wine sincere¹ outside the city gate.
 I still have two or three old friends will grope
 240 Their way along the mere half-mile of road,
 With staff and lantern on a moonless night
 When one needs talk: they'll find me, never fear,
 And I'll find them a flask of the old sort yet!"
 Violante said "You chatter like a crow:
 245 Pompilia tires o' the tattle, and shall to bed:
 Do not too much the first day,—somewhat more
 To-morrow, and, the next, begin the cape
 And hood and coat! I have spun wool enough."
 Oh what a happy friendly eve was that!
- 250 And, next day, about noon, out Pietro went—
 He was so happy and would talk so much,
 Until Violante pushed and laughed him forth
 Sight-seeing in the cold,—"So much to see
 I' the churches! Swathe your throat three times!" she cried,
 255 "And, above all, beware the slippery ways,
 And bring us all the news by supper-time!"
 He came back late, laid by cloak, staff and hat,
 Powdered so thick with snow it made us laugh,
 Rolled a great log upon the ash o' the hearth,
 260 And bade Violante treat us to a flask,
 Because he had obeyed her faithfully,
 Gone sight-see through the seven, and found no church
 To his mind like San Giovanni²—"There's the fold,

¹ genuine, unadulterated.

² the church of St. John Lateran. At this time and later, not only in Italy but in other Roman Catholic countries, the Christmas period provoked keen rivalry among churches for the prestige of mounting the most splendid and elaborate nativity scenes.

- And all the sheep together, big as cats!
- 265 And such a shepherd, half the size of life,
Starts up and hears the angel"—when, at the door,
A tap: we started up: you know the rest.
- Pietro at least had done no harm, I know;
Nor even Violante, so much harm as makes
- 270 Such revenge lawful. Certainly she erred—
Did wrong, how shall I dare say otherwise?—
In telling that first falsehood, buying me
From my poor faulty mother at a price,
To pass off upon Pietro as his child.
- 275 If one should take my babe, give him a name,
Say he was not Gaetano and my own,
But that some other woman made his mouth
And hands and feet,—how very false were that!
No good could come of that; and all harm did.
- 280 Yet if a stranger were to represent
"Needs must you either give your babe to me
And let me call him mine for evermore,
Or let your husband get him"—ah, my God,
That were a trial I refuse to face!
- 285 Well, just so here: it proved wrong but seemed right
To poor Violante—for there lay, she said,
My poor real dying mother in her rags,
Who put me from her with the life and all,
Poverty, pain, shame and disease at once,
- 290 To die the easier by what price I fetched—
Also (I hope) because I should be spared
Sorrow and sin,—why may not that have helped?
My father,—he was no one, any one,—
The worse, the likelier,—call him—he who came,
- 295 Was wicked for his pleasure, went his way,

And left no trace to track by; there remained
Nothing but me, the unnecessary life,
To catch up or let fall,—and yet a thing
She could make happy, be made happy with,
300 This poor Violante,—who would frown thereat?

Well, God, you see! God plants us where we grow.
It is not that because a bud is born¹
At a wild briar's end, full i' the wild beast's way,
We ought to pluck and put it out of reach
305 On the oak-tree top,—say "There the bud belongs!"
She thought, moreover, real lies were lies told
For harm's sake; whereas this had good at heart,
Good for my mother, good for me, and good
For Pietro who was meant to love a babe,
310 And needed one to make his life of use,
Receive his house and land when he should die.
Wrong, wrong and always wrong! how plainly wrong!
For see, this fault kept pricking, as faults do,
All the same at her heart: this falsehood hatched,
315 She could not let it go nor keep it fast.
She told me so,—the first time I was found
Locked in her arms once more after the pain,
When the nuns let me leave them and go home,
And both of us cried all the cares away,—
320 This it was set her on to make amends,
This brought about the marriage—simply this!
Do let me speak for her you blame so much!
When Paul, my husband's brother, found me out,
Heard there was wealth for who should marry me,
325 So, came and made a speech to ask my hand

¹ Compare the image at III 77.

- For Guido,—she, instead of piercing straight
 Through the pretence to the ignoble truth,
 Fancied she saw God's very finger point,
 Designate just the time for planting me
- 330 (The wild-briar slip she plucked to love and wear)
 In soil where I could strike real root, and grow,
 And get to be the thing I called myself:
 For, wife and husband are one flesh,¹ God says,
 And I, whose parents seemed such and were none,
- 335 Should in a husband have a husband now,
 Find nothing, this time, but was what it seemed,
 —All truth and no confusion any more.
 I know she meant all good to me, all pain
 To herself,—since how could it be aught but pain
- 340 To give me up, so, from her very breast,
 The wilding flower-tree-branch that, all those years,
 She had got used to feel for and find fixed?
 She meant well: has it been so ill i' the main?
 That is but fair to ask: one cannot judge
- 345 Of what has been the ill or well of life,
 The day that one is dying,—sorrows change
 Into not altogether sorrow-like;
 I do see strangeness but scarce misery,
 Now it is over, and no danger more.
- 350 My child is safe; there seems not so much pain.
 It comes, most like, that I am just absolved,
 Purged of the past, the foul in me, washed fair,—²
 One cannot both have and not have, you know,—
 Being right now, I am happy and colour things.

¹ Genesis 2.24; Mark 10.8.

² Compare the use of the disinfection-blood purgation motif at II 1433–37, III 1563, V 1662–64, and below, ll. 1735–38.

355 Yes, everybody that leaves life sees all
Softened and bettered: so with other sights:
To me at least was never evening yet
But seemed far beautifuller than its day,
For past is past.

360 There was a fancy came,
When somewhere, in the journey with my friend,
We stepped into a hovel to get food;
And there began a yelp here, a bark there,—
Misunderstanding creatures that were wroth
365 And vexed themselves and us till we retired.
The hovel is life: no matter what dogs bit
Or cats scratched in the hovel I break from,
All outside is lone field, moon and such peace—
Flowing in, filling up as with a sea
370 Wheron comes Someone, walks fast on the white,
Jesus Christ's self, Don Celestine declares,
To meet me and calm all things back again.

Beside, up to my marriage, thirteen years
Were, each day, happy as the day was long:
375 This may have made the change too terrible.
I know that when Violante told me first
The cavalier—she meant to bring next morn,
Whom I must also let take, kiss my hand—
Would be at San Lorenzo the same eve
380 And marry me,—which over, we should go
Home both of us without him as before,
And, till she bade speak, I must hold my tongue,
Such being the correct way with girl-brides,
From whom one word would make a father blush,—
385 I know, I say, that when she told me this,

- Well, I no more saw sense in what she said
 Than a lamb does in people clipping wool;
 Only lay down and let myself be clipped.
 And when next day the cavalier who came—
 390 (Tisbe had told me that the slim young man¹
 With wings at head, and wings at feet, and sword
 Threatening a monster, in our tapestry,
 Would eat a girl else,—was a cavalier)
 When he proved Guido Franceschini,—old
 395 And nothing like so tall as I myself,
 Hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard,
 Much like a thing I saw on a boy's wrist,
 He called an owl and used for catching birds,—
 And when he took my hand and made a smile—
 400 Why, the uncomfortableness of it all²
 Seemed hardly more important in the case
 Than,—when one gives you, say, a coin to spend,—
 Its newness or its oldness; if the piece
 Weigh properly and buy you what you wish,
 405 No matter whether you get grime or glare!
 Men take the coin, return you grapes and figs.
 Here, marriage was the coin, a dirty piece
 Would purchase me the praise of those I loved:
 About what else should I concern myself?
- 410 So, hardly knowing what a husband meant,
 I supposed this or any man would serve,
 No whit the worse for being so uncouth:

¹ Perseus, rescuer of Andromeda (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.663–752).

² 400–09 Compare the previous versions of the marriage bargain at IV 508–38 and V 474–516.

- For I was ill once and a doctor came¹
With a great ugly hat, no plume thereto,
415 Black jerkin and black buckles and black sword,
And white sharp beard over the ruff in front,
And oh so lean, so sour-faced and austere!—
Who felt my pulse, made me put out my tongue,
Then oped a phial, dripped a drop or two
420 Of a black bitter something,—I was cured!
What mattered the fierce beard or the grim face?
It was the physic beautified the man,
Master Malpighi,²—never met his match
In Rome, they said,—so ugly all the same!
- 425 However, I was hurried through a storm,
Next dark eve of December's deadliest day—
How it rained!—through our street and the Lion's-
mouth³
And the bit of Corso,—cloaked round, covered close,
I was like something strange or contraband,—
430 Into blank San Lorenzo, up the aisle,
My mother keeping hold of me so tight,
I fancied we were come to see a corpse
Before the altar which she pulled me toward.
There we found waiting an unpleasant priest
435 Who proved the brother, not our parish friend,
But one with mischief-making mouth and eye,
Paul, whom I know since to my cost. And then
I heard the heavy church-door lock out help

¹ 413–24 Compare Guido's use of the doctor image at V 1704–07.

² Marcello Malpighi (1628–94), great biologist and physician to the Pope in 1691–94.

³ the Via della Bocca di Leone.

- Behind us: for the customary warmth,
- 440 Two tapers shivered on the altar. “Quick—
Lose no time!” cried the priest. And straightway down
From ... what’s behind the altar where he hid—
Hawk-nose and yellowness and bush and all,
Stepped Guido, caught my hand, and there was I
- 445 O’ the chancel, and the priest had opened book,
Read here and there, made me say that and this,
And after, told me I was now a wife,
Honoured indeed, since Christ thus weds the Church,¹
And therefore turned he water into wine,²
- 450 To show I should obey my spouse like Christ.
Then the two slipped aside and talked apart,
And I, silent and scared, got down again
And joined my mother who was weeping now.
Nobody seemed to mind us any more,
- 455 And both of us on tiptoe found our way
To the door which was unlocked by this, and wide.
When we were in the street, the rain had stopped,
All things looked better. At our own house-door,
Violante whispered “No one syllable
- 460 To Pietro! Girl-brides never breathe a word!”
“—Well treated to a wetting, draggle-tails!”
Laughed Pietro as he opened—“Very near
You made me brave the gutter’s roaring sea
To carry off from roost old dove and young,
- 465 Trussed up in church, the cote, by me, the kite!
What do these priests mean, praying folk to death
On stormy afternoons, with Christmas close
To wash our sins off nor require the rain?”

¹ 448, 450 See note to V 726.

² the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2.1–10).

- Violante gave my hand a timely squeeze,
 470 Madonna saved me from immodest speech,
 I kissed him and was quiet, being a bride.¹

When I saw nothing more, the next three weeks,
 Of Guido—"Nor the Church sees Christ" thought I:
 "Nothing is changed however, wine is wine
 475 And water only water in our house.
 Nor did I see that ugly doctor since
 That cure of the illness: just as I was cured,
 I am married,—neither scarecrow will return."

Three weeks, I chuckled—"How would Giulia stare,
 480 And Tecla smile and Tisbe laugh outright,
 Were it not impudent² for brides to talk!"—
 Until one morning, as I sat and sang
 At the broidery-frame alone i' the chamber,—loud
 Voices, two, three together, sabbings too,
 485 And my name, "Guido," "Paolo," flung like stones
 From each to the other! In I ran to see.
 There stood the very Guido and the priest
 With sly face,—formal but nowise afraid,—
 While Pietro seemed all red and angry, scarce
 490 Able to stutter out his wrath in words;
 And this it was that made my mother sob,
 As he reproached her—"You have murdered us,
 Me and yourself and this our child beside!"
 Then Guido interposed "Murdered or not,
 495 Be it enough your child is now my wife!"

¹ Browning's readers would likely have been reminded of the opening line of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness."

² immodest.

- I claim and come to take her." Paul put in,
 "Consider—kinsman, dare I term you so?—
 What is the good of your sagacity
 Except to counsel in a strait like this?
 500 I guarantee the parties man and wife
 Whether you like or loathe it, bless or ban.
 May spilt milk be put back within the bowl—
 The done thing, undone? You, it is, we look
 For counsel to, you fitliest will advise!
 505 Since milk, though spilt and spoilt, does marble good,
 Better we down on knees and scrub the floor,
 Than sigh 'the waste would make a syllabub!'¹
 Help us so turn disaster to account,
 So predispose the groom, he needs shall grace
 510 The bride with favour from the very first,
 Not begin marriage an embittered man!"
 He smiled,—the game so wholly in his hands!
 While fast and faster sobbed Violante—"Ay,
 All or us murdered, past averting now!
 515 O my sin, O my secret!" and such like.

- Then I began to half surmise the truth;
 Something had happened, low, mean, underhand,
 False, and my mother was to blame, and I
 To pity, whom all spoke of, none addressed:
 520 I was the chattel that had caused a crime.
 I stood mute,—those who tangled must untie
 The embroilment. Pietro cried "Withdraw, my child!
 She is not helpful to the sacrifice
 At this stage,—do you want the victim by
 525 While you discuss the value of her blood?

¹ milk or cream combined with wine or liquor and whipped into a froth.

For her sake, I consent to hear you talk:
Go, child, and pray God help the innocent!"

- I did go and was praying God, when came
Violante, with eyes swollen and red enough,
530 But movement on her mouth for make-believe
Matters were somehow getting right again.
She bade me sit down by her side and hear.
"You are too young and cannot understand,
Nor did your father understand at first.
- 535 I wished to benefit all three of us,
And when he failed to take my meaning,—why,
I tried to have my way at unaware—
Obtained him the advantage he refused.
As if I put before him wholesome food
- 540 Instead of broken victual,—he finds change
I' the viands, never cares to reason why,
But falls to blaming me, would fling the plate
From window, scandalize the neighbourhood,
Even while he smacks his lips,—men's way, my child!
- 545 But either you have prayed him unperverse
Or I have talked him back into his wits:
And Paolo was a help in time of need,—¹
Guido, not much—my child, the way of men!
A priest is more a woman than a man,
- 550 And Paul did wonders to persuade. In short,
Yes, he was wrong, your father sees and says;
My scheme was worth attempting: and bears fruit,
Gives you a husband and a noble name,
A palace and no end of pleasant things.
- 555 What do you care about a handsome youth?

¹ Psalms 46.1.

They are so volatile, and tease their wives!
 This is the kind of man to keep the house.
 We lose no daughter,—gain a son, that's all:
 For 't is arranged we never separate,

- 560 Nor miss, in our grey time of life, the tints
 Of you that colour eve to match with morn.
 In good or ill, we share and share alike,
 And cast our lots into a common lap,
 And all three die together as we lived!

- 565 Only, at Arezzo,—that's a Tuscan town,
 Not so large as this noisy Rome, no doubt,
 But older far and finer much, say folk,—
 In a great palace where you will be queen,
 Know the Archbishop and the Governor,
 570 And we see homage done you ere we die.
 Therefore, be good and pardon!”—“Pardon what?
 You know things, I am very ignorant:
 All is right if you only will not cry!”

- And so an end! Because a blank begins
 575 From when, at the word, she kissed me hard and hot,
 And took me back to where my father leaned
 Opposite Guido—who stood eyeing him,
 As eyes the butcher the cast panting ox
 That feels his fate is come, nor struggles more,—
 580 While Paul looked archly on, pricked brow at whiles
 With the pen-point as to punish triumph there,—
 And said “Count Guido, take your lawful wife
 Until death part you!”

- All since is one blank,
 585 Over and ended; a terrific dream.
 It is the good of dreams—so soon they go!

- Wake in a horror of heart-beats, you may—
Cry “The dread thing will never from my thoughts!”
Still, a few daylight doses of plain life,
590 Cock-crow and sparrow-chirp, or bleat and bell
Of goats that trot by, tinkling, to be milked;
And when you rub your eyes awake and wide,
Where is the harm o’ the horror? Gone! So here.
I know I wake,—but from what? Blank, I say!
595 This is the note of evil: for good lasts.
Even when Don Celestine bade “Search and find!
For your soul’s sake, remember what is past,
The better to forgive it,”—all in vain!
What was fast getting indistinct before,
600 Vanished outright. By special grace perhaps,
Between that first calm and this last, four years
Vanish,—one quarter of my life, you know.
I am held up, amid the nothingness,
By one or two truths only—thence I hang,
605 And there I live,—the rest is death or dream,
All but those points of my support. I think
Of what I saw at Rome once in the Square
O’ the Spaniards, opposite the Spanish House:¹
There was a foreigner had trained a goat,
610 A shuddering white woman of a beast,
To climb up, stand straight on a pile of sticks
Put close, which gave the creature room enough:
When she was settled there he, one by one,
Took away all the sticks, left just the four
615 Whereon the little hoofs did really rest,

¹ the palazzo housing the Spanish embassy, which faced the Piazza di Spagna and the “Spanish steps,” still a familiar landmark in today’s Rome.

- There she kept firm, all underneath was air.
So, what I hold by, are my prayer to God,
My hope, that came in answer to the prayer,
Some hand would interpose and save me—hand
620 Which proved to be my friend's hand: and,—blest
bliss,—
- That fancy which began so faint at first,
That thrill of dawn's suffusion through my dark,
Which I perceive was promise of my child,
The light his unborn face sent long before,—
- 625 God's way of breaking the good news to flesh.
That is all left now of those four bad years.
Don Celestine urged "But remember more!
Other men's faults may help me find your own.
I need the cruelty exposed, explained,
630 Or how can I advise you to forgive?"
He thought I could not properly forgive
Unless I ceased forgetting,—which is true:
For, bringing back reluctantly to mind
My husband's treatment of me,—by a light
635 That's later than my life-time, I review
And comprehend much and imagine more,
And have but little to forgive at last.
For now,—be fair and say,—is it not true
He was ill-used and cheated of his hope
640 To get enriched by marriage? Marriage gave
Me and no money, broke the compact so:
He had a right to ask me on those terms,
As Pietro and Violante to declare
They would not give me: so the bargain stood:
645 They broke it, and he felt himself aggrieved,
Became unkind with me to punish them.
They said 't was he began deception first,

- Nor, in one point whereto he pledged himself,
 Kept promise: what of that, suppose it were?
 650 Echoes die off, scarcely reverberate
 For ever,—why should ill keep echoing ill
 And never let our ears have done with noise?
 Then my poor parents took the violent way
 To thwart him,—he must needs retaliate,—wrong,
 655 Wrong, and all wrong,—better say, all blind!
 As I myself was, that is sure, who else
 Had understood the mystery: for his wife
 Was bound in some sort to help somehow there.
 It seems as if I might have interposed,
 660 Blunted the edge of their resentment so,
 Since he vexed me because they first vexed him;
 “I will entreat them to desist, submit,
 Give him the money and be poor in peace,—
 Certainly not go tell the world: perhaps
 665 He will grow quiet with his gains.”

Yes, say

- Something to this effect and you do well!
 But then you have to see first: I was blind.
 That is the fruit of all such wormy ways,
 670 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
 675 That miss a man’s mind, anger him just¹ twice
 By trial at repairing the first fault.
 Thus, when he blamed me, “You are a coquette,

¹ Idiomatically, the word should precede “anger.”

- A lure-owl posturing to attract birds,
You look love-lures at theatre and church,
680 In walk, at window!"—that, I knew, was false:
But why he charged me falsely, whither sought
To drive me by such charge,—how could I know?
So, unaware, I only made things worse.
I tried to soothe him by abjuring walk,
685 Window, church, theatre, for good and all,
As if he had been in earnest: that, you know,
Was nothing like the object of his charge.
Yes, when I got my maid to supplicate
The priest, whose name she read when she would read
690 Those feigned false letters I was forced to hear
Though I could read no word of,—he should cease
Writing,—nay, if he minded prayer of mine,
Cease from so much as even pass the street
Whereon our house looked,—in my ignorance
695 I was just thwarting Guido's true intent;
Which was, to bring about a wicked change
Of sport to earnest, tempt a thoughtless man
To write indeed, and pass the house, and more,
Till both of us were taken in a crime.
700 He ought not to have wished me thus act lies,
Simulate folly: but,—wrong or right, the wish,—
I failed to apprehend its drift. How plain
It follows,—if I fell into such fault,
He also may have overreached the mark,
705 Made mistake, by perversity of brain,
I' the whole sad strange plot, the grotesque intrigue
To make me and my friend unself ourselves,
Be other man and woman than we were!
Think it out, you who have the time! for me,—
710 I cannot say less; more I will not say.

Leave it to God to cover and undo!

Only, my dulness should not prove too much!

—Not prove that in a certain other point

Wherein my husband blamed me,—and you blame,

715 If I interpret smiles and shakes of head,—

I was dull too. Oh, if I dared but speak!

Must I speak? I am blamed that I forwent

A way to make my husband's favour come.

That is true: I was firm, withheld, refused ...

720 —Women as you are, how can I find the words?

I felt there was just one thing Guido claimed

I had no right to give nor he to take;

We being in estrangement, soul from soul:

Till, when I sought help, the Archbishop smiled,

725 Inquiring into privacies of life,

—Said I was blameable—(he stands for God)

Nowise entitled to exemption there.

Then I obeyed,—as surely had obeyed

Were the injunction “Since your husband bids,

730 Swallow the burning coal he proffers you!”

But I did wrong, and he gave wrong advice

Though he were thrice Archbishop,—that, I know!—

Now I have got to die and see things clear.

Remember I was barely twelve years old—

735 A child at marriage: I was let alone

For weeks, I told you, lived my child-life still

Even at Arezzo, when I woke and found

First ... but I need not think of that again—

Over and ended! Try and take the sense

740 Of what I signify, if it must be so.

After the first, my husband, for hate's sake,

Said one eve, when the simpler cruelty

- Seemed somewhat dull at edge and fit to bear,
 "We have been man and wife six months almost:
 745 How long is this your comedy to last?
 Go this night to my chamber, not your own!"
 At which word, I did rush—most true the charge—
 And gain the Archbishop's house—he stands for God—
 And fall upon my knees and clasp his feet,
 750 Praying him hinder what my estranged soul
 Refused to bear, though patient of the rest:
 "Place me within a convent," I implored—
 "Let me henceforward lead the virgin life
 You praise in Her you bid me imitate!"
 755 What did he answer? "Folly of ignorance!
 Know, daughter, circumstances make or mar
 Virginity,—'t is virtue or 't is vice.
 That which was glory in the Mother of God
 Had been, for instance, damnable in Eve
 760 Created to be mother of mankind.
 Had Eve, in answer to her Maker's speech
 'Be fruitful, multiply, replenish earth'¹
 Pouted 'But I choose rather to remain
 Single'—why, she had spared herself forthwith
 765 Further probation by the apple and snake,
 Been pushed straight out of Paradise! For see—
 If motherhood be qualified² impure,
 I catch you making God command Eve sin!
 —A blasphemy so like these Molinists',
 770 I must suspect you dip into their books."
 Then he pursued "T was in your covenant!"

[————]

¹ Genesis 1.28.

² regarded as.

- No! There my husband never used deceit.
 He never did by speech nor act imply
 "Because of our souls' yearning that we meet
 775 And mix in soul through flesh, which yours and mine
 Wear and impress, and make their visible selves,
 —All which means, for the love of you and me,
 Let us become one flesh, being one soul!"
 He only stipulated for the wealth;
 780 Honest so far. But when he spoke as plain—
 Dreadfully honest also—"Since our souls
 Stand each from each, a whole world's width between,
 Give me the fleshly vesture I can reach
 And rend and leave just fit for hell to burn!"—
 785 Why, in God's name, for Guido's soul's own sake
 Imperilled by polluting mine,—I say,
 I did resist; would I had overcome!

- My heart died out at the Archbishop's smile;
 —It seemed so stale and worn a way o' the world,
 790 As though 't were nature frowning—"Here is Spring,
 The sun shines as he shone at Adam's fall,
 The earth requires that warmth reach everywhere:
 What, must your patch of snow be saved forsooth
 Because you rather fancy snow than flowers?"
 795 Something in this style he began with me.
 Last he said, savagely for a good man,
 "This explains why you call your husband harsh,
 Harsh to you, harsh to whom you love. God's Bread!¹
 The poor Count has to manage a mere child
 800 Whose parents leave untaught the simplest things

¹ an oath invoking the Eucharist; unseemly in the mouth of an archbishop, but not so much so as "body o' Bacchus" in VI 386.

Their duty was and privilege to teach,—
 Goodwives' instruction, gossips' lore: they laugh
 And leave the Count the task,—or leave it to me!"
 Then I resolved to tell a frightful thing.

- 805 "I am not ignorant,—know what I say,
 Declaring this is sought for hate, not love.
 Sir, you may hear things like almighty God.
 I tell you that my housemate, yes—the priest
 My husband's brother, Canon Girolamo—
 810 Has taught me what depraved and misnamed love
 Means, and what outward signs denote the sin,
 For he solicits me and says he loves,
 The idle young priest with nought else to do.
 My husband sees this, knows this, and lets be.
 815 Is it your counsel I bear this beside?"
 "—More scandal, and against a priest this time!
 What, 't is the Canon now?"—less snappishly—
 Rise up, my child, for such a child you are,
 The rod were too advanced a punishment!
 820 Let's try the honeyed cake. A parable!
 'Without a parable spake He not to them.'¹
 There was a ripe round long black toothsome fruit,
 Even a flower-fig, the prime boast of May:
 And, to the tree, said ... either the spirit o' the fig,
 825 Or, if we bring in men, the gardener,
 Archbishop of the orchard—had I time
 To try o' the two which fits in best: indeed
 It might be the Creator's self, but then
 The tree should bear an apple, I suppose,—
 830 Well, anyhow, one with authority said
 'Ripe fig, burst skin, regale the fig-pecker—

¹ Matthew 13.34.

The bird whereof thou art a perquisite!¹

'Nay,' with a flounce, replied the restif² fig,

'I much prefer to keep my pulp myself:

835 He may go breakfastless and dinnerless,

Supperless of one crimson seed, for me!'

So, back she flopped into her bunch of leaves.

He flew off, left her,—did the natural lord,—

And lo, three hundred thousand bees and wasps

840 Found her out, feasted on her to the shuck:

Such gain the fig's that gave its bird no bite!

The moral,—fools elude their proper lot,

Tempt other fools, get ruined all alike.

Therefore go home, embrace your husband quick!

845 Which if his Canon brother chance to see,

He will the sooner back to book again."

So, home I did go; so, the worst befell:

So, I had proof the Archbishop was just man,

And hardly that, and certainly no more.

850 For, miserable consequence to me,

My husband's hatred waxed nor waned at all,

His brother's boldness grew effrontery soon,

And my last stay and comfort in myself

Was forced from me: henceforth I looked to God

855 Only, nor cared my desecrated soul

Should have fair walls, gay windows for the world.

God's glimmer, that came through the ruin-top,

Was witness why all lights were quenched inside:

Henceforth I asked God counsel, not mankind.

[———]

¹ thing to which one has a sole right, exclusive possession.

² perverse.

- 860 So, when I made the effort, freed myself,
They said—"No care to save appearance here!
How cynic,—when, how wanton, were enough!"
—Adding, it all came of my mother's life—
My own real mother, whom I never knew,
865 Who did wrong (if she needs must have done wrong)
Through being all her life, not my four years,
At mercy of the hateful: every beast
O' the field was wont to break that fountain-fence,
Trample the silver into mud so murk
870 Heaven could not find itself reflected there.
Now they cry "Out on her, who, plashy pool,
Bequeathed turbidity and bitterness
To the daughter-stream where Guido dipt and drank!"

- Well, since she had to bear this brand—let me!
875 The rather do I understand her now,
From my experience of what hate calls love,—
Much love might be in what their love called hate.
If she sold ... what they call, sold ... me her child—
I shall believe she hoped in her poor heart
880 That I at least might try be good and pure,
Begin to live untempted, not go doomed
And done with ere once found in fault, as she.
Oh and, my mother, it all came to this?
Why should I trust those that speak ill of you,
885 When I mistrust who speaks even well of them?
Why, since all bound to do me good, did harm,
May not you, seeming as you harmed me most,
Have meant to do most good—and feed your child
From bramble-bush, whom not one orchard-tree
890 But drew bough back from, nor let one fruit fall?
This it was for you sacrificed your babe?

Gained just this, giving your heart's hope away
As I might give mine, loving it as you,
If ... but that never could be asked of me!

- 895 There, enough! I have my support again,
Again the knowledge that my babe was, is,
Will be mine only. Him, by death, I give
Outright to God, without a further care,—
But not to any parent in the world,—
- 900 So to be safe: why is it we repine?
What guardianship were safer could we choose?
All human plans and projects come to nought:
My life, and what I know of other lives,
Prove that: no plan nor project! God shall care!
- 905 And now you are not tired? How patient then
All of you,—Oh yes, patient this long while
Listening, and understanding, I am sure!
Four days ago, when I was sound and well
And like to live, no one would understand.
- 910 People were kind, but smiled “And what of him,
Your friend, whose tonsure the rich dark-brown hides?
There, there!—your lover, do we dream he was?
A priest too—never were such naughtiness!
Still, he thinks many a long think, never fear,
- 915 After the shy pale lady,—lay so light
For a moment in his arms, the lucky one!”
And so on: wherefore should I blame you much?
So we are made, such difference in minds,
Such difference too in eyes that see the minds!
- 920 That man, you misinterpret and misprise—
The glory of his nature, I had thought,
Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth

Through every atom of his act with me:

Yet where I point you, through the crystal shrine,

925 Purity in quintessence, one dew-drop,

You all descry a spider in the midst.

One says "The head of it is plain to see,"

And one, "They are the feet by which I judge,"

All say, "Those films were spun by nothing else."

930 Then, I must lay my babe away with God,

Nor think of him again, for gratitude.

Yes, my last breath shall wholly spend itself

In one attempt more to disperse the stain,

The mist from other breath fond mouths have made,

935 About a lustrous and pellucid soul:

So that, when I am gone but sorrow stays,

And people need assurance in their doubt

If God yet have a servant, man a friend,

The weak a saviour and the vile a foe,—

940 Let him be present, by the name invoked,

Giuseppe-Maria Caponsacchi!

There,

Strength comes already with the utterance!

I will remember once more for his sake

945 The sorrow: for he lives and is belied.

Could he be here, how he would speak for me!

I had been miserable three drear years

In that dread palace and lay passive now,

When I first learned there could be such a man.

950 Thus it fell: I was at a public play,

In the last days of Carnival last March,

Brought there I knew not why, but now know well.

My husband put me where I sat, in front;

Then crouched down, breathed cold through me from behind,

955 Stationed i' the shadow,—none in front could see,—

I, it was, faced the stranger-throng beneath,

The crowd with upturned faces, eyes one stare,

Voices one buzz. I looked but to the stage,

Whereon two lovers sang and interchanged

960 "True life is only love, love only bliss:

I love thee—thee I love!" then they embraced.

I looked thence to the ceiling and the walls,—

Over the crowd, those voices and those eyes,—

My thoughts went through the roof and out, to Rome

965 On wings of music, waft of measured words,—

Set me down there, a happy child again,

Sure that to-morrow would be festa-day,

Hearing my parents praise past festas more,

And seeing they were old if I was young,

970 Yet wondering why they still would end discourse

With "We must soon go, you abide your time,

And,—might we haply see the proper friend

Throw his arm over you and make you safe!"

Sudden I saw him; into my lap there fell

975 A foolish twist of comfits, broke my dream

And brought me from the air and laid me low,

As ruined as the soaring bee that's reached

(So Pietro told me at the Villa once)

By the dust-handful. There the comfits lay:

980 I looked to see who flung them, and I faced

This Caponsacchi, looking up in turn.

Ere I could reason out why, I felt sure,

Whoever flung them, his was not the hand,—

Up rose the round face and good-natured grin

- 985 Of one who, in effect, had played the prank,
 From covert close beside the earnest face,—
 Fat waggish Conti, friend of all the world.
 He was my husband's cousin, privileged
 To throw the thing: the other, silent, grave,
 990 Solemn almost, saw me, as I saw him.

There is a psalm Don Celestine recites,
 "Had I a dove's wings, how I fain would flee!"¹
 The psalm runs not "I hope, I pray for wings,"—
 Not "If wings fall from heaven, I fix them fast,"—
 995 Simply "How good it were to fly and rest,
 Have hope now, and one day expect content!
 How well to do what I shall never do!"
 So I said "Had there been a man like that,
 To lift me with his strength out of all strife
 1000 Into the calm, how I could fly and rest!
 I have a keeper in the garden here
 Whose sole employment is to strike me low
 If ever I, for solace, seek the sun.
 Life means with me successful feigning death,
 1005 Lying stone-like, eluding notice so,
 Forgoing here the turf and there the sky.
 Suppose that man had been instead of this!"

Presently Conti laughed into my ear,
 —Had tripped up to the raised place where I sat—
 1010 "Cousin, I flung them brutishly and hard!
 Because you must be hurt, to look austere
 As Caponsacchi yonder, my tall friend
 A-gazing now. Ah, Guido, you so close?

¹ Psalms 55.6.

Keep on your knees, do! Beg her to forgive!

1015 My cornet¹ battered like a cannon-ball.

Good-bye, I'm gone!"—nor waited the reply.

That night at supper, out my husband broke,

"Why was that throwing, that buffoonery?

Do you think I am your dupe? What man would dare

1020 Throw comfits in a stranger lady's lap?

'T was knowledge of you bred such insolence

In Caponsacchi; he dared shoot the bolt,

Using that Conti for his stalking-horse.

How could you see him this once and no more,

1025 When he is always haunting hereabout

At the street-corner or the palace-side,

Publishing my shame and your impudence?

You are a wanton,—I a dupe, you think?

O Christ, what hinders that I kill her quick?"

1030 Whereat he drew his sword and feigned a thrust.

All this, now,—being not so strange to me,

Used to such misconception day by day

And broken-in to bear,—I bore, this time,

More quietly than woman should perhaps;

1035 Repeated the mere truth and held my tongue.

Then he said, "Since you play the ignorant,

I shall instruct you. This amour,—commenced

Or finished or midway in act, all's one,—

'T is the town-talk; so my revenge shall be.

1040 Does he presume because he is a priest?

I warn him that the sword I wear shall pink

¹ twist of paper.

His lily-scented cassock through and through,
Next time I catch him underneath your eaves!"

But he had threatened with the sword so oft
1045 And, after all, not kept his promise. All
I said was "Let God save the innocent!
Moreover, death is far from a bad fate.
I shall go pray for you and me, not him;
And then I look to sleep, come death or, worse,
1050 Life." So, I slept.

There may have elapsed a week,
When Margherita,—called my waiting-maid,
Whom it is said my husband found too fair—
Who stood and heard the charge and the reply,
1055 Who never once would let the matter rest
From that night forward, but rang changes still
On this the thrust¹ and that the shame, and how
Good cause for jealousy cures jealous fools,
And what a paragon was this same priest
1060 She talked about until I stopped my ears,—
She said, "A week is gone; you comb your hair,
Then go mope in a corner, cheek on palm,
Till night comes round again,—so, waste a week
As if your husband menaced you in sport.
1065 Have not I some acquaintance with his tricks?
Oh no, he did not stab the serving-man
Who made and sang the rhymes about me once!
For why? They sent him to the wars next day.
Nor poisoned he the foreigner, my friend,
1070 Who wagered on the whiteness of my breast,—

¹ hardship, "tight spot."

- The swarth skins of our city in dispute:
 For, though he paid me proper compliment,
 The Count well knew he was besotted with
 Somebody else, a skin as black as ink,
 1075 (As all the town knew save my foreigner)
 He found and wedded presently,—‘Why need
 Better revenge?’—the Count asked. But what’s here?
 A priest that does not fight, and cannot wed,
 Yet must be dealt with! If the Count took fire
 1080 For the poor pastime of a minute,—me—
 What were the conflagration for yourself,
 Countess and lady-wife and all the rest?
 The priest will perish; you will grieve too late:
 So shall the city-ladies¹ handsomest
 1085 Frankest and liberalest gentleman
 Die for you, to appease a scurvy dog
 Hanging’s too good for. Is there no escape?
 Were it not simple Christian charity
 To warn the priest be on his guard,—save him
 1090 Assured death, save yourself from causing it?
 I meet him in the street. Give me a glove,
 A ring to show for token! Mum’s the word!”

I answered “If you were, as styled, my maid,
 I would command you: as you are, you say,
 1095 My husband’s intimate,—assist his wife
 Who can do nothing but entreat ‘Be still!’
 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,

¹ fashionable women.

- 1100 Seeing such evil with no human cure.
Reflect that God, who makes the storm desist,
Can make an angry violent heart subside.
Why should we venture teach Him governance?
Never address me on this subject more!"
- 1105 Next night she said "But I went, all the same,
—Ay, saw your Caponsacchi in his house,
And come back stuffed with news I must outpour.
I told him 'Sir, my mistress is a stone:
Why should you harm her for no good you get?
- 1110 For you do harm her—prowl about our place
With the Count never distant half the street,
Lurking at every corner, would you look!
'T is certain she has witched you with a spell.
Are there not other beauties at your beck?
- 1115 We all know, Donna This and Monna That
Die for a glance of yours, yet here you gaze!
Go make them grateful, leave the stone its cold!"
And he—oh, he turned first white and then red,
And then—'To her behest I bow myself,
- 1120 Whom I love with my body and my soul:
Only a word i' the bowing! See, I write
One little word, no harm to see or hear!
Then, fear no further! This is what he wrote.
I know you cannot read,—therefore, let me!
- 1125 'My idol!" ...

But I took it from her hand
And tore it into shreds. "Why, join the rest
Who harm me? Have I ever done you wrong?
People have told me 't is you wrong myself:
1130 Let it suffice I either feel no wrong

Or else forgive it,—yet you turn my foe!
The others hunt me and you throw a noose!"

She muttered "Have your wilful way!" I slept.

Whereupon ... no, I leave my husband out!
1135 It is not to do him more hurt, I speak.
Let it suffice, when misery was most,
One day, I swooned and got a respite so.
She stooped as I was slowly coming to,
This Margherita, ever on my trace,
1140 And whispered—"Caponsacchi!"

If I drowned,
But woke afloat i' the wave with upturned eyes,
And found their first sight was a star! I turned—
For the first time, I let her have her will,
1145 Heard passively,—"The imposthume¹ at such head,²
One touch, one lancet-puncture would relieve,—
And still no glance the good physician's way
Who rids you of the torment in a trice!
Still he writes letters you refuse to hear.
1150 He may prevent³ your husband, kill himself,
So desperate and all fordone is he!
Just hear the pretty verse he made to-day!
A sonnet from Mirtillo.⁴ 'Peerless fair ...'
All poetry is difficult to read,
1155 —The sense of it is, anyhow, he seeks

¹ swelling, abscess.

² Compare Guido's account of his threat, V 1705–06.

³ anticipate.

⁴ See note to VI 559.

Leave to contrive you an escape from hell,
 And for that purpose asks an interview.
 I can write, I can grant it in your name,
 Or, what is better, lead you to his house.

- 1160 Your husband dashes you against the stones;
 This man would place each fragment in a shrine:
 You hate him, love your husband!"

I returned

- "It is not true I love my husband,—no,
 1165 Nor hate this man. I listen while you speak,
 —Assured that what you say is false, the same:
 Much as when once, to me a little child,
 A rough gaunt man in rags, with eyes on fire,
 A crowd of boys and idlers at his heels,
 1170 Rushed as I crossed the Square, and held my head
 In his two hands, 'Here's she will let me speak!
 You little girl, whose eyes do good to mine,
 I am the Pope, am Sextus, now the Sixth;¹
 And that Twelfth Innocent, proclaimed to-day,²
 1175 Is Lucifer disguised in human flesh!
 The angels, met in conclave, crowned me!'—thus
 He gibbered and I listened; but I knew
 All was delusion, ere folk interposed
 'Unfasten him, the maniac!' Thus I know
 1180 All your report of Caponsacchi false,
 Folly or dreaming; I have seen so much
 By that adventure at the spectacle,
 The face I fronted that one first, last time:
 He would belie it by such words and thoughts.

¹ There was no Pope Sixtus the Sixth; the last Sixtus was the Fifth.

² July 12, 1691.

1185 Therefore while you profess to show him me,
I ever see his own face. Get you gone!"

"—That will I, nor once open mouth again,—
No, by Saint Joseph and the Holy Ghost!
On your head be the damage, so adieu!"

1190 And so more days, more deeds I must forget,
Till ... what a strange thing now is to declare!
Since I say anything, say all if true!

And how my life seems lengthened as to serve!
It may be idle or inopportune,

1195 But, true?—why, what was all I said but truth,
Even when I found that such as are untrue
Could only take the truth in through a lie?
Now—I am speaking truth to the Truth's self:
God will lend credit to my words this time.

1200 It had got half through April. I arose
One vivid daybreak,—who had gone to bed
In the old way my wont those last three years,
Careless until, the cup drained, I should die.
The last sound in my ear, the over-night,

1205 Had been a something let drop on the sly
In prattle by Margherita, "Soon enough
Gaieties end, now Easter's past: a week,
And the Archbishop gets him back to Rome,—
Everyone leaves the town for Rome, this Spring,—

1210 Even Caponsacchi, out of heart and hope,
Resigns himself and follows with the flock."
I heard this drop and drop like rain outside
Fast-falling through the darkness while she spoke:
So had I heard with like indifference,

- 1215 "And Michael's pair of wings will arrive first¹
At Rome, to introduce the company,
And bear him from our picture where he fights
Satan,—expect to have that dragon loose
And never a defender!"—my sole thought
- 1220 Being still, as night came, "Done, another day!
How good to sleep and so get nearer death!"—
When, what, first thing at daybreak, pierced the sleep
With a summons to me? Up I sprang alive,
Light in me, light without me, everywhere
- 1225 Change! A broad yellow sunbeam was let fall
From heaven to earth,—a sudden drawbridge lay,
Along which marched a myriad merry motes,
Mocking the flies that crossed them and recrossed
In rival dance, companions new-born too.
- 1230 On the house-eaves, a dripping shag of weed
Shook diamonds on each dull grey lattice-square,
As first one, then another bird leapt by,
And light was off, and lo was back again,
Always with one voice,—where are two such joys?—
- 1235 The blessed building-sparrow! I stepped forth,
Stood on the terrace,—o'er the roofs, such sky!
My heart sang, "I too am to go away,
I too have something I must care about,
Carry away with me to Rome, to Rome!
- 1240 The bird brings hither sticks and hairs and wool,
And nowhere else i' the world; what fly breaks rank,
Falls out of the procession that befits,
From window here to window there, with all
The world to choose,—so well he knows his course?

¹ a reference to Spinello Aretino's picture in the church of St. Francesco, Arezzo, of St. Michael fighting the dragon.

- 1245 I have my purpose and my motive too,
My march to Rome, like any bird or fly!
Had I been dead! How right to be alive!
Last night I almost prayed for leave to die,
Wished Guido all his pleasure with the sword
- 1250 Or the poison,—poison, sword, was but a trick,
Harmless, may God forgive him the poor jest!
My life is charmed, will last till I reach Rome!
Yesterday, but for the sin,—ah, nameless be
The deed I could have dared against myself!
- 1255 Now—see if I will touch an unripe fruit
And risk the health I want to have and use!
Not to live, now, would be the wickedness,—
For life means to make haste and go to Rome
And leave Arezzo, leave all woes at once!"
- 1260 Now, understand here, by no means mistake!
Long ago had I tried to leave that house
When it seemed such procedure would stop sin;
And still failed more the more I tried—at first
The Archbishop, as I told you,—next, our lord
- 1265 The Governor,—indeed I found my way,
I went to the great palace where he rules,
Though I knew well 't was he who,—when I gave
A jewel or two, themselves had given me,
Back to my parents,—since they wanted bread,
- 1270 They who had never let me want a nosegay,—he
Spoke of the jail for felons, if they kept
What was first theirs, then mine, so doubly theirs,
Though all the while my husband's most of all!
I knew well who had spoke the word wrought this:
- 1275 Yet, being in extremity, I fled
To the Governor, as I say,—scarce opened lip

- When—the cold cruel snicker close behind—
Guido was on my trace, already there,
Exchanging nod and wink for shrug and smile,
1280 And I—pushed back to him and, for my pains
Paid with ... but why remember what is past?
I sought out a poor friar the people call
The Roman, and confessed my sin which came
Of their sin,—that fact could not be repressed,—
1285 The frightfulness of my despair in God:
And, feeling, through the grate, his horror shake,
Implored him, “Write for me who cannot write,
Apprise my parents, make them rescue me!
You bid me be courageous and trust God:
1290 Do you in turn dare somewhat, trust and write
‘Dear friends, who used to be my parents once,
And now declare you have no part in me,
This is some riddle I want wit to solve,
Since you must love me with no difference.
1295 Even suppose you altered,—there’s your hate,
To ask for: hate of you two dearest ones
I shall find liker love than love found here,
If husbands love their wives. Take me away
And hate me as you do the gnats and fleas,
1300 Even the scorpions! How I shall rejoice!
Write that and save me!” And he promised—wrote
Or did not write; things never changed at all:
He was not like the Augustinian here!
Last, in a desperation I appealed
1305 To friends, whoever wished me better days,
To Guillichini, that’s of kin,—“What, I—
Travel to Rome with you? A flying¹ gout

¹ passing irregularly from one part of the body to another.

- Bids me deny my heart and mind my leg!"
 Then I tried Conti, used to brave—laugh back
 1310 The louring thunder when his cousin scowled
 At me protected by his presence: "You—
 Who well know what you cannot save me from,—
 Carry me off! What frightens you, a priest?"
 He shook his head, looked grave—"Above my strength!
 1315 Guido has claws that scratch, shows feline teeth;
 A formidabler foe than I dare fret:
 Give me a dog to deal with, twice the size!
 Of course I am a priest and Canon too,
 But ... by the bye ... though both, not quite so bold
 1320 As he, my fellow-Canon, brother-priest,
 The personage in such ill odour here
 Because of the reports—pure birth o' the brain!
 Our Caponsacchi, he's your true Saint George¹
 To slay the monster, set the Princess free,
 1325 And have the whole High-Altar to himself:
 I always think so when I see that piece
 I' the Pieve, that's his church and mine, you know:
 Though you drop eyes at mention of his name!"

- That name had got to take a half-grotesque
 1330 Half-ominous, wholly enigmatic sense,
 Like any by-word, broken bit of song
 Born with a meaning, changed by mouth and mouth
 That mix it in a sneer or smile, as chance
 Bids, till it now means nought but ugliness
 1335 And perhaps shame.

[———]

¹ a reference to Vasari's picture of St. George in the church of St. Maria della Pieve: see VI 1771-77.

—All this intends to say,

That, over-night, the notion of escape

Had seemed distemper, dreaming; and the name,—

Not the man, but the name of him, thus made

- 1340 Into a mockery and disgrace,—why, she
 Who uttered it persistently, had laughed,
 “I name his name, and there you start and wince
 As criminal from the red tongs’ touch!”—yet now,
 Now, as I stood letting morn bathe me bright,
 1345 Choosing which butterfly should bear my news,—
 The white, the brown one, or that tinier blue,—
 The Margherita, I detested so,
 In she came—“The fine day, the good Spring time!
 What, up and out at window? That is best.

- 1350 No thought of Caponsacchi?—who stood there
 All night on one leg, like the sentry crane,
 Under the pelting of your water-spout—
 Looked last look at your lattice ere he leave
 Our city, bury his dead hope at Rome.

- 1355 Ay, go to looking-glass and make you fine,
 While he may die ere touch one least loose hair
 You drag at with the comb in such a rage!”

I turned—“Tell Caponsacchi he may come!”

“Tell him to come? Ah, but, for charity,

- 1360 A truce to fooling! Come? What,—come this eve?
 Peter and Paul! But I see through the trick!
 Yes, come, and take a flower-pot on his head,
 Flung from your terrace! No joke, sincere truth?”

How plainly I perceived hell flash and fade

- 1365 O’ the face of her,—the doubt that first paled joy,
 Then, final reassurance I indeed

Was caught now, never to be free again!
 What did I care?—who felt myself of force¹
 To play with silk, and spurn the horsehair-springe.

1370 "But—do you know that I have bade him come,
 And in your own name? I presumed so much,
 Knowing the thing you needed in your heart.
 But somehow—what had I to show in proof?
 He would not come: half-promised, that was all,
 1375 And wrote the letters you refused to read.
 What is the message that shall move him now?"

"After the Ave Maria, at first dark,
 I will be standing on the terrace, say!"

1380 "I would I had a good long lock of hair
 Should prove I was not lying! Never mind!"

Off she went—"May he not refuse, that's all—
 Fearing a trick!"

I answered, "He will come."
 And, all day, I sent prayer like incense up
 1385 To God the strong, God the beneficent,
 God ever mindful in all strife and strait,
 Who, for our own good, makes the need extreme,
 Till at the last He puts forth might and saves.
 An old rhyme came into my head and rang
 1390 Of how a virgin, for the faith of God,
 Hid herself, from the Paynims that pursued,

¹ required.

In a cave's heart; until a thunderstone,
 Wrapped in a flame,¹ revealed the couch and prey
 And they laughed—"Thanks to lightning, ours at last!"
 1395 And she cried "Wrath of God, assert His love!
 Servant of God, thou fire, befriend His child!"
 And lo, the fire she grasped at, fixed its flash,
 Lay in her hand a calm cold dreadful sword
 She brandished till pursuers strewed the ground,
 1400 So did the souls within them die away,
 As o'er the prostrate bodies, sworded, safe,
 She walked forth to the solitudes and Christ:
 So should I grasp the lightning and be saved!

And still, as the day wore, the trouble grew
 1405 Whereby I guessed there would be born a star,
 Until at an intense throe of the dusk,
 I started up, was pushed, I dare to say,
 Out on the terrace, leaned and looked at last
 Where the deliverer waited me: the same
 1410 Silent and solemn face, I first descried
 At the spectacle, confronted mine once more.

So was that minute twice vouchsafed me, so
 The manhood, wasted then, was still at watch
 To save me yet a second time: no change
 1415 Here, though all else changed in the changing world!

I spoke on the instant, as my duty bade,
 In some such sense as this, whatever the phrase.

[———]

¹ According to an old belief, thunder was caused by the descent of a large stone accompanying a lightning bolt.

“Friend, foolish words were borne from you to me;
 Your soul behind them is the pure strong wind,
 1420 Not dust and feathers which its breath may bear:
 These to the witless seem the wind itself,
 Since proving thus the first of it they feel.
 If by mischance you blew offence my way,
 The straws are dropt, the wind desists no whit,
 1425 And how such strays were caught up in the street
 And took a motion from you, why inquire?
 I speak to the strong soul, no weak disguise.
 If it be truth,—why should I doubt it truth?—
 You serve God specially, as priests are bound,
 1430 And care about me, stranger as I am,
 So far as wish my good,—that miracle
 I take to intimate He wills you serve
 By saving me,—what else can He direct?
 Here is the service. Since a long while now,
 1435 I am in the course of being put to death:
 While death concerned nothing but me, I bowed
 The head and bade, in heart, my husband strike.
 Now I imperil something more, it seems,
 Something that’s truelier me than this myself,
 1440 Something I trust in God and you to save.
 You go to Rome, they tell me: take me there,
 Put me back with my people!”

He replied—

The first word I heard ever from his lips,
 1445 All himself in it,—an eternity
 Of speech, to match the immeasurable depth
 O’ the soul that then broke silence—“I am yours.”

So did the star rise, soon to lead my step,
 Lead on, nor pause before it should stand still

- 1450 Above the House o' the Babe,—my babe to be,
That knew me first and thus made me know him,
That had his right of life and claim on mine,
And would not let me die till he was born,
But pricked me at the heart to save us both,
1455 Saying “Have you the will? Leave God the way!”
And the way was Caponsacchi—“mine,” thank God!
He was mine, he is mine, he will be mine.

No pause i' the leading and the light! I know,
Next night there was a cloud came, and not he:
1460 But I prayed through the darkness till it broke
And let him shine. The second night, he came.

- “The plan is rash; the project desperate:
In such a flight needs must I risk your life,
Give food for falsehood, folly or mistake,
1465 Ground for your husband's rancour and revenge”—
So he began again, with the same face.
I felt that, the same loyalty—one star
Turning now red that was so white before—
One service apprehended newly: just
1470 A word of mine and there the white was back!

“No, friend, for you will take me! 'T is yourself
Risk all, not I,—who let you, for I trust
In the compensating great God: enough!
I know you: when is it that you will come?”

- 1475 “To-morrow at the day's dawn.” Then I heard
What I should do: how to prepare for flight
And where to fly.

[———]

That night my husband bade
 "—You, whom I loathe, beware you break my sleep
 1480 This whole night! Couch beside me like the corpse
 I would you were!" The rest you know, I think—
 How I found Caponsacchi and escaped.

And this man, men call sinner? Jesus Christ!
 Of whom men said, with mouths Thyself mad'st once,
 1485 "He hath a devil"¹—say he was Thy saint,
 My Caponsacchi! Shield and show—unshroud
 In Thine own time the glory of the soul
 If aught obscure,—if ink-spot, from vile pens
 Scribbling a charge against him—(I was glad
 1490 Then, for the first time, that I could not write)—
 Flirted his way, have flecked the blaze!

For me,
 'T is otherwise: let men take, sift my thoughts
 —Thoughts I throw like the flax for sun to bleach!
 1495 I did pray, do pray, in the prayer shall die,
 "Oh, to have Caponsacchi for my guide!"
 Ever the face upturned to mine, the hand
 Holding my hand across the world,—a sense
 That reads, as only such can read, the mark
 1500 God sets on woman, signifying so
 She should—shall peradventure—be divine;
 Yet 'ware, the while, how weakness mars the print
 And makes confusion, leaves the thing men see,
 —Not this man sees,—who from his soul, re-writes
 1505 The obliterated charter,—love and strength
 Mending what's marred. "So kneels a votarist,

¹ John 7.20, 8.48.

- Weeds some poor waste traditionaly¹ plot
 Where shrine once was, where temple yet may be,
 Purging the place but worshipping the while,
 1510 By faith and not by sight, sight clearest so,—
 Such way the saints work,”—says Don Celestine.
 But I, not privileged to see a saint
 Of old when such walked earth with crown and palm,
 If I call “saint” what saints call something else—
 1515 The saints must bear with me, impute the fault
 To a soul i’ the bud, so starved by ignorance,
 Stinted of warmth, it will not blow this year
 Nor recognize the orb² which Spring-flowers know.
 But if meanwhile some insect with a heart
 1520 Worth floods of lazy music, spendthrift joy—
 Some fire-fly renounced Spring for my dwarfed cup,
 Crept close to me, brought lustre for the dark,
 Comfort against the cold,—what though excess
 Of comfort should miscall the creature—sun?
 1525 What did the sun to hinder while harsh hands
 Petal by petal, crude and colourless,
 Tore me? This one heart gave me all the Spring!

- Is all told? There’s the journey: and where’s time
 To tell you how that heart burst out in shine?
 1530 Yet certain points do press on me too hard.
 Each place must have a name, though I forget:
 How strange it was—there where the plain begins
 And the small river mitigates³ its flow—
 When eve was fading fast, and my soul sank,

¹ traditional, set apart by custom.

² perceive the sun.

³ reduces (or slows?).

- 1535 And he divined what surge of bitterness,
In overtaking me, would float me back
Whence I was carried by the striding day—
So,—“This grey place was famous once,” said he—
And he began that legend of the place
- 1540 As if in answer to the unspoken fear,
And told me all about a brave man dead,
Which lifted me and let my soul go on!
How did he know too,—at that town’s approach
By the rock-side,—that in coming near the signs
- 1545 Of life, the house-roofs and the church and tower,
I saw the old boundary and wall o’ the world
Rise plain as ever round me, hard and cold,
As if the broken circlet joined again,
Tightened itself about me with no break,—
- 1550 As if the town would turn Arezzo’s self,—
The husband there,—the friends my enemies,
All ranged against me, not an avenue
To try, but would be blocked and drive me back
On him,—this other, ... oh the heart in that!
- 1555 Did not he find, bring, put into my arms
A new-born babe?—and I saw faces beam
Of the young mother proud to teach me joy,
And gossips round expecting my surprise
At the sudden hole through earth that lets in heaven.
- 1560 I could believe himself by his strong will
Had woven around me what I thought the world
We went along in, every circumstance,
Towns, flowers and faces, all things helped so well!
For, through the journey, was it natural
- 1565 Such comfort should arise from first to last?
As I look back, all is one milky way;
Still bettered more, the more remembered, so

- Do new stars bud while I but search for old,
And fill all gaps i' the glory, and grow him—
1570 Him I now see make the shine everywhere.
Even at the last when the bewildered flesh,
The cloud of weariness about my soul
Clogging too heavily, sucked down all sense,—
Still its last voice was, "He will watch and care;
1575 Let the strength go, I am content: he stays!"
I doubt not he did stay and care for all—
From that sick minute when the head swam round,
And the eyes looked their last and died on him,
As in his arms he caught me, and, you say,
1580 Carried me in, that tragical red eve,
And laid me where I next returned to life
In the other red of morning, two red plates
That crushed together, crushed the time between,
And are since then a solid fire to me,—
1585 When in, my dreadful husband and the world
Broke,—and I saw him, master, by hell's right,
And saw my angel helplessly held back
By guards that helped the malice—the lamb prone,
The serpent towering and triumphant—then
1590 Came all the strength back in a sudden swell,
I did for once see right, do right, give tongue
The adequate protest: for a worm must turn¹
If it would have its wrong observed by God.
I did spring up, attempt to thrust aside
1595 That ice-block 'twixt the sun and me, lay low
The neutralizer of all good and truth.
If I sinned so,—never obey voice more
O' the Just and Terrible, who bids us—"Bear!"

¹ Compare III 1289.

- Not—"Stand by, bear to see my angels bear!"
- 1600 I am clear it was on impulse to serve God
Not save myself,—no—nor my child unborn!
Had I else waited patiently till now?—
Who saw my old kind parents, silly-sooth
And too much trustful, for their worst of faults,
1605 Cheated, brow-beaten, stripped and starved, cast out
Into the kennel: I remonstrated,
Then sank to silence, for,—their woes at end,
Themselves gone,—only I was left to plague.
If only I was threatened and belied,
- 1610 What matter? I could bear it and did bear;
It was a comfort, still one lot for all:
They were not persecuted for my sake
And I, estranged, the single happy one.
But when at last, all by myself I stood
- 1615 Obeying the clear voice which bade me rise,
Not for my own sake but my babe unborn,
And take the angel's hand was sent to help—
And found the old adversary athwart the path—
Not my hand simply struck from the angel's, but
- 1620 The very angel's self made foul i' the face
By the fiend who struck there,—that I would not bear,
That only I resisted! So, my first
And last resistance was invincible.
Prayers move God; threats, and nothing else, move men!
- 1625 I must have prayed a man as he were God
When I implored the Governor to right
My parents' wrongs: the answer was a smile.
The Archbishop,—did I clasp his feet enough,
Hide my face hotly on them, while I told
- 1630 More than I dared make my own mother know?
The profit was—compassion and a jest.

This time, the foolish prayers were done with, right
Used might, and solemnized¹ the sport at once.

All was against the combat: vantage, mine?

- 1635 The runaway avowed, the accomplice-wife,
In company with the plan-contriving priest?
Yet, shame thus rank and patent, I struck, bare,
At foe from head to foot in magic mail,
And off it withered, cobweb-armoury
1640 Against the lightning! 'T was truth singed the lies
And saved me, not the vain sword nor weak speech!

You see, I will not have the service fail!

I say, the angel saved me: I am safe!

Others may want and wish, I wish nor want

- 1645 One point o' the circle plainer, where I stand
Traced round about with white to front the world.
What of the calumny I came across,
What o' the way to the end?—the end crowns all.²
The judges judged aright i' the main, gave me
1650 The uttermost of my heart's desire, a truce
From torture and Arezzo, balm for hurt,
With the quiet nuns,—God recompense the good!
Who said and sang away the ugly past.
And, when my final fortune was revealed,
1655 What safety while, amid my parents' arms,
My babe was given me! Yes, he saved my babe:
It would not have peeped forth, the bird-like thing,
Through that Arezzo noise and trouble: back

¹ made solemn, serious.

² the end justifies the means, a free translation of "*Honestia turpitudine est pro causa bona*" (Publius Syrus, *Maxims* 234), a cynical doctrine condemned by various popes.

- Had it returned nor ever let me see!
- 1660 But the sweet peace cured all, and let me live
And give my bird the life among the leaves
God meant him! Weeks and months of quietude,
I could lie in such peace and learn so much—
Begin the task, I see how needful now,
- 1665 Of understanding somewhat of my past,—
Know life a little, I should leave so soon.
Therefore, because this man restored my soul,
All has been right; I have gained my gain, enjoyed
As well as suffered,—nay, got foretaste too
- 1670 Of better life beginning where this ends—
All through the breathing-while allowed me thus,
Which let good premonitions reach my soul
Unthwarted, and benignant influence flow
And interpenetrate and change my heart,
- 1675 Uncrossed by what was wicked,—nay, unkind.
For, as the weakness of my time drew nigh,
Nobody did me one disservice more,
Spoke coldly or looked strangely, broke the love
I lay in the arms of, till my boy was born,
- 1680 Born all in love, with nought to spoil the bliss
A whole long fortnight: in a life like mine
A fortnight filled with bliss is long and much.
All women are not mothers of a boy,
Though they live twice the length of my whole life,
- 1685 And, as they fancy, happily all the same.
There I lay, then, all my great fortnight long,
As if it would continue, broaden out
Happily more and more, and lead to heaven:
Christmas before me,—was not that a chance?
- 1690 I never realized God's birth before—
How He grew likest God in being born.

This time I felt like Mary, had my babe
 Lying a little on my breast like hers.
 So all went on till, just four days ago—

1695 The night and the tap.

Oh it shall be success
 To the whole of our poor family! My friends
 ... Nay, father and mother,—give me back my word!
 They have been rudely stripped of life, disgraced
 1700 Like children who must needs go clothed too fine,
 Carry the garb of Carnival in Lent.
 If they too much affected frippery,¹
 They have been punished and submit themselves,
 Say no word: all is over, they see God
 1705 Who will not be extreme to mark their fault
 Or He had granted respite: they are safe.

For that most woeful man my husband once,
 Who, needing respite, still draws vital breath,
 I—pardon him? So far as lies in me,
 1710 I give him for his good the life he takes,
 Praying the world will therefore acquiesce.
 Let him make God amends,—none, none to me
 Who thank him rather that, whereas strange fate
 Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,
 1715 Himself this way at least pronounced divorce,
 Blotted the marriage-bond: this blood of mine
 Flies forth exultingly at any door,
 Washes the parchment white, and thanks the blow.
 We shall not meet in this world nor the next,

¹ laid store on cheap outward show.

- 1720 But where will God be absent? In His face
 Is light, but in His shadow healing too:¹
 Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!
 And as my presence was importunate,—²
 My earthly good, temptation and a snare,—
- 1725 Nothing about me but drew somehow down
 His hate upon me,—somewhat so excused
 Therefore, since hate was thus the truth of him,—
 May my evanishment for evermore
 Help further to relieve the heart that cast
- 1730 Such object of its natural loathing forth!
 So he was made; he nowise made himself:
 I could not love him, but his mother did.
 His soul has never lain beside my soul:
 But for that unresisting body,—thanks!
- 1735 He burned that garment spotted by the flesh.
 Whatever he touched is rightly ruined: plague
 It caught, and disinfection it had craved
 Still but for Guido; I am saved through him
 So as by fire;³ to him—thanks and farewell!
- 1740 Even for my babe, my boy, there's safety thence—
 From the sudden death of me, I mean: we poor
 Weak souls, how we endeavour to be strong!
 I was already using up my life,—
 This portion, now, should do him such a good,
- 1745 This other go to keep off such an ill!
 The great life; see, a breath and it is gone!

¹ a fusion of 2 Corinthians 4.6 and Acts 5.15 (where, however, the “shadow” is that of St. Peter, not Christ).

² troublesome, a nuisance.

³ 1 Corinthians 3.15.

- So is detached, so left all by itself
The little life, the fact which means so much.
Shall not God stoop the kindlier to His work,
1750 His marvel of creation, foot would crush,
Now that the hand He trusted to receive
And hold it, lets the treasure fall perforce?
The better; He shall have in orphanage
His own way all the clearlier: if my babe
1755 Outlived the hour—and he has lived two weeks—
It is through God who knows I am not by.
Who is it makes the soft gold hair turn black,
And sets the tongue, might lie so long at rest,
Trying to talk? Let us leave God alone!
1760 Why should I doubt He will explain in time
What I feel now, but fail to find the words?
My babe nor was, nor is, nor yet shall be
Count Guido Franceschini's child at all—
Only his mother's, born of love not hate!
1765 So shall I have my rights in after-time.
It seems absurd, impossible to-day;
So seems so much else, not explained but known!

Ah! Friends, I thank and bless you every one!
No more now: I withdraw from earth and man
1770 To my own soul, compose myself for God.

Well, and there is more! Yes, my end of breath
Shall bear away my soul in being true!
He is still here, not outside with the world,
Here, here, I have him in his rightful place!
1775 'T is now, when I am most upon the move,
I feel for what I verily find—again
The face, again the eyes, again, through all,
The heart and its immeasurable love

- Of my one friend, my only, all my own,
1780 Who put his breast between the spears and me.¹
Ever with Caponsacchi! Otherwise
Here alone would be failure, loss to me—
How much more loss to him, with life debarred
From giving life, love locked from love's display,
1785 The day-star stopped its task that makes night morn!
O lover of my life, O soldier-saint,
No work begun shall ever pause for death!
Love will be helpful to me more and more
I' the coming course, the new path I must tread—
1790 My weak hand in thy strong hand, strong for that!
Tell him that if I seem without him now,
That's the world's insight! Oh, he understands!
He is at Civita—do I once doubt
The world again is holding us apart?
1795 He had been here, displayed in my behalf
The broad brow that reverberates the truth,
And flashed the word God gave him, back to man!
I know where the free soul is flown! My fate
Will have been hard for even him to bear:
1800 Let it confirm him in the trust of God,
Showing how holily he dared the deed!
And, for the rest,—say, from the deed, no touch
Of harm came, but all good, all happiness,
Not one faint fleck of failure! Why explain?
1805 What I see, oh, he sees and how much more!
Tell him,—I know not wherefore the true word
Should fade and fall unuttered at the last—

¹ possibly a reference to St. Peter's intervening between Jesus and "a great multitude with swords and staves" (Mark 14.43–49).

- It was the name of him I sprang to meet
When came the knock, the summons and the end.
- 1810 "My great heart, my strong hand are back again!"
I would have sprung to these, beckoning across
Murder and hell gigantic and distinct
O' the threshold, posted to exclude me heaven:
He is ordained to call and I to come!
- 1815 Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God?
Say,—I am all in flowers from head to foot!
Say,—not one flower of all he said and did,
Might seem to flit unnoticed, fade unknown,
But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-tree
- 1820 Whereof the blossoming perfumes the place
At this supreme of moments! He is a priest;
He cannot marry therefore, which is right:
I think he would not marry if he could.
Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,
- 1825 Mere imitation of the inimitable:
In heaven we have the real and true and sure.
'T is there they neither marry nor are given
In marriage but are as the angels:¹ right,
Oh how right that is, how like Jesus Christ
- 1830 To say that! Marriage-making for the earth,
With gold so much,—birth, power, repute so much,
Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these!
Be as the angels rather, who, apart,
Know themselves into one, are found at length
- 1835 Married, but marry never, no, nor give
In marriage; they are man and wife at once
When the true time is: here we have to wait

¹ Matthew 22.30.

Not so long neither! Could we by a wish
Have what we will and get the future now,
1840 Would we wish aught done undone in the past?
So, let him wait God's instant men call years;
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of His light
1845 For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.

VIII

DOMINUS HYACINTHUS
DE ARCHANGELIS

PAUPERUM PROCURATOR

AH, my Giacinto,¹ he's no ruddy rogue,
Is not Cinone? What, to-day we're eight?
Seven and one's eight, I hope, old curly-pate!
—Branches me out his verb-tree on the slate,

- 5 *Amo -as -avi -atum -are -ans*,
Up to *-atus*, person, tense, and mood,
Quies me *cum subjunctivo*² (I could cry)
And chews Corderius³ with his morning crust!
Look eight years onward, and he's perched, he's perched
10 Dapper and deft on stool beside this chair,
Cinozzo, Cinoncello, who but he?
—Trying his milk-teeth on some crusty case⁴

The time is late January or early February (the season of Carnival). If “a month” (XII 333) can be taken literally, the date is January 22.
Preview: I 1105–61.

¹ the first of the many affectionate diminutives the speaker uses for his son and namesake Hyacinth.

² shows that he understands that in some circumstances the relative pronoun *qui* should be followed by the subjunctive. But Archangeli (and Browning) are playing a verbal game here with the hybrid Latin-English construction. With the Roman “es,” Browning adds the third-person singular ending of English verbs (see “Branches me” in l. 4 above) to the Latin relative pronoun “*qui*.” The English verb form takes the objective “me,” also in Roman, as it appears in the printer’s manuscript. The *Oxford Browning* translates the line as “uses *qui* for me with the subjunctive mood” (8.298).

³ Maturin Cordier (c.1480–1564), author of Latin textbooks and teacher of Calvin.

⁴ As Guido said earlier (V 566), “the case is hard.”

Like this, papa shall triturate¹ full soon
 To smooth Papinianian² pulp!

15

It trots

Already through my head, though noon be now,
 Does supper-time and what belongs to eve.

Dispose, O Don, o' the day, first work then play!

—The proverb bids. And “then” means, won’t we hold

- 20 Our little yearly lovesome frolic feast,
 Cinuolo’s birth-night, Cinicello’s own,
 That makes gruff January grin perforce!
 For too contagious grows the mirth, the warmth
 Escaping from so many hearts at once—
 25 When the good wife, buxom and bonny yet,
 Jokes the hale grandsire,—such are just the sort
 To go off suddenly,—he who hides the key
 O’ the box beneath his pillow every night,—
 Which box may hold a parchment (someone thinks)

- 30 Will show a scribbled something like a name
 “Cinino, Ciniccino,” near the end,
 “To whom I give and I bequeath my lands,
 Estates, tenements,³ hereditaments,⁴
 When I decease as honest grandsire ought.”
 35 Wherefore—yet this one time again perhaps—
 Shan’t my Orvieto fuddle his old nose!
 Then, uncles, one or the other, well i’ the world,

¹ reduce to a fine pulp.

² basically a reference to a Roman jurist named Papinianus (second century AD) but with a multiple pun on “pap,” “papa,” and the name of Denis Papin, French physicist (1647–c.1712) who invented a primitive pressure cooker, obliquely referred to in “the patent truth-extracting process” (I 1114).

³ income-producing holdings.

⁴ inheritable property.

May—drop in, merely?—trudge through rain and wind,
Rather! The smell-feasts rouse them at the hint

- 40 There's cookery in a certain dwelling-place!
Gossips,¹ too, each with keepsake in his poke,
Will pick the way, thrid² lane by lantern-light,
And so find door, put galligaskin³ off
At entry of a decent domicile
45 Cornered in snug Condotti,⁴—all for love,
All to crush cup with Cinucciatolo!

Well,

Let others climb the heights o' the court, the camp!

How vain are chambering and wantonness,⁵

- 50 Revel and rout and pleasures that make mad!
Commend me to home-joy, the family board,
Altar and hearth! These, with a brisk career,
A source of honest profit and good fame,
Just so much work as keeps the brain from rust,
55 Just so much play as lets the heart expand,
Honouring God and serving man,—I say,
These are reality, and all else,—fluff,
Nutshell and naught,⁶—thank Flaccus for the phrase!
Suppose I had been Fisc, yet bachelor!

- 60 Why, work with a will, then! Wherfore lazy now?
Turn up the hour-glass, whence no sand-grain slips
But should have done its duty to the saint

¹ friends or godparents.

² make one's way through.

³ gaiter, wet-weather legging.

⁴ a street connecting the Piazza di Spagna with the Corso.

⁵ sexual license (Romans 13.13).

⁶ Horace (Flaccus), *Satires* 2.5.35.

- O' the day, the son and heir that's eight years old!
 Let law come dimple Cinoncino's cheek,
 65 And Latin dumble¹ Cinarello's chin,
 The while we spread him fine and toss him flat
 This pulp that makes the pancake, trim our mass
 Of matter into Argument the First,
 Prime Pleading in defence of our accused,
 70 Which, once a-waft on paper wing, shall soar,
 Shall signalize before applausive Rome
 What study, and mayhap some mother-wit,²
 Can do toward making Master fop and Fisc
 Old bachelor Bottinius bite his thumb.³
- 75 Now, how good God is! How falls plumb to point
 This murder, gives me Guido to defend
 Now, of all days i' the year, just when the boy
 Verges on Virgil, reaches the right age
 For some such illustration⁴ from his sire,
 80 Stimulus to himself! One might wait years
 And never find the chance which now finds me!
 The fact is, there's a blessing on the hearth,
 A special providence for fatherhood!
 Here's a man, and what's more, a noble, kills
 85 —Not sneakingly but almost with parade—
 Wife's father and wife's mother and wife's self
 That's mother's self of son and heir (like mine!)
 —And here stand I, the favoured advocate,

¹ here used merely for the sake of assonance with "dimple" and as one of the many expressions of Arcangeli's culinary preoccupation.

² native intelligence.

³ a gesture of threat or defiance, putting the thumb-nail into the mouth and clicking it against the upper teeth.

⁴ example, demonstration.

- Who pluck this flower o' the field, no Solomon
- 90 Was ever clothed in glorious gold to match,¹
And set the same in Cinoncino's cap!
I defend Guido and his comrades—I!
Pray God, I keep me humble: not to me—
*Non nobis, Domine, sed tibi laus!*²
- 95 How the fop chuckled when they made him Fisc!
We'll beat you, my Bottinius, all for love,
All for our tribute to Cinotto's day.
Why, 'sbuddikins,³ old Innocent himself
May rub his eyes at the bustle,—ask "What's this
- 100 Rolling from out the rostrum, as a gust
O' the *Pro Milone*⁴ had been prisoned there,
And rattled Rome awake?" Awaken Rome,
How can the Pope doze on in decency?
He needs must wake up also, speak his word,
- 105 Have his opinion like the rest of Rome,
About this huge, this hurly-burly case:
He wants who can excogitate⁵ the truth,
Give the result in speech, plain black and white,
To mumble in the mouth and make his own
- 110 —A little changed, good man, a little changed!
No matter, so his gratitude be moved,
By when my Giacintino gets of age,
Mindful of who thus helped him at a pinch,
Archangelus Procurator Pauperum—
- 115 And proved Hortensius *Redivivus!*⁶

¹ Matthew 6.28–29.

² not to us, O Lord, but to thee must go praise.

³ (God)'s bodikins—God's dear body.

⁴ Cicero's oration in defense of the accused murderer Milo.

⁵ reason out.

⁶ Hortensius (Cicero's rival) reincarnated.

Whew!

- To earn the *Est-est*,¹ merit the minced herb
 That mollifies² the liver's leathery slice,
 With here a goose-foot, there a cock's-comb stuck,
 120 Cemented in an element of cheese!
- I doubt if dainties do the grandsire good:
 Last June he had a sort of strangling ... bah!
 He's his own master, and his will is made.
 So, liver fizz, law flit and Latin fly
- 125 As we rub hands o'er dish by way of grace!
 May I lose cause if I vent one word more
 Except,—with fresh-cut quill we ink the white,—
P-r-o-pro Guidone et Sociis. There!
- Count Guido married—or, in Latin due,
 130 What? *Duxit in uxorem?*—commonplace!³
Taedas jugales init, subiit,—ha!
 He underwent the matrimonial torch?
Connubio stabili sibi junxit,—hum!

¹ a fine Roman wine.

² See ll. 543–47. (*Note.* From this point onward, the interpolated Latin of Arcangeli's argument, nearly all quoted directly from his and his colleague Spreti's pleadings in the Old Yellow Book, will be translated only when its sense is not sufficiently clear from the English paraphrase that accompanies it. Latinists will recognize, however, that as he translates, Browning sometimes plays sly tricks with the strict sense of the original for the sake of irony or innuendo. This is equally true of Bottini's speech in Book IX.)

³ "The first way of saying 'Guido married' is taken from the actual Latin of the opening speech for the prosecution, and is scoffingly characterized as 'commonplace'; the second is an adaptation of Catullus, but does not quite suit Arcangeli's taste; in the third, he gets exactly what he wishes from Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.73, 'clear of any modern taint' (Hodell).

In stable bond of marriage bound his own?

135 That's clear of any modern taint: and yet ...

Virgil is little help to who writes prose.

He shall attack me Terence with the dawn,
Shall Cinuccino! Mum, mind business, Sir!

Thus circumstantially evolve we facts,

140 *Ita se habet ideo series facti:*

He wedded,—ah, with owls for augury!

Nupserat, heu sinistris avibus,

One of the blood Arezzo boasts her best,

Dominus Guido, nobili genere ortus,

Pompiliae ...

145 But the version¹ afterward!

Curb we this ardour! Notes alone, to-day,

The speech to-morrow and the Latin last:

Such was the rule in Farinacci's² time.

Indeed I hitched³ it into verse and good.

150 Unluckily, law quite absorbs a man,

Or else I think I too had poetized.

“Law is the pork substratum of the fry,

Goose-foot and cock's-comb are Latinity,”—

And in this case, if circumstance assist,

155 We'll garnish law with idiom,⁴ never fear!

Out-of-the-way events extend our scope:

¹ translation, with the specific suggestion of “a translation from English into Latin prose done as a school or university exercise” (*OED*).

² Roman jurist (1544–1613), often cited in the lawyers' arguments in the Old Yellow Book.

³ put (with some effort) into verse.

⁴ proper legal language.

- For instance, when Bottini brings his charge,
 "That letter which you say Pompilia wrote,—
 To criminate her parents and herself
 160 And disengage her husband from the coil,—
 That, Guido Franceschini wrote, say we:
 Because Pompilia could nor read nor write,
 Therefore he pencilled her such letter first,
 Then made her trace in ink the same again."
 165 —Ha, my Bottini, have I thee on hip?¹
 How will he turn this and break Tully's pate?²
 "Existimandum" (don't I hear the dog!)
 "Quod Guido designaverit elementa
Dictae epistolae, quae fuerint
 170 (*Superinducto ab ea calamo*)
Notata atramento—there's a style!—
 "Quia ipsa scribere nesciebat." Boh!
 Now, my turn! Either, *Insulse!* (I outburst)
 Stupidly put! Inane is the response,
 175 *Inanis est responsio*, or the like—
 To-wit, that each of all those characters,
Quod singula elementa epistolae,
 Had first of all been traced for her by him,
Fuerant per eum prius designata,
 180 And then, the ink applied a-top of that,
Et deinde, superinducto calamo,
 The piece, she says, became her handiwork,
Per eam, efformata, ut ipsa asserit.
 Inane were such response! (a second time:)
 185 Her husband outlined her the whole, forsooth?

¹ Have I got you where I want you? See note to IV 762.

² write unCiceronian, and therefore inelegant and even ungrammatical, Latin; equivalent to the "break Priscian's head" of VI 389.

Vir ejus lineabat epistolam?

What, she confesses that she wrote the thing,

Fatetur eam scripsisse, (scorn that scathes!)

That she might pay obedience to her lord?

190 *Ut viro obtemperaret, apices*

(Here repeat charge with proper varied phrase)

Eo designante, ipsaque calatum

Super inducente? By such argument,

Ita pariter, she seeks to show the same,

195 (Ay, by Saint Joseph and what saints you please)

Epistolam ostendit, medius fidius,

No voluntary deed but fruit of force!

Non voluntarie sed coacte scriptam!

That's the way to write Latin, friend my Fisc!

200 Bottini is a beast, one barbarous:

Look out for him when he attempts to say

“Armed with a pistol, Guido followed her!”

Will not I be beforehand with my Fisc,

Cut away phrase by phrase from underfoot!

205 *Guido Pompiliam*—Guido thus his wife

Following with igneous engine, shall I have?

Armis munitus igneis persequens—

Arma sulphurea gestans, sulphury arms,

Or, might one style a pistol—popping-piece?

210 *Armatus breviori sclopulo?*

We'll let him have been armed so, though it make

Somewhat against us: I had thought to own—

Provided with a simple travelling-sword,

Ense solummodo viatorio

215 *Instructus:* but we'll grant the pistol here:

Better we lost the cause than lacked the gird

At the Fisc's Latin, lost the Judge's laugh!

It's Venturini that decides for style.

Tommati rather goes upon the law.

220 So, as to law,—

Ah, but with law ne'er hope

To level the fellow,—don't I know his trick!

How he draws up, ducks under, twists aside!

He's a lean-gutted hectic¹ rascal, fine²

225 As pale-haired red-eyed ferret which pretends

'T is ermine, pure soft snow from tail to snout.

He eludes law by piteous looks aloft,

Lets Latin glance off as he makes appeal

To saint that's somewhere in the ceiling-top:

230 Do you suppose I don't conceive the beast?

Plague of the ermine-vermin! For it takes,

It takes, and here's the fellow Fisc, you see,

And Judge, you'll not be long in seeing next!

Confound the fop—he's now at work like me:

235 Enter his study, as I seem to do,

Hear him read out his writing to himself!

I know he writes as if he spoke: I hear

The hoarse shrill throat, see shut eyes, neck shot-forth,³

—I see him strain on tiptoe, soar and pour

240 Eloquence out, nor stay nor stint at all—

Perorate in the air, then quick to press

With the product! What abuse of type and sheet!

He'll keep clear of my cast, my logic-throw,

Let argument slide, and then deliver swift

245 Some bowl from quite an unguessed point of stand—

¹ cadaverous, wasted.

² extremely thin.

³ Compare the image of Chanticleer at I 1203–04.

- Having the luck o' the last word,¹ the reply!
 A plaguy cast, a mortifying stroke:
 You face a fellow—cries “So, there you stand?
 But I discourteous jump clean o'er your head!
- 250 You take ship-carpentry for pilotage,
 Stop rat-holes, while a sea sweeps through the breach,—
 Hammer and fortify at puny points?
 Do, clamp and tenon,² make all tight and safe!
 'T is here and here and here you ship a sea,³
 255 No good of your stopped leaks and littleness!”

- Yet what do I name “little and a leak”?
 The main defence o' the murder's used to death,
 By this time, dry bare bones, no scrap we pick:
 Safer I worked the new, the unforeseen,
- 260 The nice by-stroke, the fine and improvised
 Point that can titillate the brain o' the Bench
 Torpid⁴ with over-teaching, long ago!
 As if Tommati (that has heard, reheard
 And heard again, first this side and then that—
- 265 Guido and Pietro, Pietro and Guido, din
 And deafen, full three years, at each long ear)
 Don't want amusement for⁵ instruction now,
 Won't rather feel a flea run o'er his ribs,
 Than a daw settle heavily on his head!
- 270 Oh I was young and had the trick of fence,
 Knew subtle pass and push with careless right—

¹ See note to I 165.

² apply devices to tighten a wooden structure.

³ receive water over the side, and also through leaks in the hull.

⁴ numbed.

⁵ instead of.

- My left arm ever quiet behind back,
 With dagger ready: not both hands to blade!
 Puff and blow, put the strength out, Blunderbore!¹
 275 There's my subordinate, young Spreti, now,
 Pedant and prig,—he'll pant away at proof,
 That's his way!

Now for mine—to rub some life
 Into one's choppy² fingers this cold day!

- 280 I trust Cinuzzo ties on tippet,³ guards
 The precious throat on which so much depends!
 Guido must be all goose-flesh in his hole,
 Despite the prison-straw: bad Carnival
 For captives! no sliced fry for him, poor Count!
- 285 Carnival-time,—another providence!
 The town a-swarm with strangers to amuse,
 To edify, to give one's name and fame
 In charge of, till they find, some future day,
 Cintino come and claim it, his name too,
- 290 Pledge of the pleasantness⁴ they owe papa—
 Who else was it cured Rome of her great qualms,
 When she must needs have her own judgment?—ay,
 When all her topping⁵ wits had set to work,
 Pronounced already on the case: mere boys,
- 295 Twice Cineruggiolo's age with half his sense,
 As good as tell me, when I cross the court,
 "Master Arcangeli!" (plucking at my gown)

¹ one of Jack the Giant Killer's victims.

² chapped.

³ scarf.

⁴ entertainment.

⁵ eminent, illustrious.

“We can predict, we comprehend your play,
We'll help you save your client.” Tra-la-la!

- 300 I've travelled ground, from childhood to this hour,
To have the town anticipate my track?
The old fox takes the plain and velvet path,
The young hounds' predilection,—prints the dew,
Don't he, to suit their pulpy pads of paw?
305 No! Burying nose deep down i' the briery bush,
Thus I defend Count Guido.¹

Where are we weak?

- First, which is foremost in advantage too,
Our murder,—we call, killing,—is a fact
310 Confessed, defended, made a boast of: good!
To think the Fisc claimed use of torture here,
And got thereby avowal plump and plain
That gives me just the chance I wanted,—scope
Not for brute-force but ingenuity,
315 Explaining matters, not denying them!
One may dispute,—as I am bound to do,
And shall,—validity of process² here:
Inasmuch as a noble is exempt
From torture which plebeians undergo
320 In such a case: for law is lenient, lax,
Remits the torture to a nobleman
Unless suspicion be of twice the strength
Attaches to a man born vulgarly:

¹ It should be stressed here that most of the arguments advanced by both lawyers are taken directly from the pleadings in the Old Yellow Book. Their extravagance and absurdity are not, as a rule, Browning's, although they did inspire him to add a few fantastic touches of his own.

² legality.

- We don't card silk with comb that dresses wool.
- 325 Moreover 't was severity undue
 In this case, even had the lord been lout.
 What utters, on this head, our oracle,
 Our Farinacci, my Gamaliel¹ erst,
 In those immortal "Questions"?² This I quote:
- 330 "Of all the tools at Law's disposal, sure
 That named *Vigiliarum*³ is the best—
 That is, the worst—to whoso needs must bear:
 Lasting, as it may do, from some seven hours
 To ten; (beyond ten, we've no precedent;
 335 Certain have touched their ten, but, bah, they died!)
 It does so efficaciously convince,
 That,—speaking by much observation here,—
 Out of each hundred cases, by my count,
 Never I knew of patients beyond four
 340 Withstand its taste, or less than ninety-six
 End by succumbing: only martyrs four,
 Of obstinate silence, guilty or no,—against
 Ninety-six full confessors, innocent
 Or otherwise,—so shrewd⁴ a tool have we!"
- 345 No marvel either: in unwary hands,
 Death on the spot is no rare consequence:
 As indeed all but happened in this case
 To one of ourselves, our young tough peasant-friend
 The accomplice called Baldeschi: they were rough,
 350 Dosed him with torture as you drench a horse,
 Not modify your treatment to a man:

¹ See note to V 1107.

² the *Variae Quaestiones* of Farinacci (see note to l. 148).

³ See notes to I 979–80.

⁴ discriminating, sagacious.

So, two successive days he fainted dead,
 And only on the third essay, gave up,
 Confessed like flesh and blood. We could reclaim,—¹
 355 Blockhead Bottini giving cause enough!
 But no,—we'll take it as spontaneously
 Confessed: we'll have the murder beyond doubt.
 Ah, fortunate (the poet's word reversed)²
 Inasmuch as we know our happiness!

360 Had the antagonist left dubiety,
 Here were we proving murder a mere myth,
 And Guido innocent, ignorant, absent,—ay,
 Absent! He was—why, where should Christian be?—
 Engaged in visiting his proper church,

365 The duty of us all at Christmas-time,
 When Caponsacchi, the seducer, stung
 To madness by his relegation, cast
 About him and contrived a remedy
 In murder: since opprobrium broke afresh,

370 By birth o' the babe, on him the imputed sire,
 He it was quietly sought to smother up
 His shame and theirs together,—killed the three,
 And fled—(go seek him where you please to search)—
 Just at the time when Guido, touched by grace,

375 Devotions ended, hastened to the spot,
 Meaning to pardon his convicted wife,
 “Neither do I condemn thee, go in peace!”—³

¹ object.

² “*O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint, / Agricolas!*” (Virgil, *Georgics* 2.458). “Ah, too fortunate the husbandmen, if they but knew their happiness!” (Cook).

³ Jesus's words to the woman taken in adultery by the scribes and pharisees (John 8.11).

And thus arrived i' the nick of time to catch
The charge o' the killing, though great-heartedly
380 He came but to forgive and bring to life.
Doubt ye the force of Christmas on the soul?
"Is thine eye evil because mine is good?"¹

So, doubtless, had I needed argue here
But for the full confession round and sound!
385 Thus might you wrong some kingly alchemist,—
Whose concern should not be with showing brass
Transmuted into gold, but triumphing,
Rather, about his gold changed out of brass,
Not vulgarly to the mere sight and touch,
390 But in the idea, the spiritual² display,
The apparition buoyed by winged words
Hovering above its birth-place in the brain,—
Thus would you wrong this excellent personage
Forced, by the gross need, to gird apron round,
395 Plant forge, light fire, ply bellows,—in a word,
Demonstrate: when a faulty pipkin's³ crack
May disconcert you his presumptive truth!⁴
Here were I hanging to the testimony
Of one of these poor rustics—four, ye gods!
400 Whom the first taste of friend the Fiscal's cord
May drive into undoing my whole speech,
Undoing, on his birthday,—what is worse,—
My son and heir!

¹ Matthew 20.15, where, however, the phrase is "because *I* am good."

² intellectual.

³ small earthenware crock.

⁴ may spoil the proof he intends (by a fault in his apparatus).

I wonder, all the same,

- 405 Not so much at those peasants' lack of heart;
 But—Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
 Bear pain no better! Everybody knows
 It used once, when my father was a boy,
 To form a proper, nay, important point
 410 I' the education of our well-born youth,
 That they took torture handsomely at need,
 Without confessing in this clownish¹ guise.
 Each noble had his rack for private use,
 And would, for the diversion of a guest,
 415 Bid it be set up in the yard of arms,
 And take thereon his hour of exercise,—
 Command the varlety stretch, strain their best,
 While friends looked on, admired my lord could smile
 'Mid tugging which had caused an ox to roar.
 420 Men are no longer men!

—And advocates

- No longer Farinacci, let us add,
 If I one more time fly from point proposed!
 So, *Vindicatio*,—here begins the speech!—
 425 *Honoris causa*; thus we make our stand:
 Honour in us had injury, we prove.
 Or if we fail to prove such injury
 More than misprision² of the fact,—what then?
 It is enough, authorities declare,
 430 If the result, the deed in question now,
 Be caused by confidence that injury
 Is veritable and no figment: since,

¹ peasant, rustic.

² mistaken belief, misapprehension.

- What, though proved fancy afterward, seemed fact
At the time, they argue shall excuse result.
- 435 That which we do, persuaded of good cause
For what we do, hold justifiable!—
So casuists bid: man, bound to do his best,
They would not have him leave that best undone
And mean to do his worst,—though fuller light
- 440 Show best was worst and worst would have been best.
Act by the present light!—they ask of man.
Ultra quod hic non agitur, besides
It is not anyway our business here,
De probatione adulterii,
- 445 To prove what we thought crime was crime indeed,
Ad irrogandam poenam, and require
Its punishment: such nowise do we seek:
Sed ad effectum, but 't is our concern,
Excusandi, here to simply find excuse,
- 450 *Occisorem*, for who did the killing-work,
Et ad illius defensionem, (mark
The difference) and defend the man, just that!
Quo casu levior probatio
Exuberaret, to which end far lighter proof
- 455 Suffices than the prior case would claim:
It should be always harder to convict,
In short, than to establish innocence.
Therefore we shall demonstrate first of all
That Honour is a gift of God to man
- 460 Precious beyond compare: which natural sense
Of human rectitude and purity,—
Which white, man's soul is born with,—brooks no touch:
Therefore, the sensitivest spot of all,
Wounded by any wafture breathed from black,
- 465 Is,—honour within honour, like the eye

Centred i' the ball,—the honour of our wife.

Touch us o' the pupil of our honour, then,

Not actually,—since so you slay outright,—

But by a gesture simulating touch,

470 Presumable mere menace of such taint,—

This were our warrant for eruptive ire

“To whose dominion I impose no end.”¹

(Virgil, now, should not be too difficult

To Cinoncino,—say, the early books.

475 Pen, truce to further gambols! *Poscimur!*)²

Nor can revenge of injury done here

To the honour proved the life and soul of us,

Be too excessive, too extravagant:

Such wrong seeks and must have complete revenge.

480 Show we this, first, on the mere natural ground:

Begin at the beginning, and proceed

Incontrovertibly. Theodoric,³

In an apt sentence Cassiodorus⁴ cites,

Propounds for basis of all household law—

485 I hardly recollect it, but it ends,

“Bird mates with bird, beast genders with his like,

And brooks no interference.” Bird and beast?

The very insects ... if they wive or no,

How dare I say when Aristotle doubts?⁵

¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.279.

² I am called upon [for an ode] (Horace, *Odes* 1.32.1).

³ Theodoric the Great, first Gothic king of Italy (c.455–526).

⁴ Theodoric's chancellor (c.480–575), who in his official capacity composed and collected many royal decrees under the title *Epistolae Variae*.

⁵ He does so in *De Generatione Animalium* 3.10 (“There is much difficulty about the generation of bees”).

- 490 But the presumption is they likewise wive,
 At least the nobler sorts; for take the bee
 As instance,—copying King Solomon,—¹
 Why that displeasure of the bee to aught
 Which savours of incontinency, makes
- 495 The unchaste a very horror to the hive?
 Whence comes it bees obtain their epithet
 Of *castae apes*, notably “the chaste”?
 Because, ingeniously saith Scaliger,
 (The young sage,—see his book of Table-talk)
- 500 “Such is their hatred of immodest act,
 They fall upon the offender, sting to death.”
 I mind a passage much confirmative
 I’ the Idyllist² (though I read him Latinized)
 “Why” asks a shepherd, “is this bank unfit
- 505 For celebration of our vernal loves?”
 “Oh swain,” returns the instructed shepherdess,
 “Bees swarm here, and would quick resent our warmth!”
 Only cold-blooded fish lack instinct here,
 Nor gain nor guard connubiality:
- 510 But beasts, quadrupedal, mammiferous,
 Do credit to their beasthood: witness him
 That Aelian³ cites, the noble elephant,
 (Or if not Aelian, somebody as sage)
 Who seeing, much offence beneath his nose,
- 515 His master’s friend exceed in courtesy

¹ Proverbs 6.6–8 (Septuagint version), where the bee—an ant in the King James version—is an example of industry and foresight rather than an enemy of unchastity.

² Supposedly the reference is to Theocritus, Moschus, or Bion, but no commentator, including the present ones, has succeeded in locating such a passage in their works.

³ See note to I 232.

- The due allowance to his master's wife,
 Taught them good manners and killed both at once,
 Making his master and the world admire.
 Indubitably, then, that master's self,
 520 Favoured by circumstance, had done the same
 Or else stood clear rebuked by his own beast.
Adeo, ut qui honorem spernit, thus,
 Who values his own honour not a straw,—
Et non recuperare curat, nor
 525 Labours by might and main to salve its wound,
Se ulciscendo, by revenging him,
Nil differat a belluis, is a brute,
Quinimo irrationabilior
Ipsismet belluis, nay, contrariwise,
 530 Much more irrational than brutes themselves,
 Should be considered, *reputetur!* How?
 If a poor animal feel honour smart,
 Taught by blind instinct nature plants in him,
 Shall man,—confessed creation's master-stroke,
 535 Nay, intellectual glory, nay, a god,
 Nay, of the nature of my Judges here,—
 Shall man prove the insensible, the block,
 The blot o' the earth he crawls on to disgrace?
 (Come, that's both solid and poetic!) Man
 540 Derogate,¹ live for the low tastes alone,
 Mean creeping cares about the animal life?
Absit such homage to vile flesh and blood!
- (May Gigia have remembered, nothing stings
 Fried liver out of its monotony
 545 Of richness, like a root of fennel, chopped

¹ “act unworthily of his rank and dignity” (Cook).

Fine with parsley: parsley-sprigs, I said—
 Was there need I should say “and fennel too”?
 But no, she cannot have been so obtuse!
 To our argument! The fennel will be chopped.)

- 550 From beast to man next mount we—ay, but, mind,
 Still mere man, not yet Christian,—that, in time!
 Not too fast, mark you! 'T is on Heathen grounds
 We next defend our act: then, fairly urge—
 If this were done of old, in a green tree,
 555 Allowed in the Spring rawness of our kind,
 What may be licensed in the Autumn dry¹
 And ripe, the latter harvest-tide of man?
 If, with his poor and primitive half-lights,
 The Pagan, whom our devils served for gods,²
 560 Could stigmatise the breach of marriage-vow
 As that which blood, blood only might efface,—
 Absolve the husband, outraged, whose revenge
 Anticipated law, plied sword himself,—
 How with the Christian in full blaze of noon?
 565 Shall not he rather double penalty,
 Multiply vengeance, than, degenerate,
 Let privilege be minished, droop, decay?
 Therefore set forth at large the ancient law!
 Superabundant the examples be
 570 To pick and choose from. The Athenian Code,
 Solon's, the name is servicable,—then,
 The Laws of the Twelve Tables,³ that fifteenth,—

¹ “For if they do these things [such as the persecution and killing of Jesus] in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?” (Luke 23.31).

² 1 Corinthians 10.20.

³ the earliest known body of Roman law, fifth century BC.

- “Romulus” likewise rolls out round and large;
 The Julian; the Cornelian; Gracchus’ Law:¹
- 575 So old a chime, the bells ring of themselves!
 Spreti can set that going if he please,
 I point you, for my part, the belfry plain,
 Intent to rise from dusk, *diluculum*,
 Into the Christian day shall broaden next.
- 580 First, the fit compliment to His Holiness
 Happily reigning: then sustain the point—
 All that was long ago declared as law
 By the natural revelation, stands confirmed
 By Apostle and Evangelist and Saint,—
- 585 To-wit—that Honour is man’s supreme good.
 Why should I baulk² Saint Jerome of his phrase?³
Ubi honor non est, where no honour is,
Ibi contemptus est; and where contempt,
Ibi injuria frequens; and where that,
- 590 The frequent injury, *ibi et indignatio;*
 And where the indignation, *ibi quies*
Nulla: and where there is no quietude,
 Why, *ibi*, there, the mind is often cast
 Down from the heights where it proposed to dwell,
- 595 *Mens a proposito saepe dejicitur.*
 And naturally the mind is so cast down,
 Since harder ’t is, *quum difficilius sit,*

¹ catch-titles referring to sections of Justinian’s *Pandects* often cited in the Old Yellow Book (see notes to I 223 and V 1781). These were decisions and statutes of the periods of, respectively, Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138–78 BC) and Gaius Gracchus (153–121 BC).

² to ignore or pass over.

³ in one of his letters.

- Iram cohibere, to coerce¹ one's wrath,
*Quam miracula facere, than work miracles,—**
- 600 So Gregory smiles in his First Dialogue.²
 Whence we infer, the ingenuous soul, the man
 Who makes esteem of honour and repute,
 Whenever honour and repute are touched
 Arrives at term³ of fury and despair,
- 605 Loses all guidance from the reason-check:
 As in delirium or a frenzy-fit,
 Nor fury nor despair he satiates,—no,
 Not even if he attain the impossible,
 O'erturn the hinges of the universe
- 610 To annihilate—not whoso caused the smart
 Solely, the author simply of his pain,
 But the place, the memory, *vituperii*,
 O' the shame and scorn: *quia*,—says Solomon,
 (The Holy Spirit speaking by his mouth
- 615 In Proverbs, the sixth chapter near the end)
 —Because, the zeal⁴ and fury of a man,
Zelus et furor viri, will not spare,
Non parcer, in the day of his revenge,
In die vindictae, nor will acquiesce,
- 620 *Nec acquiesceret*, through a person's prayers,
Cujusdam precibus,—nec suscipiet,
 Nor yet take, *pro redemptione*, for
 Redemption, *dona plurium*, gifts of friends,
 Mere money-payment to compound⁵ for ache.

¹ repress.

² that is, in his *Dialogorum Liber*.

³ extreme, end of the rope.

⁴ a calculated mistranslation of *zelus* (jealousy).

⁵ compensate (inadequately).

- 625 Who recognizes not my client's case?
 Whereto, as strangely consentaneous¹ here,
 Adduce Saint Bernard in the Epistle writ
 To Robertulus, his nephew: "Too much grief,
Dolor quippe nimius non liberat,
- 630 Does not excogitate² propriety,
Non verecundatur, nor knows shame at all,
Non consulit rationem, nor consults
 Reason, *non dignitatis metuit*
Damnum, nor dreads the loss of dignity;
- 635 *Modum et ordinem*, order and the mode,
Ignorat, it ignores: " why, trait for trait,
 Was ever portrait limned so like the life?
 (By Cavalier Maratta,³ shall I say?
 I hear he's first in reputation now.)
- 640 Yes, that of Samson in the Sacred Text:⁴
 That's not so much the portrait as the man!
 Samson in Gaza was the antetype
 Of Guido at Rome: observe the Nazarite!
 Blinded he was,—an easy thing to bear:
- 645 Intrepidly he took imprisonment,
 Gyves, stripes and daily labour at the mill:
 But when he found himself, i' the public place,
 Destined to make the common people sport,
 Disdain⁵ burned up with such an impetus
- 650 I' the breast of him that, all the man one fire,
Moriatur, roared he, let my soul's self die,

¹ pertinent.

² have regard for.

³ See note to III 58–59.

⁴ Judges 16.21–30.

⁵ pride.

Anima mea, with the Philistines!
 So, pulled down pillar, roof, and death and all,
Multosque plures interfecit, ay,
 655 And many more he killed thus, *moriens*,
 Dying, *quam vivus*, than in his whole life,
Occiderat, he ever killed before.
 Are these things writ for no example, Sirs?¹
 One instance more, and let me see who doubts!
 660 Our Lord Himself, made all of mansuetude,²
 Sealing the sum of sufferance up,³ received
 Opprobrium, contumely and buffeting⁴
 Without complaint: but when He found Himself
 Touched in His honour never so little for once,
 665 Then outbroke indignation pent before—
"Honorem meum nemini dabo!"⁵ "No,
 My honour I to nobody will give!"
 And certainly the example so hath wrought,
 That whosoever, at the proper worth,
 670 Apprises worldly honour and repute,
 Esteems it nobler to die honoured man
 Beneath Mannaia, than live centuries
 Disgraced in the eye o' the world. We find Saint Paul
 No recreant to this faith delivered once:⁶

¹ 1 Corinthians 10.11.

² gentleness.

³ "Thus saith the Lord God, Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty" (Ezekiel 28.12).

⁴ Matthew 26.67.

⁵ This was uttered not by Christ but by God, defending not *honorem* but *gloriam* (his being the Godhead). The source is Isaiah 42.8 (Vulgate): "*Ego Dominus, / Hoc est nomen meum: / Gloriam meam alteri non dabo.*"

⁶ Jude 3.

- 675 "Far worthier were it that I died,"¹ cries he,
Expedit mihi magis mori, "than
 That anyone should make my glory void,"
Quam ut gloriam meam quis evacuet!
 See, *ad Corinthienses*: whereupon
- 680 Saint Ambrose makes a comment with much fruit,
 Doubtless my Judges long since laid to heart,
 So I desist from bringing forward here.
 (I can't quite recollect it.)²

Have I proved

- 685 *Satis superque*, both enough and to spare,
 That Revelation old and new admits
 The natural man may effervesce in ire,
 O'erflood earth, o'erfroth heaven with foamy rage,
 At the first puncture to his self-respect?
- 690 Then, Sirs, this Christian dogma, this law-bud
 Full-blown now, soon to bask the absolute flower
 Of Papal doctrine in our blaze of day,—
 Bethink you, shall we miss one promise-streak,
 One doubtful birth of dawn crepuscular,³
- 695 One dew-drop comfort to humanity,
 Now that the chalice teems with noonday wine?
 Yea, argue Molinists who bar revenge—
 Referring just to what makes out our case!

¹ The quotation is from 1 Corinthians 9.15: "for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying [i.e., selfless worship of Jesus] void." The suppression of the gerund ending alters the whole meaning of the verse. Compare Galatians 6.14: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

² But Spreti does in the Old Yellow Book.

³ shadowy, dim (literally, twilight).

- Under old dispensation, argue they,
- 700 The doom of the adulterous wife was death,
 Stoning by Moses' law.¹ "Nay, stone her not,
 Put her away!" next legislates our Lord;²
 And last of all, "Nor yet divorce a wife!"
 Ordains the Church, "she typifies herself,
- 705 The Bride no fault shall cause to fall from Christ."
 Then, as no jot nor tittle of the Law
 Has passed away—which who presumes to doubt?
 As not one word of Christ is rendered vain—
 Which, could it be though heaven and earth should
 pass?³
- 710 —Where do I find my proper punishment
 For my adulterous wife, I humbly ask
 Of my infallible Pope,—who now remits
 Even the divorce allowed by Christ in lieu
 Of lapidation⁴ Moses licensed me?
- 715 The Gospel checks the Law which throws the stone,
 The Church tears the divorce-bill Gospel grants:
 Shall wives sin and enjoy impunity?
 What profits me the fulness of the days,⁵
 The final dispensation, I demand,
- 720 Unless Law, Gospel and the Church subjoin
 "But who hath barred thee primitive revenge,
 Which, like fire damped and dammed up, burns more
 fierce?
 Use thou thy natural privilege of man,

¹ Deuteronomy 22.23–24.

² in Matthew 5.31.

³ Matthew 24.35.

⁴ the right to throw stones.

⁵ 1 Chronicles 29.28.

Else wert thou found like those old ingrate Jews,¹
 725 Despite the manna-banquet on the board,
 A-longing after melons, cucumbers,
 And such like trash of Egypt left behind!"

(There was one melon had improved our soup:
 But did not Cinoncino need the rind
 730 To make a boat with? So I seem to think.)

Law, Gospel and the Church—from these we leap
 To the very last revealment, easy rule
 Befitting the well-born and thorough-bred²
 O' the happy day we live in, not the dark
 735 O' the early rude and acorn-eating race.
 "Behold," quoth James, "we bridle in a horse
 And turn his body as we would thereby!"³
 Yea, but we change the bit to suit the growth,
 And rasp our colt's jaw with a rugged spike
 740 We hasten to remit⁴ our managed steed
 Who wheels round at persuasion of a touch.
 Civilization bows to decency,
 The acknowledged use and wont: 't is manners,—mild
 But yet imperative law,—which make the man.
 745 Thus do we pay the proper compliment
 To rank, and what society of Rome
 Hath so obliged us by its interest,

¹ "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions and the garlick: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes" (Numbers 11.5–6).

² pure-blooded.

³ James 3.3.

⁴ dispense, with excuse.

Taken our client's part instinctively,
As unaware defending its own cause.

- 750 What *dictum* doth Society lay down
I' the case of one who hath a faithless wife?
Wherewithal should the husband cleanse his way?¹
Be patient and forgive? Oh, language fails,—
Shrinks from depicting his turpitude!
- 755 For if wronged husband raise not hue and cry,
Quod si maritus de adulterio non
Conquereretur, he's presumed a—foh!²
Presumitur leno: so, complain he must.
But how complain? At your tribunal, lords?
- 760 Far weightier challenge suits your sense, I wot!
You sit not to have gentlemen propose
Questions gentility can itself discuss.
Did not you prove that to our brother Paul?
The Abate, quum judicialiter
- 765 *Prosequeretur*, when he tried the law,
Guidonis causam, in Count Guido's case,
Accidit ipsi, this befell himself,
Quod risum moverit et cachinnos, that
He moved to mirth and cachinnation,³ all
- 770 Or nearly all, *ferè in omnibus*
Etiam sensatis et cordatis, men
Strong-sensed, sound-hearted, nay, the very Court,
Ipsismet in judicibus, I might add,
Non tamen dicam. In a cause like this,

¹ "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Psalms 119.9).

² explained by the next phrase—*Presumitur leno* (he is deemed a pander).

³ guffawing.

- 775 So multiplied were reasons *pro* and *con*,
 Delicate, intertwined and obscure,
 That Law refused loan of a finger-tip
 To unravel, re-adjust the hopeless twine,
 Since, half-a-dozen steps outside Law's seat,
- 780 There stood a foolish trifler with a tool¹
 A-dangle to no purpose by his side,
 Had clearly cut the embroilment in a trice.
Asserunt enim unanimiter
Doctores, for the Doctors all assert
- 785 That husbands, *quod mariti*, must be held
Viles, cornuti reputantur, vile,
 Fronts branching forth a florid infamy,
Si propriis manibus, if with their own hands,
Non sumunt, they fail straight to take revenge,
- 790 *Vindictam*, but expect the deed be done
 By the Court—*expectant illam fieri*
Per judices, qui summopere rident, which
 Gives an enormous guffaw for reply,
Et cachinnantur. For he ran away,
- 795 *Deliquit enim*, just that he might 'scape
 The censure of both counsellors and crowd,
Ut vulgi et doctorum evitaret
Censuram, and lest so he superadd
 To loss of honour ignominy too,
- 800 *Et sic ne istam quoque ignominiam*
Amisso honori superadderet.
 My lords, my lords, the inconsiderate step
 Was—we referred ourselves to Law at all!
 Twit me not with “Law else had punished you!”
- 805 Each punishment of the extra-legal step,

¹ such as Half-Rome; see II 66–67.

- To which the high-born preferably revert,
 Is ever for some oversight, some slip
 I' the taking vengeance, not for vengeance' self.
 A good thing, done unhandsomely, turns ill;
- 810 And never yet lacked ill the law's rebuke.
 For pregnant instance, let us contemplate
 The luck of Leonardus,—see at large
 Of Sicily's Decisions sixty-first.
 This Leonard finds his wife is false: what then?
- 815 He makes her own son snare her, and entice
 Out of the town walls to a private walk
 Wherein he slays her with commodity.¹
 They find her body half-devoured by dogs:
 Leonard is tried, convicted, punished, sent
- 820 To labour in the galleys seven years long:
 Why? For the murder? Nay, but for the mode!
Malus modus occidendi, ruled the Court,
 An ugly mode of killing, nothing more!
 Another fructuous sample,—see “*De Re*
- 825 *Criminali*,” in Matthaeus² divine piece.
 Another husband, in no better plight,
 Simulates absence, thereby tempts his wife;
 On whom he falls, out of sly ambuscade,
 Backed by a brother of his, and both of them
- 830 Armed to the teeth with arms that law had blamed.
Nimis dolose, overwilily,
Fuisse operatum, did they work,
 Pronounced the law: had all been fairly done
 Law had not found him worthy, as she did,

¹ conveniently.

² Laurentius Matthaeu et Sanz, Spanish author of *Tractatus de Re Criminali* (1676).

- 835 Of four years' exile. Why cite more? Enough
 Is good as a feast¹—(unless a birthday-feast
 For one's Cinuccio) so, we finish here.
 My lords, we rather need defend ourselves
 Inasmuch as, for a twinkling of an eye,
 840 We hesitatingly appealed to law,—
 Than need deny that, on mature advice,
 We blushingly bethought us, bade revenge
 Back to its simple proper private way
 Of decent self-dealt gentlemanly death.
 845 Judges, here is the law, and here beside,
 The testimony!² Look to it!

Pause and breathe!

- So far is only too plain; we must watch:
 Bottini will scarce hazard an attack
 850 Here: best anticipate the fellow's play
 And guard the weaker places—warily ask,
 What if considerations of a sort,
 Reasons of a kind, arise from out the strange
 Peculiar unforeseen new circumstance
 855 Of this our (candour owns) abnormal act,
 To bar the right of us revenging so?
 “Impunity were otherwise your meed:
 Go slay your wife and welcome,”—may be urged,—
 “But why the innocent old couple slay,
 860 Pietro, Violante? You may do enough,
 Not too much, not exceed the golden mean:
 Neither brute-beast nor Pagan, Gentile, Jew,

¹ an English colloquial saying first printed in John Heywood's *Proverbs* (1546).

² Isaiah 8.20.

Nor Christian, no nor votarist of the mode,¹
 Is justified to push revenge so far."

- 865 No, indeed? Why, thou very sciolist!²
 The actual wrong, Pompilia seemed to do,
 Was virtual wrong done by the parents here—
 Imposing her upon us as their child—
 Themselves allow: then, her fault was their fault,
 870 Her punishment be theirs accordingly!
 But wait a little, sneak not off so soon!
 Was this cheat solely harm to Guido, pray?
 The precious couple you call innocent,—
 Why, they were felons that Law failed to clutch,
 875 *Qui ut fraudarent*, who that they might rob,
Legitime vocatos, folk law called,
Ad fidei commissum, true heirs to the Trust,
Partum supposuerunt, feigned this birth,
Immemores reos factos esse, blind
- 880 To the fact that, guilty, they incurred thereby,
Ultimi supplicii, hanging or what's worse.
 Do you blame us that we turn Law's instruments,
 Not mere self-seekers,—mind the public weal,
 Nor make the private good our sole concern?
- 885 That having—shall I say—secured a thief,
 Not simply we recover from his pouch
 The stolen article our property,
 But also pounce upon our neighbour's purse
 We opportunely find reposing there,
- 890 And do him justice while we right ourselves?
 He owes us, for our part, a drubbing say,

¹ follower of the current fashion (therefore a rationalist or freethinker).

² superficial scholar.

But owes our neighbour just a dance i' the air
 Under the gallows: so, we throttle him.

That neighbour's Law, that couple are the Thief,

895 We are the over ready to help Law—

Zeal of her house hath eaten us up:¹ for which,
 Can it be, Law intends to eat up us,

Crudum Priatum, devour poor Priam raw,²

('T was Jupiter's own joke) with babes to boot,

900 *Priamique pisinnos*, in Homeric phrase?

Shame!—and so ends my period prettily.

But even,—prove the pair not culpable,
 Free as unborn babe from connivance at,
 Participation in, their daughter's fault:

905 Ours the mistake. Is that a rare event?

Non semel, it is anything but rare,

In contingentia facti, that by chance,

Impunes evaserunt, go scot-free,

Qui, such well-meaning people as ourselves,

910 *Justo dolore moti*, who aggrieved

With cause, *apposuerunt manus*, lay

Rough hands, *in innocentes*, on wrong heads.

Cite we an illustrative case in point:

Mulier Smirnea quaedam, good my lords,

915 A gentlewoman lived in Smyrna once,

Virum et filium ex eo conceptum, who

Both husband and her son begot by him

Killed, *interfecerat*, *ex quo*, because,

Vir filium suum perdididerat, her spouse

¹ Psalms 69.9.

² Zeus (Jupiter) told Hera that she might satisfy her wrath if she ate King Priam, his sons, and all the Trojan people raw (*Iliad* 4.35).

- 920 Had been beforehand with her, killed her son,
Matrimonii primi, of a previous bed.
Deinde accusata, then accused,
Apud Dolabellam, before him that sat
 Proconsul, *nec duabus caedibus*
 925 *Contaminatam liberare*, nor
 To liberate a woman doubly-dyed
 With murder, *voluit*, made he up his mind,
Nec condemnare, nor to doom to death,
Justo dolore impulsam, one impelled
 930 By just grief; *sed remisit*, but sent her up
Ad Areopagum, to the Hill of Mars,¹
Sapientissimorum judicum
Coetum, to that assembly of the sage
 Paralleled only by my judges here;
 935 *Ubi, cognito de causa*, where, the cause
 Well weighed, *responsum est*, they gave reply,
Ut ipsa et accusator, that both sides
 O' the suit, *redirent*, should come back again,
Post centum annos, after a hundred years,
 940 For judgment; *et sic*, by which sage decree,
Duplici parricidio rea, one
 Convicted of a double parricide,
Quamvis etiam innocentem, though in truth
 Out of the pair, one innocent at least
 945 She, *occidisset*, plainly had put to death,
Unde quaque, yet she altogether 'scaped,
Evasit impunis. See the case at length
 In Valerius,² fittingly styled *Maximus*,

¹ the Areopagus, site of the Athenian judicial assembly in the time of Solon.

² Roman historian, first century AD.

That eighth book of his Memorable Facts.

950 Nor Cyriacus¹ cites beside the mark:

Similiter uxor quae mandaverat,

Just so, a lady who had taken care,

Homicidium viri, that her lord be killed,

Ex denegatione debiti,

955 For denegation² of a certain debt,

Matrimonialis, he was loth to pay,

Fuit pecuniaria mulcta, was

Amerced in a pecuniary mulct,³

Punita, et ad poenam, and to pains,

960 *Temporalem*, for a certain space of time,

In monasterio, in a convent.

(Ay,

In monasterio! He mismanages

In with the ablative, the accusative!

965 I had hoped to have hitched the villain into verse

For a gift, this very day, a complete list

O' the prepositions each with proper case,

Telling a story, long was in my head.

“What prepositions take the accusative?

970 *Ad* to or at—*who saw the cat?*—down to

Ob, for, because of, *keep her claws off!*” Tush!

Law in a man takes the whole liberty:

The muse is fettered: just as Ovid found!)⁴

[———]

¹ Franciscus Niger Cyriacus, Mantuan lawyer, author of *Controversiae Forenses* (1628–38).

² denial.

³ fined.

⁴ See note to II 1221.

- And now, sea widens and the coast is clear.
- 975 What of the dubious act you bade excuse?
 Surely things broaden, brighten, till at length
 Remains—so far from act that needs defence—
 Apology to make for act delayed
 One minute, let alone eight mortal months
- 980 Of hesitation! “Why procrastinate?”
 (Out with it my Bottinius, ease thyself!)
 “Right, promptly done, is twice right: right delayed
 Turns wrong. We grant you should have killed your wife,
 But killed o’ the moment, at the meeting her
- 985 In company with the priest: then did the tongue
 O’ the Brazen Head¹ give license, ‘Time is now!’
 Wait to make mind up? ‘Time is past’ it peals.
 Friend, you are competent to mastery
 O’ the passions that confessedly explain
- 990 An outbreak: you allow an interval,
 And then break out as if time’s clock still clanged.
 You have forfeited your chance, and flat you fall
 Into the commonplace category
 Of men bound to go softly all their days,²
- 995 Obeying Law.”
- Now, which way make response?
 What was the answer Guido gave, himself?
 —That so to argue came of ignorance
 How honour bears a wound. “For, wound,” said he,
 1000 “My body, and the smart soon mends and ends:

¹ a bronze head reputedly made by Roger Bacon (c.1214–92), which uttered the words “Time is, Time was, Time’s past” and then fell into pieces.

² Isaiah 38.15.

- While, wound my soul where honour sits and rules,
 Longer the sufferance, stronger grows the pain,
 Being *ex incontinenti*,¹ fresh as first."
- But try another tack, urge common sense
- 1005 By way of contrast: say—Too true, my lords!
 We did demur, awhile did hesitate:
 Since husband sure should let a scruple speak
 Ere he slay wife,—for his own safety, lords!
 Carpers abound in this misjudging world:
- 1010 Moreover, there's a nicety in law
 That seems to justify them should they carp.
 Suppose the source of injury a son,—
 Father may slay such son yet run no risk:
 Why graced with such privilege? Because
- 1015 A father so incensed with his own child,
 Or must have reason, or believe he has:
Quia semper, seeing that in such event,
Presumitur, the law is bound suppose,
Quod capiat pater, that the sire must take,
- 1020 *Bonum consilium pro filio*,
 The best course as to what befits his boy,
 Through instinct, *ex instinctu*, of mere love,
Amoris, and, *paterni*, fatherhood;
Quam confidentiam, which confidence,
- 1025 *Non habet*, law declines to entertain,
De viro, of the husband: where finds he
 An instinct that compels him love his wife?
 Rather is he presumably her foe:
 So, let him ponder long in this bad world
- 1030 Ere do the simplest act of justice.

[— — —]

¹ at once (the *ex* is superfluous).

But

Again—and here we brush Bottini's breast—

Object you, "See the danger of delay!

Suppose a man murdered my friend last month:

1035 Had I come up and killed him for his pains

In rage, I had done right, allows the law:

I meet him now and kill him in cold blood,

I do wrong, equally allows the law:

Wherein do actions differ, yours and mine?"

1040 *In plenitudine intellectus es?*

Hast thy wits, Fisc? To take such slayer's life,

Returns it life to thy slain friend at all?

Had he stolen ring instead of stabbing friend,—

To-day, to-morrow or next century,

1045 Meeting the thief, thy ring upon his thumb,

Thou justifiably hadst wrung it thence:

So, couldst thou wrench thy friend's life back again,

Though prisoned in the bosom of his foe,

Why, law would look complacent on thy wrath.

1050 Our case is, that the thing we lost, we found:¹

The honour, we were robbed of eight months since,

Being recoverable at any day

By death of the delinquent. Go thy ways!

Ere thou hast learned law, will be much to do,

1055 As said the gaby² while he shod the goose.

Nay, if you urge me, interval was none!

From the inn to the villa—blank or else a bar

Of adverse and contrarious incident

Solid between us and our just revenge!

¹ Luke 15.6 (the parable of the lost sheep).

² simpleton.

- 1060 What with the priest who flourishes his blade,
The wife who like a fury flings at us,
The crowd—and then the capture, the appeal
To Rome, the journey there, the jaunting thence
To shelter at the House of Convertites,
1065 The visits to the Villa, and so forth,
Where was one minute left us all this while
To put in execution that revenge
We planned o' the instant?—as it were, plumped down
O' the spot, some eight months since, which round
sound egg,
- 1070 Rome, more propitious than our nest, should hatch!
Object not, “You reached Rome on Christmas-eve,
And, despite liberty to act at once,
Waited a whole and indecorous week!”
Hath so the Molinism, the canker, lords,
1075 Eaten to our bone? Is no religion left?
No care for aught held holy by the Church?
What, would you have us skip and miss those Feasts
O' the Natal Time, must we go prosecute
Secular business on a sacred day?
- 1080 Should not the merest charity expect,
Setting our poor concerns aside for once,
We hurried to the song matutinal
I' the Sistine,¹ and pressed forward for the Mass
The Cardinal that's Camerlengo² chaunts,
1085 Then rushed on to the blessing of the Hat
And Rapier, which the Pope sends to what prince
Has done most detriment to the Infidel—
And thereby whetted courage if 't were blunt?

¹ principal chapel of the Vatican.

² papal chamberlain, highest of the cardinals.

Meantime, allow we kept the house a week,
 1090 Suppose not we were idle in our mew!¹
 Picture us raging here and raving there—
 “Money?” I need none. ‘Friends?’ The word is null.
 Restore the white was on that shield of mine
 Borne at” ... wherever might be shield to bear.
 1095 “I see my grandsire, he who fought so well
 At” ... here find out and put in time and place,
 Or else invent the fight his grandsire fought:
 “I see this! I see that!”

(See nothing else,
 1100 Or I shall scarce see lamb’s fry in an hour!
 What to the uncle, as I bid advance
 The smoking dish? “Fry suits a tender tooth!
 Behoves we care a little for our kin—
 You, Sir,—who care so much for cousinship²
 1105 As come to your poor loving nephew’s feast!”
 He has the reversion of a long lease yet—
 Land to bequeath! He loves lamb’s fry, I know!)

Here fall to be considered those same six
 Qualities; what Bottini needs must call
 1110 So many aggravations of our crime,
 Parasite-growth upon mere murder’s back.
 We summarily might dispose of such
 By some off-hand and jaunty fling, some skit—³
 “So, since there’s proved no crime to aggravate,

¹ confinement, captivity.

² family ties.

³ joke, banter.

- 1115 A fico¹ for your aggravations, Fisc!"
 No,—handle mischief rather,—play with spells
 Were meant to raise a spirit, and laugh the while
 We show that did he rise we stand his match!
 Therefore, first aggravation: we made up—
- 1120 Over and above our simple murderous selves—
 A regular assemblage of armed men,
Coadunatio armatorum,—ay,
 Unluckily it was the very judge
 That sits in judgment on our cause to-day
- 1125 Who passed the law as Governor of Rome:
 "Four men armed,"—though for lawful purpose, mark!
 Much more for an acknowledged crime,—"shall die."
 We five were armed to the teeth, meant murder too?
 Why, that's the very point that saves us, Fisc!
- 1130 Let me instruct you. Crime nor done nor meant,—
 You punish still who arm and congregate:
 For wherefore use bad means to a good end?
 Crime being meant not done,—you punish still
 The means to crime, whereon you haply pounce,
- 1135 Though accident have baulked them of effect.
 But crime not only compassed² but complete,
 Meant and done too? Why, since you have the end,
 Be that your sole concern, nor mind those means
 No longer to the purpose! Murdered we?
- 1140 (—Which, that our luck was in the present case,
Quod contigisse in praesenti casu,
 Is palpable, *manibus palpatum est*—)
 Make murder out against us, nothing else!
 Of many crimes committed with a view

¹ fig. (To "give the fico" is to "bite the thumb": see note to l. 74 above.)

² plotted.

- 1145 To one main crime, Law overlooks the less,
 Intent upon the large. Suppose a man
 Having in view commission of a theft,
 Climbs the town-wall: 't is for the theft he hangs,
 In case he stands convicted of such theft:
 1150 Law remits whipping, due to who clomb wall
 Through bravery or wantonness alone,
 Just to dislodge a daw's nest, plant a flag.
 So I interpret you the manly mind
 Of him about to judge both you and me,—
 1155 Our Governor, who, being no Fisc, my Fisc,
 Cannot have blundered on ineptitude!

Next aggravation,—that the arms themselves
 Were specially of such forbidden sort
 Through shape or length or breadth, as, prompt, Law
 plucks

- 1160 From single hand of solitary man,
 Making him pay the carriage with his life:
Delatio armorum, arms against the rule,
Contra formam constitutionis, of
 Pope Alexander's¹ blessed memory.
 1165 Such are the poignards with the double prong,
 Horn-like, when tines make bold the antlered buck,
 Each prong of brittle glass—wherewith to stab
 And break off short and so let fragment stick
 Fast in the flesh to baffle surgery:
 1170 Such being the Genoese blade with hooked edge
 That did us service at the villa here.
Sed parcat mihi tam eximius vir,
 But,—let so rare a personage forgive,—

¹ Innocent XII's immediate predecessor.

Fisc, thy objection is a foppery!

- 1175 Thy charge runs that we killed three innocents:
 Killed, dost see? Then, if killed, what matter how?
 By stick or stone, by sword or dagger, tool
 Long or tool short, round or triangular—
 Poor slain folk find small comfort in the choice!
- 1180 Means to an end, means to an end, my Fisc!
 Nature cries out, “Take the first arms you find!”
*Furor ministrat arma.*¹ where’s a stone?
Unde mī lapidem, where darts for me?
*Unde sagittas?*² But subdue the bard
- 1185 And rationalize a little. Eight months since,
 Had we, or had we not, incurred your blame
 For letting ‘scape unpunished this bad pair?
 I think I proved that in last paragraph!
 Why did we so? Because our courage failed.
- 1190 Wherfore? Through lack of arms to fight the foe:
 We had no arms or merely lawful ones,
 An unimportant sword and blunderbuss,
 Against a foe, pollent³ in potency,
 The *amasius*,⁴ and our vixen of a wife.
- 1195 Well then, how culpably do we gird the loin
 And once more undertake the high emprise,⁵
 Unless we load ourselves this second time
 With handsome superfluity of arms,
 Since better is “too much” than “not enough,”
- 1200 And “*plus non vitiat*,” too much does no harm,

¹ “Madness supplies its own arms” (*Aeneid* 1.150).

² Horace, *Satires* 2.7.116–17.

³ powerful.

⁴ lover.

⁵ enterprise.

Except in mathematics, sages say.

Gather instruction from the parable!¹

At first we are advised—"A lad hath here

Seven barley loaves and two small fishes: what

1205 Is that among so many?" Aptly asked:

But put that question twice and, quite as apt,

The answer is "Fragments, twelve baskets full!"

And, while we speak of superabundance, fling

We word by the way to fools who cast their flout

1210 On Guido—"Punishment were pardoned him,

But here the punishment exceeds offence:

He might be just, but he was cruel too!"

Why, grant there seems a kind of cruelty

In downright stabbing people he could maim,

1215 (If so you stigmatize the stern and strict)

Still, Guido meant no cruelty—may plead

Transgression of his mandate, over-zeal

O' the part of his companions: all he craved

Was, they should fray the faces of the folk,

1220 Merely disfigure, nowise make them die.

Solummodo fassus est, he owns no more,

Dedisce mandatum, than that he desired,

Ad sfrisiandum, dicam, that they hack

And hew, i' the customary phrase, his wife,

1225 *Uxorem tantum*, and no harm beside.

If his instructions then be misconceived,

Nay, disobeyed, impute you blame to him?

¹ Matthew 15.34 (for the seven loaves; other accounts, e.g., Matthew 14.17, have five) and Matthew 14.20 (for the twelve baskets; other accounts, e.g., Matthew 15.37, have seven). It is, of course, a miracle, not a parable.

- Cite me no Panicollus¹ to the point,
 As adverse! Oh, I quite expect his case—
- 1230 How certain noble youths of Sicily
 Having good reason to mistrust their wives,
 Killed them and were absolved in consequence:
 While others who had gone beyond the need
 By mutilation of each paramour—
- 1235 As Galba in the Horatian satire² grieved
 —These were condemned to the galleys, cast for guilt
 Exceeding simple murder of a wife.
 But why? Because of ugliness, and not
 Cruelty, in the said revenge, I trow!
- 1240 *Ex causa abscissionis partium;*
Qui nempe id facientes reputantur
Naturae inimici, man revolts
 Against them as the natural enemy.
 Pray, grant to one who meant to slit the nose
- 1245 And slash the cheek and slur the mouth, at most,
 A somewhat more humane award than these
 Obtained, these natural enemies of man!
Objectum funditus corruit, flat you fall,
 My Fisc! I waste no kick on you, but pass.
- 1250 Third aggravation: that our act was done—
 Not in the public street, where safety lies,
 Not in the bye-place, caution may avoid,
 Wood, cavern, desert, spots contrived for crime,—
 But in the very house, home, nook and nest,

¹ a mistake for Caesar Panimolle (Panimollus), a jurist frequently quoted in the Old Yellow Book.

² the sole dissenter when “all” others approved of the sexual mutilation of an adulterer (*Satires* 1.2.46).

- 1255 O' the victims, murdered in their dwelling-place,
In domo ac habitatione propria,
 Where all presumably is peace and joy.
 The spider, crime, pronounce we twice a pest
 When, creeping from congenial cottage, she
 1260 Taketh hold with her hands, to horrify
 His household more, i' the palace of the king.
 All three were housed and safe and confident.
 Moreover, the permission that our wife
 Should have at length *domum pro carcere*,
 1265 Her own abode in place of prison—why,
 We ourselves granted, by our other self
 And proxy Paolo: did we make such grant,
 Meaning a lure?—elude the vigilance
 O' the jailor, lead her to commodious¹ death,
 1270 While we ostensibly relented?

Ay,

- Just so did we, nor otherwise, my Fisc!
 Is vengeance lawful? We demand our right,
 But find it will be questioned or refused
 1275 By jailor, turnkey, hangdog,²—what know we?
 Pray, how is it we should conduct ourselves?
 To gain our private right—break public peace,
 Do you bid us?—trouble order with our broils?
 Endanger ... shall I shrink to own ... ourselves?—
 1280 Who want no broken head nor bloody nose
 (While busied slitting noses, breaking heads)

¹ adequate for our needs.

² “a despicable or degraded fellow fit only to hang a dog, or to be hanged like a dog” (*OED*); in this context the word was perhaps suggested by Sir Walter Scott’s “hangdog executioner” (*The Fair Maid of Perth*).

- From the first tipstaff¹ that may interfere!
Nam quicquid sit, for howsoever it be,
An de consensu nostro, if with leave
1285 Or not, *a monasterio*, from the nuns,
Educta esset, she had been led forth,
Potuimus id dissimulare, we
May well have granted leave in pure pretence,
Ut aditum habere, that thereby
1290 An entry we might compass, a free move
Potuissemus, to her easy death,
Ad eam occidendum. Privacy
O' the hearth, and sanctitude of home, say you?
Shall we give man's abode more privilege
1295 Than God's?—for in the churches where He dwells,
In quibus assistit Regum Rex, by means
Of His essence, *per essentiam*, all the same,
Et nihilominus, therein, *in eis*,
Ex justa via delinquens, whoso dares
1300 To take a liberty on ground enough,
Is pardoned, *excusatur*: that's our case—
Delinquent through befitting cause. You hold,
To punish a false wife in her own house
Is graver than, what happens every day,
1305 To hale a debtor from his hiding-place
In church protected by the Sacrament?
To this conclusion have I brought my Fisc?
Foxes have holes, and fowls o' the air their nests;²
Praise you the impiety that follows, Fisc?
1310 Shall false wife yet have where to lay her head?

¹ court official.

² The application in the original (Matthew 8.20) is to “the Son of man,” not to false wives.

“*Contra Fiscum definitum est!*” He’s done!

“*Surge et scribe,*” make a note of it!

—If I may dally with Aquinas’ word.¹

- Or in the death-throe does he mutter still,
 1315 Fourth aggravation, that we changed our garb,
 And rusticized ourselves with uncouth hat,
 Rough vest and goatskin wrappage; murdered thus
Mutatione vestium, in disguise,
 Whereby mere murder got complexed with wile,
 1320 Turned *homicidium ex insidiis?* Fisc,
 How often must I round thee in the ears—
 All means are lawful to a lawful end?
 Concede he had the right to kill his wife:
 The Count indulged in a travesty;² why?
 1325 *De illa ut vindictam sumeret,*
 That on her he might lawful vengeance take,
Commodius, with more ease, *et tutius*,
 And safelier: wants he warrant for the step?
 Read to thy profit how the Apostle once³
 1330 For ease and safety, when Damascus raged,
 Was let down in a basket by the wall
 To ’scape the malice of the governor
 (Another sort of Governor boasts Rome!)
 —Many are of opinion,—covered close,
 1335 Concealed with—what except that very cloak

¹ “Arise and write” (“*Surge et scribe*”) is not found in his writings, though many legends credit him with divine inspiration.

² disguise.

³ Acts 9.25 (“Then the disciples took him [Paul] by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket”) and 2 Timothy 4.13 (“The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee”: but this was thirty years “afterward”).

He left behind at Troas afterward?

I shall not add a syllable: Molinists may!

Well, have we more to manage? Ay, indeed!

Fifth aggravation, that our wife reposed

- 1340 *Sub potestate judicis*, beneath
 Protection of the judge,—her house was styled
 A prison, and his power became its guard
 In lieu of wall and gate and bolt and bar.
 This is a tough point, shrewd, redoubtable:
 1345 Because we have to supplicate that judge
 Shall overlook wrong done the judgment-seat.
 Now, I might suffer my own nose be pulled,
 As man: but then as father ... if the Fisc
 Touched one hair of my boy who held my hand
 1350 In confidence he could not come to harm
 Crossing the Corso, at my own desire,
 Going to see those bodies in the church—
 What would you say to that, Don Hyacinth?
 This is the sole and single knotty point:
 1355 For, bid Tommati blink his interest,
 You laud his magnanimity the while:
 But baulk¹ Tommati's office,—he talks big!
 “My predecessors in the place,—those sons
 O' the prophets that may hope succeed me here,—
 1360 Shall I diminish their prerogative?
 Count Guido Franceschini's honour!—well,
 Has the Governor of Rome none?”

[———]

¹ “Blink” and “baulk” both mean “ignore” (the sense is, disregard his personal feelings in respect to the alleged contempt of court, but not the dignity of his office).

You perceive,

- The cards are all against us. Make a push,
 1365 Kick over table, as shrewd gamesters do!
 We, do you say, encroach upon the rights,
 Deny the omnipotence o' the Judge forsooth?
 We, who have only been from first to last
 Intending that his purpose should prevail,
 1370 Nay more, at times, anticipating it
 At risk of his rebuke?

But wait awhile!

- Cannot we lump this with the sixth and last
 Of the aggravations—that the Majesty
 1375 O' the Sovereign here received a wound? to-wit,
Laesa Majestas, since our violence
 Was out of envy¹ to the course of law,
In odium litis? We cut short thereby
 Three pending suits, promoted by ourselves
 1380 I' the main,—which worsens crime, *accedit ad*
Exasperationem criminis!

Yes, here the eruptive wrath with full effect!

How, did not indignation chain my tongue,
 Could I repel this last, worst charge of all!

- 1385 (There is a porcupine to barbecue;
 Giga can jug a rabbit well enough,
 With sour-sweet sauce and pine-pips; but, good Lord,
 Suppose the devil instigate the wench
 To stew, not roast him? Stew my porcupine?
 1390 If she does, I know where his quills shall stick!
 Come, I must go myself and see to things:

¹ hostility, malice.

- I cannot stay much longer stewing here.)
Our stomach ... I mean, our soul is stirred within,
And we want words. We wounded Majesty?
- 1395 Fall under such a censure, we?—who yearned
So much that Majesty dispel the cloud
And shine on us with healing on her wings,¹
That we prayed Pope *Majestas'* very self
To anticipate a little the tardy pack,
- 1400 Bell us forth deep the authoritative bay
Should start the beagles into sudden yelp
Unisonous,—and, Gospel leading Law,
Grant there assemble in our own behoof
A Congregation, a particular Court,
- 1405 A few picked friends of quality and place,
To hear the several matters in dispute,—
Causes big, little and indifferent,
Bred of our marriage like a mushroom-growth,—
All at once (can one brush off such too soon?)
- 1410 And so with laudable despatch decide
Whether we, in the main (to sink detail)
Were one the Pope should hold fast or let go.
“What, take the credit from the Law?” you ask?
Indeed, we did! Law ducks to Gospel here:
- 1415 Why should Law gain the glory and pronounce
A judgment shall immortalize the Pope?
Yes: our self-abnegating policy
Was Joab’s—we would rouse our David’s sloth,²
Bid him encamp against a city, sack
- 1420 A place whereto ourselves had long laid siege,
Lest, taking it at last, it take our name

¹ Malachi 4.2.

² 2 Samuel 12.26–29.

Nor be styled *Innocentinopolis*.
 But no! The modesty was in alarm,
 The temperance refused to interfere,
 1425 Returned us our petition with the word
 “*Ad judices suos*,” “Leave him to his Judge!”
 As who should say “Why trouble my repose?
 Why consult Peter in a simple case,¹
 Peter’s wife’s sister in her fever-fit
 1430 Might solve as readily as the Apostle’s self?
 Are my Tribunals posed by aught so plain?
 Hath not my Court a conscience? It is of age,
 Ask it!”²

We do ask,—but, inspire reply

1435 To the Court thou bidst me ask, as I have asked—
 Oh thou, who vigilantly dost attend
 To even the few, the ineffectual words
 Which rise from this our low and mundane sphere
 Up to thy region out of smoke and noise,
 1440 Seeking corroboration from thy nod
 Who art all justice—which means mercy too,³
 In a low noisy smoky world like ours
 Where Adam’s sin made peccable⁴ his seed!
 We venerate the father of the flock,
 1445 Whose last faint sands of life, the frittered gold,
 Fall noiselessly, yet all too fast, o’ the cone
 And tapering heap of those collected years:

¹ Matthew 8.14–15.

² John 9.21 (the words of the parents of the boy whose sight was miraculously restored).

³ Micah 6.8.

⁴ capable of sinning.

Never have these been hurried in their flow,
 Though justice fain would jog reluctant arm,

- 1450 In eagerness to take the forfeiture
 Of guilty life: much less shall mercy sue
 In vain that thou let innocence survive,
 Precipitate no minim¹ of the mass
 O' the all-so precious moments of thy life,
 1455 By pushing Guido into death and doom!

(Our Cardinal engages to go read
 The Pope my speech, and point its beauties out.
 They say, the Pope has one half-hour, in twelve,
 Of something like a moderate return

- 1460 Of the intellectuals,²—never much to lose!
 If I adroitly plant this passage there,
 The Fisc will find himself forestalled, I think,
 Though he stand, beat till the old ear-drum break!
 —Ah, boy of my own bowels, Hyacinth,
 1465 Wilt ever catch the knack, requite the pains
 Of poor papa, become proficient too
 I' the how and why and when, the time to laugh,³
 The time to weep, the time, again, to pray,
 And all the times prescribed by Holy Writ?
 1470 Well, well, we fathers can but care, but cast
 Our bread upon the waters!)⁴

In a word,

These secondary charges go to ground,

¹ smallest particle.

² mental powers.

³ Ecclesiastes 3.1–8.

⁴ Ecclesiastes 11.1.

- Since secondary, and superfluous,—motes
1475 Quite from the main point: we did all and some,
Little and much, adjunct and principal,
Causa honoris. Is there such a cause
As the sake of honour? By that sole test try
Our action, nor demand if more or less,
1480 Because of the action's mode, we merit blame
Or may-be deserve praise! The Court decides.
Is the end lawful? It allows the means:
What we may do, we may with safety do,
And what means "safety" we ourselves must judge.
1485 Put case a person wrongs me past dispute:
If my legitimate vengeance be a blow,
Mistrusting my bare arm can deal that blow,
I claim co-operation of a stick;
Doubtful if stick be tough, I crave a sword;
1490 Diffident of ability in fence,
I fee a friend, a swordsman to assist:
Take one—he may be coward, fool or knave:
Why not take fifty?—and if these exceed
I' the due degree of drubbing, whom accuse
1495 But the first author of the aforesaid wrong
Who put poor me to such a world of pains?
Surgery would have just excised a wart;
The patient made such pothecy, struggled so
That the sharp instrument sliced nose and all.
1500 Taunt us not that our friends performed for pay!
Ourselves had toiled for simple honour's sake:
But country clowns want dirt they comprehend,
The piece of gold! Our reasons, which suffice
Ourselves, be ours alone; our piece of gold
1505 Be, to the rustic, reason he approves!
We must translate our motives like our speech,

Into the lower phrase that suits the sense
 O' the limitedly apprehensive.¹ Let
 Each level have its language! Heaven speaks first
 1510 To the angel, then the angel tames the word
 Down to the ear of Tobit:² he, in turn,
 Diminishes the message to his dog,
 And finally that dog finds how the flea
 (Which else, importunate, might check his speed)
 1515 Shall learn its hunger must have holiday
 By application of his tongue or paw:
 So many varied sorts of language here,
 Each following each with pace to match the step,
*Haud passibus aequis!*³

1520 Talking of which flea,
 Reminds me I must put in special word
 For the poor humble following,—the four friends,
Sicarii, our assassins caught and caged.
 Ourselves are safe in your approval now:
 1525 Yet must we care for our companions, plead
 The cause o' the poor, the friends (of old-world faith)⁴
 Who lie in tribulation for our sake.
Pauperum Procurator is my style:
 I stand forth as the poor man's advocate:
 1530 And when we treat of what concerns the poor,
Et cum agatur de pauperibus,
 In bondage, *carceratis*, for their sake,

¹ intelligent, quick.

² in the apocryphal book of the same name. See note to VI 1272–73.

³ Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.724 (which has *non* instead of *haud*).

⁴ that is, according to the teachings of Jesus, the principles of Christianity.

- In eorum causis, natural piety,
Pietas, ever ought to win the day,*
1535 *Triumphare debet, quia ipsi sunt,*
Because those very paupers constitute,
Thesaurus Christi, all the wealth of Christ.
Nevertheless I shall not hold you long
With multiplicity of proofs, nor burn
1540 Candle at noon-tide, clarify the clear.
There beams a case refulgent¹ from our books—
Castrensis, Butringarius,² everywhere
I find it burn to dissipate the dark.
'T is this: a husband had a friend, which friend
1545 Seemed to him over-friendly with his wife
In thought and purpose,—I pretend no more.
To justify suspicion or dispel,
He bids his wife make show of giving heed,
Semblance of sympathy—propose, in fine,
1550 A secret meeting in a private place.
The friend, enticed thus, finds an ambuscade,
To-wit, the husband posted with a pack
Of other friends, who fall upon the first
And beat his love and life out both at once.
1555 These friends were brought to question for their help;
Law ruled "The husband being in the right,
Who helped him in the right can scarce be wrong"—
Opinio, an opinion every way,
Multum tenenda cordi, heart should hold!
1560 When the inferiors follow as befits
The lead o' the principal, they change their name,
And, *non dicuntur*, are no longer called

¹ brilliant.

² jurists of the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries respectively.

- His mandatories,¹ *mandatorii*,
 But helpmates, *sed auxiliatores*; since
 1565 To that degree does honour' sake lend aid,
Adeo honoris causa est efficax,
 That not alone, *non solum*, does it pour
 Itself out, *se diffundat*, on mere friends
 We bring to do our bidding of this sort,
 1570 *In mandatorios simplices*, but sucks
 Along with it in wide and generous whirl,
Sed etiam assassinii qualitate
Qualificatos, people qualified
 By the quality of assassination's self,
 1575 Dare I make use of such neologism,²
Ut utar verbo.

Haste we to conclude.

- Of the other points that favour, leave some few
 For Spreti; such as the delinquents' youth.
 1580 One of them falls short, by some months, of age
 Fit to be managed by the gallows; two
 May plead exemption from our law's award,
 Being foreigners, subjects of the Granduke—
 I spare that bone to Spreti, and reserve
 1585 Myself the juicier breast of argument—
 Flinging the breast-blade i' the face o' the Fisc
 Who furnished me the tid-bit: he must needs
 Play off his privilege and rack the clowns,—
 And they, at instance of the rack, confess
 1590 All four unanimously made resolve,—
 The night o' the murder, in brief minute snatched

¹ people who take orders.

² the word-play on “qualified” and “quality” in the preceding lines.

Behind the back of Guido as he fled,—
That, since he had not kept his promise, paid
The money for the murder on the spot,
1595 So, reaching home again, might please ignore
The pact or pay them in improper coin,—
They one and all resolved, these hopeful friends,
'T were best inaugurate the morrow's light,
Nature recruited with her due repose,
1600 By killing Guido as he lay asleep
Pilloved on wallet which contained their fee.

I thank the Fisc for knowledge of this fact:
What fact could hope to make more manifest
Their rectitude, Guido's integrity?
1605 For who fails recognize the touching truth
That these poor rustics bore no envy, hate,
Malice nor yet uncharitableness
Against the people they had put to death?
In them, did such an act reward itself?
1610 All done was to deserve the simple pay,
Obtain the bread clowns earn by sweat of brow,
And missing which, they missed of everything—
Hence claimed pay, even at expense of life
To their own lord, so little warped (admire!)
1615 By prepossession, such the absolute
Instinct of equity in rustic souls!
Whereas our Count, the cultivated mind,
He, wholly rapt in his serene regard
Of honour, he contemplating the sun
1620 Who hardly marks if taper blink below,—
He, dreaming of no argument for death
Except a vengeance worthy noble hearts,—
Dared not so desecrate the deed, forsooth,

Vulgarize vengeance, as defray its cost

- 1625 By money dug from out the dirty earth,
 Irritant mere, in Ovid's phrase,¹ to ill.
 What though he lured base hinds² by lucre's hope,—
 The only motive they could masticate,
 Milk for babes, not strong meat which men require?
 1630 The deed done, those coarse hands were soiled enough,
 He spared them the pollution of the pay.
 So much for the allegation, thine, my Fisc,
Quo nil absurdius, than which nought more mad,
Excogitari potest, may be squeezed
 1635 From out the cogitative brain of thee!

And now, thou excellent the Governor!

(Push to the peroration)³ *caeterum*

Enixe supplico, I strive in prayer,

Ut dominis meis, that unto the Court,

- 1640 *Benigna fronte*, with a gracious brow,
Et oculis serenis, and mild eyes,
Perpendere placeat, it may please them weigh,
Quod dominus Guido, that our noble Count,
Occidit, did the killing in dispute,

- 1645 *Ut ejus honor tumulatus*, that
 The honour of him buried fathom-deep
 In infamy, *in infamia*, might arise,
Resurgeret, as ghost breaks sepulchre!

Occidit, for he killed, *uxorem*, wife,

- 1650 *Quia illi fuit*, since she was to him,
Opprobrio, a disgrace and nothing more!

¹ “*irritamenta malorum*” (*Metamorphoses* 1.140).

² peasants.

³ concluding summary.

- Et genitores, killed her parents too,
 Qui, who, *postposita verecundia*,
 Having thrown off all sort of decency,
 1655 *Filiam repudiarunt*, had renounced
 Their daughter, *atque declarare non
 Erubuerunt*, nor felt blush tinge cheek,
 Declaring, *meretricis genitam
 Esse*, she was the offspring of a drab,
 1660 *Ut ipse dehonestaretur*, just
 That so himself might lose his social rank!
Cujus mentem, and which daughter's heart and soul,
 They, *perverterunt*, turned from the right course,
Et ad illicitos amores non
 1665 *Dumtaxat pellexerunt*, and to love
 Not simply did alluringly incite,
Sed vi obedientiae, but by force
 O' the duty, *filialis*, daughters owe,
Coegerunt, forced and drove her to the deed:
 1670 *Occidit*, I repeat he killed the clan,
Ne scilicet amplius in dedecore,
 Lest peradventure longer life might trail,
Viveret, link by link his turpitude,¹
Invisus consanguineis, hateful so
 1675 To kith and kindred, *a nobilibus*
Notatus, shunned by men of quality,
Relictus ab amicis, left i' the lurch
 By friends, *ab omnibus derisus*, turned
 A common hack-block to try edge of jokes.
 1680 *Occidit*, and he killed them here in Rome,
In Urbe, the Eternal City, Sirs,
Nempe quae alias spectata est,*

¹ shame.

- The appropriate theatre which witnessed once,
Matronam nobilem, Lucretia's self,¹
1685 *Abluere pudicitiae maculas*,
Wash off the spots of her pudicity,²
Sanguine proprio, with her own pure blood;
Quae vidit, and which city also saw,
Patrem, Virginius,³ *undequaque*, quite,
1690 *Impunem*, with no sort of punishment,
Nor, *et non illaudatum*, lacking praise,
Sed polluentem parricidio,
Imbrue his hands with butchery, *filiae*,
Of chaste Virginia, to avoid a rape,
1695 *Ne raperetur ad stupra*; so to heart,
Tanti illi cordi fuit, did he take,
Suspicio, the mere fancy men might have,
Honoris amittendi, of fame's⁴ loss,
Ut potius voluerit filia
1700 *Orbari*, he preferred to lose his child,
Quam illa incederet, rather than she walk
The ways an, *inhonesta*, child disgraced,
Licet non sponte, though against her will.
Occidit—killed them, I reiterate—
1705 *In propria domo*, in their own abode,
Ut adultera et parentes, that each wretch,

¹ After being raped by the son of Tarquinus Superbus, Lucretia stabbed herself in the presence of her father, her husband, and two of their friends.

² The word means “chastity,” but Browning, deriving it from the adjective “pudic,” uses it here in the sense of “shame.”

³ To avoid his daughter's falling into the hands of the decemvir Appius Claudius as a slave, her father Virginius stabbed her to the heart. See Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*.

⁴ reputation.

- Conscii agnoscerent*, might both see and say,
Nullum locum, there's no place, *nullumque esse*
Asylum, nor yet refuge of escape,
1710 *Impenetrabilem*, shall serve as bar,
Honori laeso, to the wounded one
In honour; *neve ibi opprobria*
Continuarentur, killed them on the spot,
Moreover, dreading lest within those walls
1715 The opprobrium peradventure be prolonged,
Et domus quae testis fuit turpium,
And that the domicile which witnessed crime,
Esset et poenae, might watch punishment:
Occidit, killed, I round you in the ears,
1720 *Quia alio modo*, since by other mode,
Non poterat ejus existimatio,
There was no possibility his fame,
Laesa, gashed griesly,¹ *tam enormiter*,
Ducere cicatrices, might be healed:
1725 *Occidit ut exemplum praeberet*
Uxoribus, killed her, so to lesson wives
Jura conjugii, that the marriage-oath,
Esse servanda, must be kept henceforth:
Occidit denique, killed her, in a word,
1730 *Ut pro posse honestus viveret*,
That he, please God, might creditably live,
Sin minus, but if fate willed otherwise,
Proprii honoris, of his outraged fame,
Offensi, by Mannaia, if you please,
1735 *Commiseranda victima caderet*,
The pitiable victim he should fall!

[— — —]

¹ horribly.

Done! I' the rough, i' the rough! But done! And, lo,
 Landed and stranded lies my very speech,
 My miracle, my monster of defence—¹

1740 Leviathan into the nose whereof
 I have put fish-hook, pierced his jaw with thorn,
 And given him to my maidens for a play!
 I' the rough: to-morrow I review my piece,
 Tame here and there undue floridity.

1745 It's hard: you have to plead before these priests
 And poke at them with Scripture, or you pass
 For heathen and, what's worse, for ignorant
 O' the quality o' the Court and what it likes
 By way of illustration of the law.

1750 To-morrow stick in this, and throw out that,
 And, having first ecclesiasticized,
 Regularize the whole, next emphasize,
 Then latinize, and lastly Cicero-ize,²
 Giving my Fisc his finish. There's my speech!

1755 And where's my fry, and family and friends?
 Where's that huge Hyacinth I mean to hug
 Till he cries out, "*Jam satis!*³ Let me breathe!"
 Now, what an evening have I earned to-day!
 Hail, ye true pleasures, all the rest are false!

1760 Oh the old mother, oh the fattish wife!
 Rogue Hyacinth shall put on paper toque,⁴
 And wrap himself around with mamma's veil
 Done up to imitate papa's black robe,
 (I'm in the secret of the comedy,—

¹ 1739–42 Job 41. Compare V 1504–05 and X 1102–11.

² polish to the highest standards of Ciceronian Latin.

³ Martial, *Epigrammaton* 4.89.1. See also note to IV 31.

⁴ tall brimless hat worn by lawyers and chefs.

- 1765 Part of the program leaked out long ago!
 And call himself the Advocate o' the Poor,
 Mimic Don father that defends the Count:
 And for reward shall have a small full glass
 Of manly red rosolio¹ to himself,
- 1770 —Always provided that he conjugate
Bibo, I drink, correctly—nor be found
 Make the *perfectum, bipsi*,² as last year!
 How the ambitious do so harden heart
 As lightly hold by these home-sanctitudes,
- 1775 To me is matter of bewilderment—
 Bewilderment! Because ambition's range
 Is nowise tethered by domestic tie.
 Am I refused an outlet from my home
 To the world's stage?—whereon a man should play
- 1780 The man in public, vigilant for law,
 Zealous for truth, a credit to his kind,
 Nay,—since, employing talent so, I yield
 The Lord His own again with usury,—³
 A satisfaction, yea, to God Himself!
- 1785 Well, I have modelled me by Agur's wish,⁴
 "Remove far from me vanity and lies,
 Feed me with food convenient for me!" What
 I' the world should a wise man require beyond?
 Can I but coax the good fat little wife
- 1790 To tell her fool of a father the mad prank
 His scapegrace nephew played this time last year
 At Carnival! He could not choose, I think,

¹ cordial.

² It should have been *bibi*.

³ Matthew 25.27. There is probably a pun on "talent."

⁴ Proverbs 30.8.

- But modify that inconsiderate gift
 O' the cup and cover (somewhere in the will
 1795 Under the pillow, someone seems to guess)
 —Correct that clause in favour of a boy
 The trifle ought to grace, with name engraved,
 Would look so well, produced in future years
 To pledge a memory, when poor papa
 1800 Latin and law are long since laid at rest—
*Hyacintho dono dedit avus!*¹ Why,
 The wife should get a necklace for her pains,
 The very pearls that made Violante proud,
 And Pietro pawned for half their value once,—
 1805 Redeemable by somebody, *ne sit*
Marita quae rotundioribus
*Onusta mammis ... baccis ambulet.*²
 Her bosom shall display the big round balls,
 No braver proudly borne by wedded wife!
 1810 With which Horatian promise I conclude.

Into the pigeon-hole with thee, my speech!
 Off and away, first work then play, play, play!
 Bottini, burn thy books, thou blazing ass!
 Sing “Tra-la-la, for, lambkins, we must live!”

¹ Uncle bequeathed it to Hyacinth.

² In thus quoting from Horace (*Epodes* 8.13–14), Arcangeli commits a Freudian slip, *mammis* (breasts) for the Horatian *bacis* (pearls).

IX

JURIS DOCTOR JOHANNES-
BAPTISTA BOTTINIUS

FISCI ET REV. CAM. APOSTOL. ADVOCATUS

HAD I God's leave, how I would alter things!

If I might read instead of print my speech,—

Ay, and enliven speech with many a flower

Refuses obstinate to blow in print,

- 5 As wildings planted in a prim parterre,—
This scurvy room were turned an immense hall;
Opposite, fifty judges in a row;
This side and that of me, for audience—Rome:
And, where yon window is, the Pope should hide—
- 10 Watch, curtained, but peep visibly enough.
A buzz of expectation! Through the crowd,
Jingling his chain and stumping with his staff,
Up comes an usher, louts him low, “The Court
Requires the allocution¹ of the Fisc!”
- 15 I rise, I bend, I look about me, pause
O'er the hushed multitude: I count—One, two—

Have ye seen, Judges, have ye, lights of law,—

When it may hap some painter, much in vogue

Throughout our city nutritive of arts,

The time is the same as that of Book VIII or shortly thereafter.
Previews: I 1162–1219 and VIII 235–42.

¹ address.

- 20 Ye summon to a task shall test his worth,
 To manufacture, as he knows and can,
 A work may decorate a palace-wall,
 Afford my lords their Holy Family,—
 Hath it escaped the acumen of the Court
- 25 How such a painter sets himself to paint?
 Suppose that Joseph, Mary and her Babe
 A-journeying to Egypt, prove the piece:
 Why, first he sedulously practiseth,
 This painter,—girding loin and lighting lamp,—¹
- 30 On what may nourish eye, make facile hand;
 Getteth him studies (styled by draughtsmen so)
 From some assistant² corpse of Jew or Turk
 Or, haply, Molinist,³ he cuts and carves,—
 This Luca or this Carlo or the like.
- 35 To him the bones their inmost secret yield,
 Each notch and nodule signify their use:
 On him the muscles turn, in triple tier,
 And pleasantly entreat the entrusted man
 “Familiarize thee with our play that lifts
- 40 Thus, and thus lowers again, leg, arm and foot!”
 —Ensuring due correctness in the nude.
 Which done, is all done? Not a whit, ye know!
 He,—to art’s surface rising from her depth,—
 If some flax-polled⁴ soft-bearded sire be found,
- 45 May simulate a Joseph, (happy chance!)—
 Limneth exact each wrinkle of the brow,

¹ Luke 12.35.

² useful.

³ See note to I 307.

⁴ tow-headed.

- Loseth no involution, cheek or chap,¹
 Till lo, in black and white, the senior lives!
 Is it a young and comely peasant-nurse
 50 That poseth? (be the phrase accorded me!)
 Each feminine delight of florid lip,
 Eyes brimming o'er and brow bowed down with love,
 Marmoreal neck and bosom uberous,—²
 Glad on the paper in a trice they go
 55 To help his notion of the Mother-maid:
 Methinks I see it, chalk a little stumped!³
 Yea and her babe—that flexure of soft limbs,
 That budding face imbued with dewy sleep,
 Contribute each an excellence to Christ.
- 60 Nay, since he humbly lent companionship,
 Even the poor ass, unpanniered⁴ and elate
 Stands, perks an ear up, he a model too;
 While clouted shoon,⁵ staff, scrip⁶ and water-gourd,—
 Aught may betoken travel, heat and haste,—
- 65 No jot nor tittle of these but in its turn
 Ministers to perfection of the piece:
 Till now, such piece before him, part by part,—
 Such prelude ended,—pause our painter may,
 Submit his fifty studies one by one,
- 70 And in some sort boast “I have served my lords.”

But what? And hath he painted once this while?
 Or when ye cry “Produce the thing required,

¹ jaw.

² full of milk.

³ blurred.

⁴ relieved of its burden (of baskets).

⁵ patched shoes, or shoes with studs on soles (Milton, *Comus* 635).

⁶ small bag.

- Show us our picture shall rejoice its niche,
Thy Journey through the Desert done in oils!"—
- 75 What, doth he fall to shuffling 'mid his sheets,
Fumbling for first this, then the other fact
Consigned to paper,—“studies,” bear the term!—
And stretch a canvas, mix a pot of paste,
And fasten here a head and there a tail,
- 80 (The ass hath one, my Judges!) so dove-tail
Or, rather, ass-tail in, piece sorrily out—
By bits of reproduction of the life—
The picture, the expected Family?
I trow not! do I miss with my conceit¹
- 85 The mark, my lords?—not so my lords were served!
Rather your artist turns abrupt from these,
And preferably buries him and broods
(Quite away from aught vulgar and extern)
On the inner spectrum, filtered through the eye,
- 90 His brain-deposit, bred of many a drop,
*E pluribus unum.*² and the wiser he!
For in that brain,—their fancy sees at work,
Could my lords peep indulged,—results alone,
Not processes which nourish such results,
- 95 Would they discover and appreciate,—life
Fed by digestion, not raw food itself,
No goblets but smooth comfortable chyme³
Secreted from each snapped-up crudity,—
Less distinct, part by part, but in the whole
- 100 Truer to the subject,—the main central truth
And soul o' the picture, would my Judges spy,—

¹ fanciful image, with a pun on the meaning of “self-admiration.”

² one from many (Virgil, *Moretum* 104).

³ digested semi-liquid food.

Not those mere fragmentary studied facts
 Which answer to the outward frame and flesh—
 Not this nose, not that eyebrow, the other fact
 105 Of man's staff, woman's stole¹ or infant's clout,²
 But lo, a spirit-birth conceived of flesh,
 Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false.
 The studies—for his pupils and himself!
 The picture be for our eximious³ Rome
 110 And—who knows?—satisfy its Governor,
 Whose new wing to the villa he hath bought
 (God give him joy of it) by Capena,⁴ soon
 ('T is bruited) shall be glowing with the brush
 Of who hath long surpassed the Florentine,⁵
 115 The Urbinate⁶ and ... what if I dared add,
 Even his master, yea the Cortonese,—
 I mean the accomplished Ciro Ferri,⁷ Sirs!
 (—Did not he die? I'll see before I print.)

End we exordium,⁸ Phoebus⁹ plucks my ear!¹⁰
 120 Thus then, just so and no whit otherwise,
 Have I—engaged as I were Ciro's self,
 To paint a parallel, a Family,
 The patriarch Pietro with his wise old wife

¹ long outer garment.

² diaper.

³ glorious.

⁴ the Porta Capena, entry for the Appian Way.

⁵ Michelangelo (1475–1564).

⁶ Raphael (1483–1520).

⁷ See note to V 488–89.

⁸ introduction.

⁹ Apollo, god of poetry.

¹⁰ Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.3–4.

- To boot (as if one introduced Saint Anne
125 By bold conjecture to complete the group)
And juvenile Pompilia with her babe,
Who, seeking safety in the wilderness,
Were all surprised by Herod, while outstretched
In sleep beneath a palm-tree by a spring,
130 And killed—the very circumstance I paint,
Moving the pity and terror of my lords—
Exactly so have I, a month at least,
Your Fiscal, made me cognizant of facts,
Searched out, pried into, pressed the meaning forth
135 Of every piece of evidence in point,
How bloody Herod slew these innocents,—
Until the glad result is gained, the group
Demonstrably presented in detail,
Their slumber and his onslaught,—like as life.
140 Yea and, availing me of help allowed
By law, discreet provision lest my lords
Be too much troubled by effrontery,—
The rack, law plies suspected crime withal—
(Law that hath listened while the lyrist sang
145 “*Lene tormentum ingenio admoves,*”
Gently thou joggest by a twinge the wit,
“*Plerumque duro,*”¹ else were slow to blab!)
Through this concession my full cup runs o'er:²
The guilty owns his guilt without reserve.
150 Therefore by part and part I clutch my case
Which, in entirety now,—momentous task,—
My lords demand, so render them I must,

¹ “Pleasant compulsion dost thou apply to wits whose wont is dullness” (Horace, *Odes* 3.21.13–14).

² Psalms 23.5.

- Since, one poor pleading more and I have done.
 But shall I ply my papers, play my proofs,
 155 Parade my studies, fifty in a row,
 As though the Court were yet in pupilage,¹
 Claimed not the artist's ultimate appeal?
 Much rather let me soar the height prescribed
 And, bowing low, proffer my picture's self!
- 160 No more of proof, disproof,—such virtue was,
 Such vice was never in Pompilia, now!
 Far better say “Behold Pompilia!”—(for
 I leave the family as unmanageable,
 And stick to just one portrait, but life-size.)
- 165 Hath calumny imputed to the fair
 A blemish, mole on cheek or wart on chin,
 Much more, blind hidden horrors best unnamed?
 Shall I descend to prove you, point by point,
 Never was knock-knee known nor splay-foot² found
- 170 In Phryne?³ (I must let the portrait go,
 Content me with the model, I believe)—
 —I prove this? An indignant sweep of hand,
 Dash at and doing away with drapery,
 And,—use your eyes, Athenians, smooth she smiles!
- 175 Or,—since my client can no longer smile,
 And more appropriate instances abound,—
 What is this Tale of Tarquin,⁴ how the slave
 Was caught by him, preferred to Collatine?

¹ still merely students.

² flat, outward-turned feet.

³ notorious Greek courtesan who won a lawsuit by exposing her body to the judges.

⁴ the rape of Lucretia (see note to VIII 1684).

- Thou, even from thy corpse-clothes virginal,
 180 Look'st the lie dead, Lucretia!
- Thus at least
- I, by the guidance of antiquity,
 (Our one infallible guide) now operate,
 Sure that the innocence thus shown is safe;
 185 Sure, too, that, while I plead, the echoes cry
 (Lend my weak voice thy trump, sonorous Fame!)
 "Monstrosity the Phrynean shape shall mar,
 Lucretia's soul comport with Tarquin's lie,
 When thistles grow on vines or thorns yield figs,¹
 190 Or oblique² sentence leave this judgment-seat!"

- A great theme: may my strength be adequate!
 For—paint Pompilia, dares my feebleness?
 How did I unaware engage so much
 —Find myself undertaking to produce
 195 A faultless nature in flawless form?
 What's here? Oh, turn aside nor dare the blaze
 Of such a crown, such constellation, say,
 As jewels here thy front,³ Humanity!
 First, infancy, pellucid as a pearl;
 200 Then childhood—stone which, dew-drop at the first,
 (An old conjecture) sucks, by dint of gaze,
 Blue from the sky and turns to sapphire so:
 Yet both these gems eclipsed by, last and best,
 Womanliness and wifehood opaline,
 205 Its milk-white pallor,—chastity,—suffused

¹ Luke 6.44.

² erroneous, unjust.

³ forehead.

With here and there a tint and hint of flame,—
Desire,—the lapidary¹ loves to find.

Such jewels bind conspicuously thy brow,
Pompilia, infant, child, maid, woman, wife—

210 Crown the ideal in our earth at last!

What should a faculty like mine do here?
Close eyes, or else, the rashlier hurry hand!

Which is to say,—lose no time but begin!

Sermocinando ne declamem, Sirs,

215 *Ultra clepsydram*,² as our preachers smile,
Lest I exceed my hour-glass. Whereupon,
As Flaccus prompts,³ I dare the epic plunge—⁴
Begin at once with marriage, up till when
Little or nothing would arrest your love,⁵

220 In the easeful life o' the lady; lamb and lamb,
How do they differ? Know one, you know all
Manners of maidenhood: mere maiden she.

And since all lambs are like in more than fleece,
Prepare to find that, lamb-like, she too frisks—

225 O' the weaker sex, my lords, the weaker sex!

To whom, the Teian⁶ teaches us, for gift,
Not strength,—man's dower,—but beauty, nature gave,
“Beauty in lieu of spears, in lieu of shields!”
And what is beauty's sure concomitant,

¹ worker in gems.

² “Let me not declaim with my discoursing beyond the clepsydram.” A clepsydram is a water glass for measuring time.

³ Horace, *Ars Poetica* 148.

⁴ *in medias res*.

⁵ engage your sympathetic attention.

⁶ the Greek lyric poet, Anacreon (c.570–485 BC), born in Teos.

- 230 Nay, intimate essential character,
 But melting wiles, deliciousest deceits,
 The whole redoubted¹ armoury of love?
 Therefore of vernal pranks, dishevellings
 O' the hair of youth that dances April in,
 235 And easily-imagined Hebe-slips²
 O'er sward which May makes over-smooth for foot—
 These shall we pry into?—or wiselier wink,
 Though numerous and dear they may have been?

- For lo, advancing Hymen and his pomp!
 240 *Discedunt nunc amores*, loves, farewell!
Maneat amor,³ let love, the sole, remain!
 Farewell to dewiness and prime of life!⁴
 Remains the rough determined day: dance done,
 To work, with plough and harrow! What comes next?
 245 'T is Guido henceforth guides Pompilia's step,
 Cries "No more friskings o'er the foodful glebe,
 Else, 'ware the whip!" Accordingly,—first crack
 O' the thong,—we hear that his young wife was barred,
Cohibita fuit, from the old free life,
 250 *Vitam liberiorem ducere*.
 Demur we? Nowise: heifer brave the hind?
 We seek not there should lapse the natural law,
 The proper piety to lord and king
 And husband: let the heifer bear the yoke!
 255 Only, I crave he cast not patience off,
 This hind; for deem you she endures the whip,

¹ redoubtable, formidable.

² Hebe was the goddess of youth and spring.

³ a medieval adaptation of Catullus (Hodell).

⁴ youth.

- Nor winces at the goad, nay, restive, kicks?
 What if the adversary's charge be just,
 And all untowardly¹ she pursue her way
 260 With groan and grunt, though hind strike ne'er so hard?
 If petulant remonstrance made appeal,
 Unseasonable, o'erprotracted,—if
 Importunate challenge taxed the public ear
 When silence more decorously had served
 265 For protestation,—if Pompilian plaint
 Wrought but to aggravate Guidonian ire,—
 Why, such mishaps, ungainly² though they be,
 Ever companion³ change, are incident
 To altered modes and novelty of life:
 270 The philosophic mind expects no less,
 Smilingly knows and names the crisis, sits
 Waiting till old things go and new arrive.
 Therefore, I hold a husband but inept
 Who turns impatient at such transit-time,
 275 As if this running from the rod would last!

- Since, even while I speak, the end is reached:
 Success awaits the soon-disheartened man.
 The parents turn their backs and leave the house,
 The wife may wail but none shall intervene:
 280 He hath attained his object, groom and bride
 Partake the nuptial bower no soul can see,
 Old things are passed and all again is new,⁴
 Over and gone the obstacles to peace,

¹ refractorily, balkily.

² awkward, embarrassing.

³ accompany.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5.17; Revelation 21.4–5.

Novorum—tenderly the Mantuan turns

- 285 The expression, some such purpose in his eye—
*Nascitur ordo!*¹ Every storm is laid,
 And forth from plain each pleasant herb may peep,
 Each bloom of wifehood in abeyance late:
 (Confer a passage in the *Canticles*).²
- 290 But what if, as 't is wont with plant and wife,
 Flowers,—after a suppression to good end,
 Still, when they do spring forth,—sprout here, spread
 there,
 Anywhere likelier than beneath the foot
 O' the lawful good-man gardener of the ground?
 295 He dug and dibbled,³ sowed and watered,—still
 'T is a chance wayfarer shall pluck the increase.
 Just so, respecting persons not too much,
 The lady, foes allege, put forth each charm
 And proper floweret of feminity
 300 To whosoever had a nose to smell
 Or breast to deck: what if the charge be true?⁴
 The fault were graver had she looked with choice,⁵
 Fastidiously appointed who should grasp,
 Who, in the whole town, go without the prize!
 305 To nobody she destined donative,⁶
 But, first come was first served, the accuser saith.
 Put case her sort of ... in this kind ... escapes⁷
 Were many and oft and indiscriminate—

¹ Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.5–7.

² Song of Solomon 2.11–13.

³ made holes for seeds.

⁴ Compare III 244–45.

⁵ prejudice.

⁶ She did not reserve the gift (of herself) to any one man.

⁷ escapades.

- Impute ye as the action were prepense,¹
 310 The gift particular, arguing malice so?
 Which butterfly of the wide air shall brag
 "I was preferred to Guido"—when 't is clear
 The cup, he quaffs at, lay with oalent² breast
 Open to gnat, midge, bee and moth as well?
 315 One chalice entertained the company;
 And if its peevish lord object the more,
 Mistake, misname such bounty in a wife,
 Haste we to advertise³ him—charm of cheek,
 Lustre of eye, allowance of the lip,
 320 All womanly components in a spouse,
 These are no household-bread each stranger's bite
 Leaves by so much diminished for the mouth
 O' the master of the house at supper-time:
 But rather like a lump of spice they lie,
 325 Morsel of myrrh, which scents the neighbourhood
 Yet greets its lord no lighter by a grain.

- Nay, even so, he shall be satisfied!
 Concede we there was reason in his wrong,
 Grant we his grievance and content the man!
 330 For lo, Pompilia, she submits herself;
 Ere three revolving years have crowned their course,
 Off and away she puts this same reproach
 Of lavish bounty, inconsiderate gift
 O' the sweets of wifehood stored to other ends:
 335 No longer shall he blame "She none excludes,"
 But substitute "She laudably sees all,

¹ premeditated.

² redolent, fragrant.

³ inform.

Searches the best out and selects the same.”
 For who is here, long sought and latest found,
 Waiting his turn unmoved amid the whirl,
 340 “*Constans in levitate*,”—Ha, my lords?
 Calm in his levity,—indulge the quip!—¹
 Since ’t is a levite bears the bell away,
 Parades him henceforth as Pompilia’s choice.
 ’T is no ignoble object, husband! Doubt’st?
 345 When here comes tripping Flaccus with his phrase
 “Trust me, no miscreant singled from the mob,
Crede non illum tibi de scelestia
Plebe delectum,”² but a man of mark,
 A priest, dost hear? Why then, submit thyself!
 350 Priest, ay and very phoenix³ of such fowl,
 Well-born, of culture,⁴ young and vigorous,
 Comely too, since precise the precept⁵ points—
 On the selected levite be there found
 Nor mole nor scar nor blemish, lest the mind
 355 Come all uncandid⁶ through the thwarting flesh!
 Was not the son of Jesse ruddy, sleek,⁷

¹ The “quip” is the play on the two senses of “levity,” the state of being a levite (deacon) and lack of seriousness, inconstancy. The Latin phrase is from Ovid, *Tristia* 5.8.18. “Bell” in the next line redoubles the quip.

² Horace, *Odes* 2.4.17–18. Bottini converts Horace’s *dilectam* (referring to a “maid”) into the masculine “*delectum*.”

³ paragon.

⁴ well-bred.

⁵ maxim, proverb.

⁶ defiled.

⁷ 356–66 A conflation of three Biblical passages. The description of David, son of Jesse, is from 1 Samuel 16.12 (“he was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to”). In 1 Samuel 25.18–23, Abigail, desiring to conciliate David and his soldiers, goes out to meet them with figs and sweetmeats, and in 2 Samuel 6.14–16, David

- Pleasant to look on, pleasant every way?
 Since well he smote the harp and sweetly sang,
 And danced till Abigail came out to see,
 360 And seeing smiled and smiling ministered
 The raisin-cluster and the cake of figs,
 With ready meal refreshed the gifted youth,
 Till Nabal, who was absent shearing sheep,
 Felt heart sink, took to bed (discreetly done—
 365 They might have been beforehand with him else)
 And died—would Guido have behaved as well!
 But ah, the faith of early days is gone,
*Heu prisca fides!*¹ Nothing died in him
 Save courtesy, good sense and proper trust,
 370 Which, when they ebb from souls they should o'erflow,
 Discover² stub, weed, sludge and ugliness.
 (The Pope, we know, is Neapolitan
 And relishes a sea-side simile.)
 Deserted by each charitable wave,
 375 Guido, left high and dry, shows jealous now!
 Jealous avouched, paraded: tax the fool
 With any peccadillo, he responds
 “Truly I beat my wife through jealousy,
 Imprisoned her and punished otherwise,
 380 Being jealous: now would threaten, sword in hand,
 Now manage to mix poison in her sight,
 And so forth: jealously I dealt, in fine.”
 Concede thus much, and what remains to prove?

dances before the Ark of the Covenant—not before Abigail—and Michal, the captive daughter of Saul, secretly looking on, “despised him in her heart.”

¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.878.

² reveal.

- Have I to teach my masters what effect
 385 Hath jealousy, and how, befooling men,
 It makes false true, abuses eye and ear,
 Turns mere mist adamantine,¹ loads with sound
 Silence, and into void and vacancy
 Crowds a whole phalanx of conspiring foes?
- 390 Therefore who owns "I watched with jealousy
 My wife," adds "for no reason in the world!"
 What need that, thus proved madman, he remark
 "The thing I thought a serpent proved an eel"?—
 Perchance the right Comacchian,² six foot length,
 395 And not an inch too long for that rare pie
 (Master Arcangeli has heard of such)
 Whose succulence makes fasting³ bearable;
 Meant to regale some moody splenetic⁴
 Who, pleasing to mistake the donor's gift,
 400 Spying I know not what Lernaean snake⁵
 I' the luscious Lenten creature, stamps forsooth
 The dainty in the dust.

Enough! Prepare,

- Such lunes⁶ announced, for downright lunacy!
 405 *Insanit homo*,⁷ threat succeeds to threat,
 And blow redoubles blow,—his wife, the block.
 But, if a block, shall not she jar the hand

¹ hard and impenetrable.

² the vale of Comacchio, noted for its large eels.

³ that is, in Lent.

⁴ melancholy person.

⁵ the hydra of Lerna, slain by Hercules.

⁶ mad whims.

⁷ Horace, *Satires* 2.7.117.

- That buffets her? The injurious idle stone
 Rebounds and hits the head of him who flung.
 410 Causeless rage breeds, i' the wife now, rageful cause,
 Tyranny wakes rebellion from its sleep.
 Rebellion, say I?—rather, self-defence,
 Laudable wish to live and see good days,
 Pricks our Pompilia now to fly the fool
 415 By any means, at any price,—nay, more,
 Nay, most of all, i' the very interest
 O' the fool that, baffled of his blind desire
 At any price, were truest victor so.
 Shall he effect his crime and lose his soul?
 420 No, dictates duty to a loving wife!
 Far better that the unconsummate¹ blow,
 Adroitly baulked by her, should back again,
 Correctively admonish his own pate!

- Crime then,—the Court is with me?—she must crush:
 425 How crush it? By all efficacious means;
 And these,—why, what in woman should they be?
 “With horns the bull, with teeth the lion fights;
 To woman,” quoth the lyrist quoted late,²
 “Nor teeth, nor horns, but beauty, Nature gave.”
 430 Pretty i' the Pagan! Who dares blame the use
 Of armoury thus allowed for natural,—
 Exclaim against a seeming-dubious play
 O' the sole permitted weapon, spear and shield³
 Alike, resorted to i' the circumstance
 435 By poor Pompilia? Grant she somewhat plied

¹ unachieved.

² Anacreon; see note to l. 226.

³ See l. 228.

Arts that allure, the magic nod and wink,
 The witchery of gesture, spell of word,
 Whereby the likelier to enlist this friend,
 Yet stranger, as a champion on her side?

- 440 Such man, being but mere man, ('t was all she knew),
 Must be made sure by beauty's silken bond,
 The weakness that subdues the strong, and bows
 Wisdom alike and folly. Grant the tale
 O' the husband, which is false, were proved and true
- 445 To the letter—or the letters, I should say,
 Abominations he professed to find
 And fix upon Pompilia and the priest,—
 Allow them hers—for though she could not write,
 In the early days of Eve-like innocence
- 450 That plucked no apple from the knowledge-tree,
 Yet, at the Serpent's word, Eve plucks and eats
 And knows—especially how to read and write:
 And so Pompilia,—as the move o' the maw,
 Quoth Persius,¹ makes a parrot bid “Good day!”
- 455 A crow salute the concave,² and a pie³
 Endeavour at proficiency in speech,—
 So she, through hunger after fellowship,
 May well have learned, though late, to play the scribe:
 As indeed, there's one letter on the list
- 460 Explicitly declares did happen here.
 “You thought my letters could be none of mine,”
 She tells her parents—“mine, who wanted skill;

¹ Latin poet (34–62 AD) in his *Satires*, Prologue: “Who was it made the parrot so glib with its ‘good-morning’? That great teacher of art and bestower of mother wit, the stomach” (Hodell).

² vault of heaven.

³ magpie.

- But now I have the skill, and write, you see!"
 She needed write love-letters, so she learned,
 465 "Negatas artifex sequi voces"¹—though
 This letter nowise 'scapes the common lot,
 But lies i'² the condemnation of the rest,
 Found by the husband's self who forged them all.
 Yet, for the sacredness of argument,
 470 For this once an exemption shall it plead—
 Anything, anything to let the wheels
 Of argument run glibly to their goal!
 Concede she wrote (which were preposterous)
 This and the other epistle,—what of it?
 475 Where does the figment touch her candid³ fame?
 Being in peril of her life—"my life,
 Not an hour's purchase," as the letter runs,—
 And having but one stay in this extreme,
 Out of the wide world but a single friend—
 480 What could she other than resort to him,
 And how with any hope resort but thus?
 Shall modesty dare bid a stranger brave
 Danger, disgrace, nay death in her behalf—
 Think to entice the sternness of the steel
 485 Yet spare love's loadstone moving manly mind?
 —Most of all, when such mind is hampered so
 By growth of circumstance athwart the life
 O' the natural man, that decency forbids
 He stoop and take the common privilege,
 490 Say frank "I love," as all the vulgar do.
 A man is wedded to philosophy,

¹ Persius, *Satires*, Prologue.

² shares.

³ pure.

Married to statesmanship; a man is old;
 A man is fettered by the foolishness
 He took for wisdom and talked ten years since;
 495 A man is, like our friend the Canon here,
 A priest, and wicked if he break his vow:
 Shall he dare love, who may be Pope one day?
 Despite the coil of such encumbrance here,
 Suppose this man could love, unhappily,
 500 And would love, dared he only let love show!
 In case the woman of his love, speaks first,
 From what embarrassment she sets him free!
 "T is I who break reserve, begin appeal,
 Confess that, whether you love me or no,
 505 I love you!" What an ease to dignity,
 What help of pride from the hard high-backed chair
 Down to the carpet where the kittens bask,
 All under the pretence of gratitude!

From all which, I deduce—the lady here
 510 Was bound to proffer nothing short of love
 To the priest whose service was to save her. What?
 Shall she propose him lucre, dust o' the mine,
 Rubbish o' the rock, some diamond, muckworms¹ prize,
 Some pearl secreted by a sickly fish?
 515 Scarcely! She caters for a generous taste.
 'T is love shall beckon, beauty bid to breast,
 Till all the Samson² sink into the snare!
 Because, permit the end—permit therewith
 Means to the end!

¹ larvae of a beetle found in manure.

² It should be recalled that at VIII 640–55 Guido was Samson (Judges 16).

- 520 How say you, good my lords?
I hope you heard my adversary ring
The changes on this precept: now, let me
Reverse the peal! *Quia dato licito fine,*
Ad illum assequendum ordinata
525 *Non sunt damnanda media*,—licit end
Enough was found in mere escape from death,
To legalize our means illicit else
Of feigned love, false allurement, fancied fact.
Thus Venus losing Cupid on a day,
530 (See that *Idyllium Moschi*¹) seeking help,
In the anxiety of motherhood,
Allowably promised “Who shall bring report
Where he is wandered to, my winged babe,
I give him for reward a nectared kiss;
535 But who brings safely back the truant’s self,
His be a super-sweet makes kiss seem cold!”
Are not these things writ for example-sake?²

To such permitted motive, then, refer
All those professions, else were hard explain,
540 Of hope, fear, jealousy, and the rest of love!
He is Myrtillus, Amaryllis³ she,
She burns, he freezes,—all a mere device
To catch and keep the man, may save her life,
Whom otherwise nor catches she nor keeps!
545 Worst, once, turns best now: in all faith, she feigns,
Feigning,—the liker innocence to guilt,
The truer to the life in what she feigns!

¹ Moschus, *Idylls* 1.3–5.

² 1 Corinthians 10.11.

³ lovers in Giambattista Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*.

- How if Ulysses,—when, for public good¹
 He sunk particular qualms and played the spy,
 550 Entered Troy's hostile gate in beggar's garb—
 How if he first had boggled at this clout,²
 Grown dainty o'er that clack-dish?³ Grime is grace
 To whoso gropes amid the dung for gold.

- Hence, beyond promises, we praise each proof
 555 That promise was not simply made to break,
 Mere moonshine-structure meant to fade at dawn:
 We praise, as consequent and requisite,
 What, enemies allege, were more than words,
 Deeds—meetings at the window, twilight-trysts,
 560 Nocturnal entertainments in the dim
 Old labyrinthine palace; lies, we know—
 Inventions we, long since, turned inside out.
 Must such external semblance of intrigue
 Demonstrate that intrigue there lurks perdue?
 565 Does every hazel-sheath disclose a nut?
 He were a Molinist who dared maintain
 That midnight meetings in a screened alcove
 Must argue folly in a matron—since
 So would he bring a slur on Judith's self,⁴
 570 Commended beyond women, that she lured
 The lustful to destruction through his lust.
 Pompilia took not Judith's liberty,

¹ *Odyssey* 4.244–48.

² rag.

³ covered wooden alms dish.

⁴ The story of Judith's patriotic decapitation of the Assyrian general Holofernes is in the apocryphal Book of Judith 13, which does not, however, allude to her use of a dish; this touch is probably borrowed from the story of Salome and John the Baptist.

No faulchion¹ find you in her hand to smite,
 No damsel to convey in dish the head
 575 Of Holophernes,—style the Canon so—
 Or is it the Count? If I entangle me
 With my similitudes,—if wax wings melt,²
 And earthward down I drop, not mine the fault:
 Blame your beneficence, O Court, O sun,
 580 Whereof the beamy smile affects my flight!
 What matter, so Pompilia's fame revive
 I' the warmth that proves the bane of Icarus?

Yea, we have shown it lawful, necessary
 Pompilia leave her husband, seek the house
 585 O' the parents: and because 'twixt home and home
 Lies a long road with many a danger rife,
 Lions by the way and serpents in the path,
 To rob and ravish,—much behoves she keep
 Each shadow of suspicion from fair fame,
 590 For her own sake much, but for his sake more,
 The ingrate husband's. Evidence shall be,
 Plain witness to the world how white she walks
 I' the mire she wanders through ere Rome she reach.
 And who so proper witness as a priest?
 595 Gainsay ye? Let me hear who dares gainsay!
 I hope we still can punish heretics!
 "Give me the man" I say with him of Gath,³
 That we may fight together!" None, I think:
 The priest is granted me.

[————]

¹ sword.

² The Icarus story is in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.182–235.

³ Goliath (1 Samuel 17.10).

600

Then, if a priest,

One juvenile and potent: else, mayhap,

That dragon, our Saint George would slay, slays him.

And should fair face accompany strong hand,

The more complete equipment: nothing mars

605 Work, else praiseworthy, like a bodily flaw

I' the worker: as 't is said Saint Paul himself¹

Deplored the check o' the puny presence, still

Cheating his fulmination² of its flash,

Albeit the bolt therein went true to oak.

610 Therefore the agent, as prescribed, she takes,—

Both juvenile and potent, handsome too,—

In all obedience: "good," you grant again.

Do you? I would you were the husband, lords!

How prompt and facile might departure be!

615 How boldly would Pompilia and the priest

March out of door, spread flag at beat of drum,

But that inapprehensive³ Guido grants

Neither premiss nor yet conclusion here,

And, purblind, dreads a bear in every bush!⁴

620 For his own quietude and comfort, then,

Means must be found for flight in masquerade

At hour when all things sleep.—"Save jealousy!"

Right, Judges! Therefore shall the lady's wit

Supply the boon thwart⁵ nature baulks him of,

¹ "his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10.10).

² thunderous diatribe.

³ stupid, slow-witted.

⁴ "Or in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.21–22).

⁵ perverse, obstinate.

- 625 And do him service with the potent drug
(Helen's *nepenthe*,¹ as my lords opine²)
Which respites blessedly each fretted nerve
O' the much-enduring man:³ accordingly,
There lies he, duly dosed and sound asleep,
630 Relieved of woes or real or raved about.
While soft she leaves his side, he shall not wake;
Nor stop who steals away to join her friend,
Nor do him mischief should he catch that friend
Intent on more than friendly office,—nay,
635 Nor get himself raw head and bones laid bare
In payment of his apparition!⁴

Thus

- Would I defend the step,—were the thing true
Which is a fable,—see my former speech,—
640 That Guido slept (who never slept a wink)
Through treachery, an opiate from his wife,
Who not so much as knew what opiates mean.

- Now she may start: or hist,—a stoppage still!
A journey is an enterprise of cost!
645 As in campaigns, we fight but others pay,
*Suis expensis, nemo militat.*⁵
'T is Guido's self we guard from accident,
Ensuring safety to Pompilia, versed
Nowise in misadventures by the way,

¹ the drug she gave to Odysseus (*Odyssey* 4.220–21).

² know.

³ Odysseus, who also had a faithful wife.

⁴ as a reward for his inopportune appearance.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9.7.

- 650 Hard riding and rough quarters, the rude fare,
 The unready host. What magic mitigates
 Each plague of travel to the unpractised wife?
 Money, sweet Sirs! And were the fiction fact
 She helped herself thereto with liberal hand
 655 From out her husband's store,—what fitter use
 Was ever husband's money destined to?
 With bag and baggage thus did Dido once
 Decamp,¹—for more authority, a queen!

- So is she fairly on her route at last,
 660 Prepared for either fortune: nay and if
 The priest, now all a-glow with enterprise,
 Cool somewhat presently when fades the flush
 O' the first adventure, clouded o'er belike
 By doubts, misgivings how the day may die,
 665 Though born with such auroral brilliance,—if
 The brow seem over-pensive and the lip
 'Gin lag and lose the prattle lightsome late,—
 Vanquished by tedium of a prolonged jaunt
 In a close carriage o'er a jolting road,
 670 With only one young female substitute
 For seventeen other Canons of ripe age
 Were wont to keep him company in church,—
 Shall not Pompilia haste to dissipate
 The silent cloud that, gathering, bodes her bale?—²

¹ In a dream, Dido learned from the ghost of her late husband, Sychaeus, that he had been murdered by her brother Pygmalion, king of Tyre, and his treasure hidden at a place he specified. After she retrieved the riches, she fled with them and subsequently founded Carthage (*Aeneid* 1.348–64).

² trouble.

- 675 Prop the irresoluteness may portend
Suspension of the project, check the flight,
Bring ruin on them both? Use every means,
Since means to the end are lawful! What i' the way
Of wile should have allowance like a kiss
- 680 Sageley and sisterly administered,
Sororia saltem oscula? We find
Such was the remedy her wit applied
To each incipient scruple of the priest,
If we believe,—as, while my wit is mine
- 685 I cannot,—what the driver testifies,
Borsi, called Venerino, the mere tool
Of Guido and his friend the Governor,—
Avowal I proved wrung from out the wretch,
After long rotting in imprisonment,
- 690 As price of liberty and favour: long
They tempted, he at last succumbed, and lo
Counted them out full tale each kiss and more,
“The journey being one long embrace,” quoth he.
Still, though we should believe the driver's lie,
- 695 Nor even admit as probable excuse,
Right reading of the riddle,—as I urged
In my first argument, with fruit perhaps—
That what the owl-like eyes (at back of head!)
O' the driver, drowsed by driving night and day,
- 700 Supposed a vulgar interchange of lips,
This was but innocent jog of head 'gainst head,
Cheek meeting jowl as apple may touch pear
From branch and branch contiguous in the wind,
When Autumn blusters and the orchard rocks:—
- 705 That rapid run and the rough road were cause
O' the casual ambiguity, no harm
I' the world to eyes awake and penetrative.

- Say,—not to grasp a truth I can release
 And safely fight without, yet conquer still,—
- 710 Say, she kissed him, say, he kissed her again!
 Such osculation was a potent means,
 A very efficacious help, no doubt:
 Such with a third part of her nectar did
 Venus imbue:¹ why should Pompilia fling
- 715 The poet's declaration in his teeth?—
 Pause to employ what—since it had success,
 And kept the priest her servant to the end—
 We must presume of energy enough,
 No whit superfluous, so permissible?
- 720 The goal is gained: day, night and yet a day
 Have run their round: a long and devious² road
 Is traversed,—many manners, various men
 Passed in review, what cities did they see,
 What hamlets mark, what profitable food
- 725 For after-meditation cull and store!
 Till Rome, that Rome whereof—this voice
 Would it might make our Molinists observe,
 That she is built upon a rock³ nor shall
 Their powers prevail against her!—Rome, I say,
- 730 Is all but reached; one stage more and they stop
 Saved: pluck up heart, ye pair, and forward, then!

Ah, Nature—baffled she recurs, alas!
 Nature imperiously exacts her due,

¹ “the sweet lips that Venus has imbued with the quintessence of her own nectar” (Horace, *Odes* 1.13.15–16).

² to be read, no doubt, in two senses.

³ Matthew 16.18.

- Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak:¹
 735 Pompilia needs must acquiesce and swoon,
 Give hopes alike and fears a breathing-while.
 The innocent sleep soundly: sound she sleeps,
 So let her slumber, then, unguarded save
 By her own chastity, a triple mail,
 740 And his good hand whose stalwart arms have borne
 The sweet and senseless burthen like a babe
 From coach to couch,—the serviceable strength!
 Nay, what and if he gazed rewardedly
 On the pale beauty prisoned in embrace,
 745 Stooped over, stole a balmy breath perhaps
 For more assurance sleep was not decease—
 “*Ut vidi*,” “how I saw!” succeeded by
 “*Ut perii*,”² “how I sudden lost my brains!”
 —What harm ensued to her unconscious quite?
 750 For, curiosity—how natural!
 Importunateness—what a privilege
 In the ardent sex! And why curb ardour here?
 How can the priest but pity whom he saved?
 And pity is so near to love, and love
 755 So neighbourly to all unreasonableness!
 As to love’s object, whether love were sage
 Or foolish, could Pompilia know or care,
 Being still sound asleep, as I premised?
 Thus the philosopher absorbed by thought,³
 760 Even Archimedes, busy o’er a book
 The while besiegers sacked his Syracuse,

¹ Matthew 26.41.

² Virgil, *Eclogues* 8.41.

³ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* 25.31.9. Archimedes actually “was intent upon the figures which he had traced in the dust.”

Was ignorant of the imminence o' the point
 O' the sword till it surprised him: let it stab,
 And never knew himself was dead at all.

- 765 So sleep thou on, secure whate'er betide!
 For thou, too, hast thy problem hard to solve—
 How so much beauty is compatible
 With so much innocence!

Fit place, methinks,

- 770 While in this task she rosily is lost,
 To treat of and repel objection here
 Which,—frivolous, I grant,—my mind misgives,
 May somehow still have flitted, gadfly-like,
 And teased the Court at times—as if, all said
 775 And done, there seemed, the Court might nearly say,
 In a certain acceptation, somewhat more
 Of what may pass for insincerity,
 Falsehood, throughout the course Pompilia took,
 Than befits Christian. Pagans held, we know,
 780 Man always ought to aim at good and truth,
 Not always put one thing in the same words:
Non idem semper dicere sed spectare
*Debemus.*¹ But the Pagan yoke was light;
 “Lie not at all,” the exacter precept bids:
 785 Each least lie breaks the law,—is sin, we hold.
 I humble me, but venture to submit—
 What prevents sin, itself is sinless, sure:
 And sin, which hinders sin of deeper dye,
 Softens itself away by contrast so.
 790 Conceive me! Little sin, by none at all,

¹ “We ought not always to hold the same language, but we ought always to aim at the same end” (Cicero, *Epistolae ad Familiares* 1.9.21).

- Were properly condemned for great: but great,
 By greater, dwindleth into small again.
 Now, what is greatest sin of womanhood?
 That which unwomans it, abolishes
- 795 The nature of the woman,—impudence.¹
 Who contradicts me here? Concede me, then,
 Whatever friendly fault may interpose
 To save the sex from self-abolishment
 Is three-parts on the way to virtue's rank!
- 800 And, what is taxed here as duplicity,
 Feint, wile and trick,—admitted for the nonce,—
 What worse do one and all than interpose,
 Hold, as it were, a deprecating hand,
 Statuesquely, in the Medicean mode,²
- 805 Before some shame which modesty would veil?
 Who blames the gesture prettily perverse?
 Thus,—lest ye miss a point illustrative,—
 Admit the husband's calumny—allow
 That the wife, having penned the epistle fraught
- 810 With horrors, charge on charge of crime she heaped
 O' the head of Pietro and Violante—(still
 Presumed her parents)—having despatched the same
 To their arch-enemy Paolo, through free choice
 And no sort of compulsion in the world—
- 815 Put case she next discards simplicity
 For craft, denies the voluntary act,
 Declares herself a passive instrument
 I' the husband's hands; that, duped by knavery,
 She traced the characters she could not write,
- 820 And took on trust the unread sense which, read,

¹ shamelessness, loose morals.

² like the statue of Venus de Medici (in the Uffizi, Florence).

And recognized were to be spurned at once:

Allow this calumny, I reiterate!

Who is so dull as wonder at the pose

Of our Pompilia in the circumstance?

- 825 Who sees not that the too-ingenuous soul,
Repugnant even at a duty done
Which brought beneath too scrutinizing glare
The misdemeanours,—buried in the dark,—
Of the authors of her being, as believed,—
- 830 Stung to the quick at her impulsive deed,
And willing to repair what harm it worked,
She—wise in this beyond what Nero proved,¹
Who when folk urged the candid juvenile
To sign the warrant, doom the guilty dead,
- 835 “Would I had never learned to write,” quoth he!
—Pompilia rose above the Roman, cried
“To read or write I never learned at all!”
O splendidly mendacious!²

But time fleets:

- 840 Let us not linger: hurry to the end,
Since flight does end, and that disastrously.
Beware ye blame desert for unsuccess,
Disparage each expedient else to praise,
Call failure folly! Man’s best effort fails.
- 845 After ten years’ resistance Troy succumbed:
Could valour save a town, Troy still had stood.
Pompilia came off halting in no point

¹ The “candid” (innocent) seventeen-year-old Nero, called upon to sign a death warrant, exclaimed “*Quam vellem nescire litteras!*” (Suetonius, *Nero* 10).

² Horace, *Odes* 3.11.30–36 (the reference is to the one Danaid who was faithful to her husband).

- Of courage, conduct, her long journey through:
 But nature sank exhausted at the close,
 850 And as I said, she swooned and slept all night.
 Morn breaks and brings the husband: we assist
 At¹ the spectacle. Discovery succeeds.
 Ha, how is this? What moonstruck rage is here?
 Though we confess to partial frailty now,
 855 To error in a woman and a wife,
 Is 't by the rough way she shall be reclaimed?
 Who bursts upon her chambered privacy?
 What crowd profanes the chaste *cubiculum*?²
 What outcries and lewd laughter, scurril gibe
 860 And ribald jest to scare the ministrant
 Good angels that commerce with souls in sleep?³
 Why, had the worst crowned Guido to his wish,
 Confirmed his most irrational surmise,
 Yet there be bounds to man's emotion, checks
 865 To an immoderate astonishment.
 'T is decent horror, regulated wrath,
 Befit our dispensation: have we back
 The old Pagan license? Shall a Vulcan clap
 His net⁴ o' the sudden and expose the pair
 870 To the unquenchable universal mirth?
 A feat, antiquity saw scandal in
 So clearly, that the nauseous tale thereof—
 Demodocus his nugatory song—⁵

¹ attend.

² bedroom.

³ incubi (male demons who have intercourse with sleeping women).

⁴ Compare III 1450-55.

⁵ Because many critics, ancient and modern, felt that this passage in the *Odyssey*, Book 8, was un-Homeric in authorship and spirit, they called it worthless ("nugatory").

- Hath ever been concluded modern stuff
- 875 Impossible to the mouth of the grave Muse,
So, foisted into that Eighth Odyssey
By some impertinent pickthank.¹ O thou fool,
Count Guido Franceschini, what didst gain
By publishing thy secret to the world?
- 880 Were all the precepts of the wise a waste—
Bred in thee not one touch of reverence?
Admit thy wife—admonish we the fool,—
Were falseness' self, why chronicle thy shame?
Much rather should thy teeth bite out thy tongue,
- 885 Dumb lip consort with desecrated brow,
Silence become historiographer,
And thou—thine own Cornelius Tacitus!²
But virtue, barred, still leaps the barrier, lords!
—Still, moon-like, penetrates the encroaching mist
- 890 And bursts, all broad and bare, on night, ye know!
Surprised, then, in the garb of truth, perhaps,
Pompilia, thus opposed, breaks obstacle,
Springs to her feet, and stands Thalassian-pure,³
Confronts the foe,—nay, catches at his sword
- 895 And tries to kill the intruder, he complains.
Why, so she gave her lord his lesson back,
Crowned him, this time, the virtuous woman's way,
With an exact obedience; he brought sword,

¹ busybody.

² Roman historian (c.55–c.120 AD). There is a pun on “silence” and “Tacitus.”

³ that is, nude, or “in the garb of truth” (two lines above), a translation of Horace's *nuda Veritas* (*Odes* 1.24.7). At II 1004 Pompilia, in the present situation, is described as “pink and white.” The association of nudity with the sea (Thalassa) is by way of “foam-born” Aphrodite as she emerges from the sea, for example in Botticelli's painting.

- She drew the same, since swords are meant to draw.
- 900 Tell not me 't is sharp play with tools on edge!
It was the husband chose the weapon here.
Why did not he inaugurate the game
With some gentility of apophthegm
Still pregnant on the philosophic page,
- 905 Some captivating cadence still a-lisp
O' the poet's lyre? Such spells subdue the surge,
Make tame the tempest, much more mitigate
The passions of the mind, and probably
Had moved Pompilia to a smiling blush.
- 910 No, he must needs prefer the argument
O' the blow: and she obeyed, in duty bound,
Returned him buffet ratiocinative—¹
Ay, in the reasoner's own interest,
For wife must follow whither husband leads,
- 915 Vindicate honour as himself prescribes,
Save him the very way himself bids save!
No question but who jumps into a quag
Should stretch forth hand and pray us "Pull me out
By the hand!" such were the customary cry:
- 920 But Guido pleased to bid "Leave hand alone!
Join both feet, rather, jump upon my head:
I extricate myself by the rebound!"
And dutifully as enjoined she jumped—
Drew his own sword and menaced his own life,
- 925 Anything to content a wilful spouse.

And so he was contented—one must do
Justice to the expedient which succeeds,
Strange as it seem: at flourish of the blade,

¹ reasonable, derived from logical premises.

- The crowd drew back, stood breathless and abashed,
 930 Then murmured "This should be no wanton wife,
 No conscience-stricken sinner, caught i' the act,
 And patiently awaiting our first stone:¹
 But a poor hard-pressed all-bewildered thing,
 Has rushed so far, misguidedly perhaps,
 935 Meaning no more harm than a frightened sheep.
 She sought for aid; and if she made mistake
 I' the man could aid most, why—so mortals do:
 Even the blessed Magdalen mistook
 Far less forgiveably: consult the place—²
 940 Supposing him to be the gardener,
 'Sir,' said she, and so following." Why more words?
 Forthwith the wife is pronounced innocent:
 What would the husband more than gain his cause,
 And find that honour flash in the world's eye,
 945 His apprehension was lest soil had smirched?

- So, happily the adventure comes to close
 Whereon my fat opponent grounds his charge
 Preposterous: at mid-day he groans "How dark!"
 Listen to me, thou Archangelic swine!
 950 Where is the ambiguity to blame,
 The flaw to find in our Pompilia? Safe
 She stands, see! Does thy comment follow quick
 "Safe, inasmuch as at the end proposed;
 But thither she picked way by devious path—
 955 Stands dirtied, no dubiety at all!
 I recognize success, yet, all the same,

¹ that cast by the scribes and pharisees at the woman taken in adultery (John 8.7).

² It is John 20.15.

Importunately will suggestion prompt—
Better Pompilia gained the right to boast
'No devious path, no doubtful patch was mine,
960 I saved my head nor sacrificed my foot!'
Why, being in a peril, show mistrust
Of the angels set to guard the innocent?
Why rather hold by obvious vulgar help
Of stratagem and subterfuge, excused
965 Somewhat, but still no less a foil, a fault,
Since low with high, and good with bad is linked?
Methinks I view some ancient bas-relief.
There stands Hesione thrust out by Troy,¹
Her father's hand has chained her to a crag,
970 Her mother's from the virgin plucked the vest,
At a safe distance both distressful watch,
While near and nearer comes the snorting orc.²
I look that, white and perfect to the end,
She wait till Jove despatch some demigod;
975 Not that,—impatient of celestial club
Alcmena's son should brandish at the beast,—
She daub, disguise her dainty limbs with pitch,
And so elude the purblind monster! Ay,
The trick succeeds, but 't is an ugly trick,
980 Where needs have been no trick!"

[—]

¹ 968–78 Laomedon, King of Troy, in order to placate Apollo and Poseidon, whom he had defrauded after promising to pay them for building the walls of the city, chained his daughter Hesione to a rock at the mercy of a sea monster. Alcmena's son Hercules rescued her, claiming for reward the horses Zeus had given to Laomedon. The latter again broke his promise and was slain by Hercules (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.194–220).

² mythical sea monster.

My answer? Faugh;

Nimis incongrue! Too absurdly put!

Sententiam ego teneo contrariam,

Trick, I maintain, had no alternative.

- 985 The heavens were bound with brass,—Jove far at feast¹
 (No feast like that thou didst not ask me to,
 Arcangeli,—I heard of thy regale!)
 With the unblamed Aethiop,—Hercules spun wool
 I' the lap of Omphale,² while Virtue shrieked—
- 990 The brute came paddling all the faster. You
 Of Troy, who stood at distance, where's the aid
 You offered in the extremity? Most and least,
 Gentle and simple, here the Governor,
 There the Archbishop, everywhere the friends,
 995 Shook heads and waited for a miracle,
 Or went their way, left Virtue to her fate.
 Just this one rough and ready man leapt forth!
 —Was found, sole anti-Fabius³ (dare I say)
 Who restored things, with no delay at all,
 1000 *Qui haud cunctando rem restituit!* He,
 He only, Caponsacchi 'mid a crowd,
 Caught Virtue up, carried Pompilia off
 Through gaping impotence of sympathy
 In ranged⁴ Arezzo: what you take for pitch,
 1005 Is nothing worse, belike, than black and blue,

¹ Thetis was unable to plead Achilles's cause with Zeus because the god was absent for two weeks on a state visit to the Ethiopians (*Iliad* 1.423).

² Hercules was for three years the servant, then the lover, of the masculine queen of Lydia, Omphale. To please her he exchanged clothing with her and spun wool (Ovid, *Fasti* 2.305 f.).

³ opposed to the Fabian policy (second Punic war) of attaining an end by gradual means.

⁴ lined up in a row as if watching a parade.

Mere evanescent proof that hardy hands
 Did yeoman's service, cared not where the gripe
 Was more than duly energetic: bruised,
 She smarts a little, but her bones are saved
 1010 A fracture, and her skin will soon show sleek.
 How it disgusts when weakness, false-refined,
 Censures the honest rude effective strength,—
 When sickly dreamers of the impossible
 Decry plain sturdiness which does the feat
 1015 With eyes wide open!

Did occasion serve,
 I could illustrate, if my lords allow;
Quid vetat, what forbids I aptly ask
 With Horace,¹ that I give my anger vent,
 1020 While I let breathe, no less, and recreate,
 The gravity of my Judges, by a tale?
 A case in point—what though an apologue²
 Graced by tradition?—possibly a fact:
 Tradition must precede all scripture, words
 1025 Serve as our warrant ere our books can be:
 So, to tradition back we needs must go
 For any fact's authority: and this
 Hath lived so far (like jewel hid in muck)
 On page of that old lying vanity
 1030 Called “Sepher Toldoth Yeschu:”³ God be praised,
 I read no Hebrew,—take the thing on trust:
 But I believe the writer meant no good
 (Blind as he was to truth in some respects)
 To our pestiferous and schismatic⁴ ... well,

¹ in *Satires* 1.1.24–25.

² moral tale.

³ a Jewish attack on Christianity, dating probably from the Middle Ages.

⁴ probably the Molinists. See note to I 307.

- 1035 My lords' conjecture be the touchstone, show
The thing for what it is! The author lacks
Discretion, and his zeal exceeds: but zeal,—
How rare in our degenerate day! Enough!
Here is the story: fear not, I shall chop
1040 And change a little, else my Jew would press
All too unmannerly before the Court.

It happened once,—begins this foolish Jew,
Pretending to write Christian history,—
That three, held greatest, best and worst of men,
1045 Peter and John and Judas, spent a day
In toil and travel through the country-side
On some sufficient business—I suspect,
Suppression of some Molinism i' the bud.
Foot-sore and hungry, dropping with fatigue,
1050 They reached by nightfall a poor lonely grange,
Hostel or inn: so, knocked and entered there.
“Your pleasure, great ones?”—“Shelter, rest and food!”
For shelter, there was one bare room above;
For rest therein, three beds of bundled straw:
1055 For food, one wretched starveling fowl, no more—
Meat for one mouth, but mockery for three.
“You have my utmost.” How should supper serve?
Peter broke silence: “To the spit with fowl!
And while 't is cooking, sleep!—since beds there be,
1060 And, so far, satisfaction of a want.
Sleep we an hour, awake at supper-time,
Then each of us narrate the dream he had,
And he whose dream shall prove the happiest, point
The clearest out the dreamer as ordained
1065 Beyond his fellows to receive the fowl,
Him let our shares be cheerful tribute to,

- His the entire meal, may it do him good!"
Who could dispute so plain a consequence?¹
So said, so done: each hurried to his straw,
1070 Slept his hour's sleep and dreamed his dream, and woke.
"I," commenced John, "dreamed that I gained the prize
We all aspire to: the proud place was mine,
Throughout the earth and to the end of time
I was the Loved Disciple: mine the meal!"
1075 "But I," proceeded Peter, "dreamed, a word
Gave me the headship of our company,
Made me the Vicar and Vice-gerent, gave
The keys of heaven and hell into my hand,
And o'er the earth, dominion: mine the meal!"
1080 "While I," submitted in soft under-tone
The Iscariot—sense of his unworthiness
Turning each eye up to the inmost white—
With long-drawn sigh, yet letting both lips smack,
"I have had just the pitifullest dream
1085 That ever proved man meanest of his mates,
And born foot-washer and foot-wiper, nay
Foot-kisser to each comrade of you all!
I dreamed I dreamed; and in that mimic dream
(Impalpable to dream as dream to fact)
1090 Methought I meanly chose to sleep no wink
But wait until I heard my brethren snore;
Then stole from couch, slipped noiseless o'er the planks,
Slid downstairs, furtively approached the hearth,
Found the fowl duly brown, both back and breast,
1095 Hissing in harmony with the cricket's chirp,
Grilled to a point; said no grace but fell to,
Nor finished till the skeleton lay bare.

¹ so reasonable an understanding.

- In penitence for which ignoble dream,
 Lo, I renounce my portion cheerfully!
- 1100 Fie on the flesh—be mine the ethereal gust,¹
 And yours the sublunary sustenance!
 See that whate'er be left ye give the poor!"
 Down the two scuttled, one on other's heel,
 Stung by a fell surmise; and found, alack,
 1105 A goodly savour, both the drumstick bones,
 And that which henceforth took the appropriate name
 O' the Merry-thought,² in memory of the fact
 That to keep wide awake is man's best dream.

- So,—as was said once of Thucydides³
- 1110 And his sole joke, "The lion, lo, hath laughed!"—
 Just so, the Governor and all that's great
 I' the city, never meant that Innocence
 Should quite starve while Authority sat at meat;
 They meant to fling a bone at banquet's end:
 1115 Wished well to our Pompilia—in their dreams,
 Nor bore the secular sword in vain⁴—asleep.
 Just so the Archbishop and all good like him
 Went to bed meaning to pour oil and wine⁵
 I' the wounds of her, next day,—but long ere day,
 1120 They had burned the one and drunk the other, while
 Just so, again, contrariwise, the priest
 Sustained poor Nature in extremity
 By stuffing barley-bread into her mouth,

¹ relish, enjoyment.

² wishbone.

³ Greek historian (*c.464–c.402 BC*).

⁴ Romans 13.4.

⁵ Luke 10.34.

Saving Pompilia (grant the parallel)

1125 By the plain homely and straightforward way
 Taught him by common sense. Let others shriek
 "Oh what refined expedients did we dream
 Proved us the only fit to help the fair!"
 He cried "A carriage waits, jump in with me!"

1130 And now, this application pardoned, lords,—
 This recreative pause and breathing-while,—
 Back to beseemingness and gravity!
 For Law steps in: Guido appeals to Law,
 Demands she arbitrate,—does well for once.

1135 O Law, of thee how neatly was it said
 By that old Sophocles,¹ thou hast thy seat
 I' the very breast of Jove, no meanlier throned!
 Here is a piece of work now, hitherto
 Begun and carried on, concluded near,

1140 Without an eye-glance cast thy sceptre's way;
 And, lo the stumbling and discomfiture!
 Well may you call them "lawless" means, men take
 To extricate themselves through mother-wit
 When tangled haply in the toils of life!

1145 Guido would try conclusions with his foe,
 Whoe'er the foe was and whate'er the offence;
 He would recover certain dowry-dues:
 Instead of asking Law to lend a hand,

What bother of sword drawn and pistol cocked,

1150 What peddling with forged letters and paid spies,
 Politic circumvention!—all to end
 As it began—by loss of the fool's head,

¹ "Justice sits with Zeus in the might of the eternal laws" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1382).

First in a figure, presently in a fact.

It is a lesson to mankind at large.

1155 How other were the end, would men be sage

And bear confidingly each quarrel straight,

O Law, to thy recipient mother-knees!

How would the children light¹ come and prompt go,

This with a red-cheeked apple for reward,

1160 The other, peradventure red-cheeked too

I' the rear, by taste of birch for punishment.

No foolish brawling murder any more!

Peace for the household, practise for the Fisc,

And plenty for the exchequer of my lords!

1165 Too much to hope, in this world: in the next,

Who knows? Since, why should sit the Twelve enthroned

To judge the tribes,² unless the tribes be judged?

And 't is impossible but offences come:

So, all's one lawsuit, all one long leet-day!³

1170 Forgive me this digression—that I stand

Entranced awhile at Law's first beam, outbreak

O' the business, when the Count's good angel bade

"Put up thy sword, born enemy to the ear,⁴

And let Law listen to thy difference!"

1175 And Law does listen and compose the strife,

Settle the suit, how wisely and how well!

On our Pompilia, faultless to a fault,

Law bends a brow maternally severe,

Implies the worth of perfect chastity,

¹ quickly, readily.

² Matthew 19.28, Luke 22.30.

³ day appointed for court session.

⁴ Matthew 26.51–52.

- 1180 By fancying the flaw she cannot find.
 Superfluous sifting snow, nor helps nor harms:
 'T is safe to censure levity in youth,
 Tax womanhood with indiscretion, sure!
 Since toys,¹ permissible to-day, become
 1185 Follies to-morrow: prattle shocks in church:
 And that curt skirt which lets a maiden skip,
 The matron changes for a trailing robe.
 Mothers may aim a blow with half-shut eyes
 Nodding above their spindles by the fire,
 1190 And chance to hit some hidden fault, else safe.
 Just so, Law hazarded a punishment—
 If applicable to the circumstance,
 Why, well! if not so apposite, well too.
 "Quit the gay range² o' the world," I hear her cry,
 1195 "Enter, in lieu, the penitential pound:³
 Exchange the gauds of pomp for ashes, dust!
 Leave each mollitious⁴ haunt of luxury!
 The golden-garnished silken-couched alcove,
 The many-columned terrace that so tempts
 1200 Feminine soul put foot forth, extend ear
 To fluttering joy of lover's serenade,—
 Leave these for cellular seclusion! mask
 And dance no more, but fast and pray! avaunt—
 Be burned, thy wicked townsman's sonnet-book!⁵
 1205 Welcome, mild hymnal by ... some better scribe!
 For the warm arms were wont enfold thy flesh,

¹ amorous sport, dallying.

² grazing area.

³ place of confinement for stray (or straying) cattle or dogs.

⁴ voluptuous.

⁵ the lascivious sonnets of Pietro Aretino (1492–1556).

Let wire-shirt plough and whipcord discipline!"
 If such an exhortation proved, perchance,
 Inapplicable, words bestowed in waste,
 1210 What harm, since Law has store, can spend nor miss?

And so, our paragon submits herself,
 Goes at command into the holy house,
 And, also at command, comes out again:
 For, could the effect of such obedience prove
 1215 Too certain, too immediate? Being healed,
 Go blaze abroad the matter, blessed one!¹
 Art thou sound forthwith? Speedily vacate
 The step by pool-side, leave Bethesda² free
 To patients plentifully posted round,
 1220 Since the whole need not the physician!³ Brief,
 She may betake her to her parents' place.
 Welcome her, father, with wide arms once more,
 Motion her, mother, to thy breast again!
 For why? Since Law relinquishes the charge,
 1225 Grants to your dwelling-place a prison's style,
 Rejoice you with Pompilia! golden days,
*Redeunt Saturnia regna.*⁴ Six weeks slip,
 And she is domiciled in house and home
 As though she thence had never budged at all.
 1230 And thither let the husband,—joyous, ay,
 But contrite also—quick betake himself,
 Proud that his dove which lay among the pots⁵

¹ Mark 1.45. The "matter" was Jesus's cure of the leper.

² John 5.2.

³ Luke 5.31.

⁴ "The Golden Age returns" (Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.6). See note to X 779.

⁵ sheepfolds ("pots" is a mistranslation in Psalms 68.13).

Hath mued¹ those dingy feathers,—moulted now,
Shows silver bosom clothed with yellow gold!

1235 So shall he tempt her to the perch she fled,
Bid to domestic bliss the truant back.

But let him not delay! Time fleets how fast,
And opportunity, the irrevocable,
Once flown will flout him! Is the furrow traced?

1240 If field with corn ye fail preoccupy,
Darnel² for wheat and thistle-beards for grain,
Infelix lolium, carduus horridus,³
Will grow apace in combination prompt,
Defraud the husbandman of his desire.

1245 Already—hist—what murmurs 'monish now
The laggard?—doubtful, nay, fantastic bruit
Of such an apparition, such return
Interdum,⁴ to anticipate the spouse,
Of Caponsacchi's very self! 'T is said,

1250 When nights are lone and company is rare,
His visitations brighten winter up.

If so they did—which nowise I believe—
(How can I?—proof abounding that the priest,
Once fairly at his relegation-place,

1255 Never once left it) still, admit he stole
A midnight march, would fain see friend again,
Find matter for instruction in the past,
Renew the old adventure in such chat
As cheers a fireside! He was lonely too,

¹ molted.

² grass found in grain fields, ryegrass.

³ adapted from Virgil, *Georgics* 1.151–54.

⁴ now and then.

- 1260 He, too, must need his recreative hour.
 Shall it amaze the philosophic mind
 If he, long wont the empurpled cup to quaff,
 Have feminine society at will,
 Being debarred abruptly from all drink
- 1265 Save at the spring which Adam used for wine,
 Dreads harm to just the health he hoped to guard,
 And, trying abstinence, gains malady?
 Ask Tozzi,¹ now physician to the Pope!
 “Little by little break”—(I hear he bids
- 1270 Master Arcangeli my antagonist,
 Who loves good cheer, and may indulge too much:
 So I explain the logic of the plea
 Wherewith he opened our proceedings late)—
 “Little by little break a habit, Don,
- 1275 Become necessity to feeble flesh!”
 And thus, nocturnal taste of intercourse
 (Which never happened,—but, suppose it did)
 May have been used to dishabituate
 By sip and sip this drainer to the dregs
- 1280 O’ the draught of conversation,—heady stuff,
 Brewage which, broached, it took two days and nights
 To properly discuss² i’ the journey, Sirs!
 Such power has second-nature, men call use,
 That undelightful objects get to charm
- 1285 Instead of chafe: the daily colocynth³
 Tickles the palate by repeated dose,
 Old sores scratch kindly, the ass makes a push,
 Although the mill-yoke-wound be smarting yet,

¹ Malpighi’s successor as physician to the Pope.

² consume.

³ powerful cathartic made from a Mediterranean vine.

- For mill-door bolted on a holiday:
 1290 Nor must we marvel here if impulse urge
 To talk the old story over now and then,
 The hopes and fears, the stoppage and the haste,—
 Subjects of colloquy to surfeit once.
 “Here did you bid me twine a rosy wreath!”¹
 1295 “And there you paid my lips a compliment!”
 “Here you admired the tower could be so tall!”
 “And there you likened that of Lebanon²
 To the nose of the beloved!” Trifles! still,
 “*Forsan et haec olim*,”³—such trifles serve
 1300 To make the minutes pass in winter-time.

- Husband, return then, I re-counsel thee!
 For, finally, of all glad circumstance
 Should make a prompt return imperative,
 What in the world awaits thee, dost suppose?
 1305 O’ the sudden, as good gifts are wont befall,
 What is the hap of our unconscious⁴ Count?
 That which lights bonfire and sets cask a-tilt,
 Dissolves the stubborn’st heart in jollity.
 O admirable, there is born a babe,
 1310 A son, an heir, a Franceschini last
 And best o’ the stock! Pompilia, thine the palm!
 Repaying incredulity with faith,
 Ungenerous thrift of each marital debt
 With bounty in profuse expenditure,
 1315 Pompilia scorns to have the old year end

¹ an echo of Ben Jonson’s “To Celia”: “I sent thee late a rosy wreath.”

² “thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon” (Song of Solomon 7.4).

³ (*meminisse iuvabit*) “some day, perhaps, remembering even this will be a pleasure” (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.203).

⁴ unsuspecting.

Without a present shall ring in the new—
 Bestows on her too-parsimonious lord
 An infant for the apple of his eye,¹
 Core of his heart, and crown completing life,
 1320 True *summum bonum* of the earthly lot!
 “We,” saith ingeniously the sage,² “are born
 Solely that others may be born of us.”
 So, father, take thy child, for thine that child,
 Oh nothing doubt! In wedlock born, law holds
 1325 Baseness impossible: since “*filius est*
Quem nuptiae demonstrant,”³ twists the text
 Whoever dares to doubt.

Yet doubt he dares!

O faith, where art thou flown from out the world?
 1330 Already on what an age of doubt we fall!
 Instead of each disputing for the prize,
 The babe is bandied here from that to this.
 Whose the babe? “*Cujum pecus?*” Guido’s lamb?
 “*An Meliboei?*” Nay, but of the priest!
 1335 “*Non sed Aegonis!*”⁴ Someone must be sire:
 And who shall say, in such a puzzling strait,
 If there were not vouchsafed some miracle
 To the wife who had been harassed and abused
 More than enough by Guido’s family
 1340 For non-production of the promised fruit
 Of marriage? What if Nature, I demand,
 Touched to the quick by taunts upon her sloth,

¹ Deuteronomy 32.10.

² unidentified.

³ “he is the son [of his father] according to the marriage contract.”

⁴ Virgil, *Eclogues* 3.1–2.

Had roused herself, put forth recondite¹ power,
 Bestowed this birth to vindicate her sway,
 1345 Like the strange favour, Maro memorized²
 As granted Aristaeus when his hive
 Lay empty of the swarm? not one more bee—
 Not one more babe to Franceschini's house!
 And lo, a new birth filled the air with joy,
 1350 Sprung from the bowels of the generous steer,
 A novel son and heir rejoiced the Count!
 Spontaneous generation,³ need I prove
 Were facile feat to Nature at a pinch?
 Let whoso doubts, steep horsehair certain weeks
 1355 In water, there will be produced a snake;
 Spontaneous product of the horse, which horse
 Happens to be the representative—
 Now that I think on't—of Arezzo's self,
 The very city our conception blessed:
 1360 Is not a prancing horse the City-arms?
 What sane eye fails to see coincidence?
*Cur ego,*⁴ boast thou, my Pompilia, then,

¹ secret.

² the miraculous breeding of bees in the carcasses of four bulls and four heifers sacrificed by the shepherd Aristaeus (Virgil—"Maro"—*Georgics* 4.554–58). ("Memorized": recorded.)

³ According to the theory of spontaneous generation, freshly discredited by Louis Pasteur at the time Browning was writing the poem, fresh life could spring from such origins as a horsehair steeped in water or the dung (first "product") of a horse. The "bowels" of line 1350 is ambiguous (derived from the "per viscera" of Virgil's statement cited in the preceding note).

⁴ The Latin may be translated: "Why should I despair of becoming a mother without a husband, and of bringing forth without contact with a man, always supposing I am chaste?" (Ovid, *Fasti* 5.241–42; Loeb translation).

Desperem fieri sine conjugé

Mater—how well the Ovidian distich¹ suits!—

1365 *Et parere intacto dummodo*

Casta viro? Such miracle was wrought!

Note, further, as to mark the prodigy,

The babe in question neither took the name
Of Guido, from the sire presumptive, nor

1370 Giuseppe, from the sire potential,² but

Gaetano³—last saint of our hierarchy,
And newest namer for a thing so new!

What other motive could have prompted choice?

Therefore be peace again: exult, ye hills!

1375 Ye vales rejoicingly break forth in song!

Incipe, parve puer, begin, small boy,

*Risu cognoscere patrem,*⁴ with a laugh

To recognize thy parent! Nor do thou
Boggle, oh parent, to return the grace!

1380 *Nec anceps haere, pater, puero*

Cognoscendo—one may well eke out the prayer!

In vain! The perverse Guido doubts his eyes,
Distrusts assurance, lets the devil drive.⁵

Because his house is swept and garnished now,

1385 He, having summoned seven like himself,⁶

Must hurry thither, knock and enter in,

¹ couplet.

² possible.

³ See note to VII 103.

⁴ Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.60 (which has *matrem*, not *patrem*).

⁵ a proverb found in Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare, etc.

⁶ Matthew 12.44–45. The “seven” rather than the correct “four” is traceable to verse 45: “Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself....”

And make the last worse than the first, indeed!
 Is he content? We are. No further blame
 O' the man and murder! They were stigmatized¹
 1390 Befittingly: the Court heard long ago
 My mind o' the matter, which, outpouring full,
 Has long since swept like surge, i' the simile
 Of Homer,² overborne both dyke and dam,
 And whelmed alike client and advocate:
 1395 His fate is sealed, his life as good as gone,
 On him I am not tempted to waste word.
 Yet though my purpose holds,—which was and is
 And solely shall be to the very end,
 To draw the true *effigies* of a saint,
 1400 Do justice to perfection in the sex,—
 Yet let not some gross pamperer of the flesh
 And niggard in the spirit's nourishment,
 Whose feeding hath offuscated³ his wit
 Rather than law,—he never had, to lose—
 1405 Let not such advocate object to me
 I leave my proper function of attack!
 "What's this to Bacchus?"⁴—(in the classic phrase,
 Well used, for once) he hiccups probably.
 O Advocate o' the Poor, thou born to make
 1410 Their blessing void—*beati pauperes!*⁵
 By painting saintship I depicture sin:

¹ censured, marked with infamy.

² *Iliad* 5.87–92.

³ addled, confused.

⁴ the cry of conservative critics as the Greek tragedies originally produced in honor of Dionysus (Bacchus) strayed further and further from their original spirit and aims.

⁵ Luke 6.20.

Beside my pearl, I prove how black thy jet,
And, through Pompilia's virtue, Guido's crime.

Back to her, then,—with but one beauty more,

1415 End we our argument,—one crowning grace
Pre-eminent 'mid agony and death.

For to the last Pompilia played her part,
Used the right means to the permissible end,
And, wily as an eel that stirs the mud

1420 Thick overhead, so baffling spearman's thrust,
She, while he stabbed her, simulated death,
Delayed, for his sake, the catastrophe,
Obtained herself a respite, four days' grace,
Whereby she told her story to the world,
1425 Enabled me to make the present speech,
And, by a full confession, saved her soul.

Yet hold, even here would malice leer its last,

Gurgle its choked remonstrance: snake, hiss free!

Oh, that's the objection? And to whom?—not her

1430 But me, forsooth—as, in the very act
Of both confession and (what followed close)
Subsequent talk, chatter and gossipry,
Babble to sympathizing he and she

Whoever chose besiege her dying bed,—

1435 As this were found at variance with my tale,
Falsified all I have adduced¹ for truth,
Admitted not one peccadillo here,
Pretended to perfection, first and last,
O' the whole procedure—perfect in the end,
1440 Perfect i' the means, perfect in everything,

¹ alleged, cited.

Leaving a lawyer nothing to excuse,
 Reason away and show his skill about!
 —A flight, impossible to Adamic flesh,
 Just to be fancied, scarcely to be wished,
 1445 And, anyhow, unpleadable in court!
 “How reconcile,” gasps Malice, “that with this?”

Your “this,” friend, is extraneous to the law,
 Comes of men’s outside meddling, the unskilled
 Interposition of such fools as press
 1450 Out of their province. Must I speak my mind?
 Far better had Pompilia died o’ the spot
 Than found a tongue to wag and shame the law,
 Shame most of all herself,—could friendship fail
 And advocacy lie less on the alert:
 1455 But no, they shall protect her to the end!
 Do I credit the alleged narration? No!
 Lied our Pompilia then, to laud herself?
 Still, no! Clear up what seems discrepancy?
 The means abound: art’s long, though time is short;¹
 1460 So, keeping me in compass,² all I urge
 Is—since, confession at the point of death,
Nam in articulo mortis, with the Church
 Passes for statement honest and sincere,
Nemo presumitur reus esse,—then,
 1465 If sure that all affirmed would be believed,
 ‘T was charity, in her so circumstanced,
 To spend the last breath in one effort more
 For universal good of friend and foe:
 And,—by pretending utter innocence,

¹ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, quoted by Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae* 1.1.

² in check.

- 1470 Nay, freedom from each foible we forgive,—
Re-integrate—not solely her own fame,
But do the like kind office for the priest
Whom telling the crude truth about might vex,
Haply expose to peril, abbreviate
- 1475 Indeed the long career of usefulness
Presumably before him: while her lord,
Whose fleeting life is forfeit to the law,—
What mercy to the culprit if, by just
The gift of such a full certificate
- 1480 Of his immitigable guiltiness,
She stifled in him the absurd conceit
Of murder as it were a mere revenge
—Stopped confirmation of that jealousy
Which, did she but acknowledge the first flaw,
- 1485 The faintest foible, had emboldened him
To battle with the charge, baulk penitence,
Bar preparation for impending fate!
Whereas, persuade him that he slew a saint
Who sinned not even where she may have sinned,
- 1490 You urge him all the brisklier to repent
Of most and least and aught and everything!
Still, if this view of mine content you not,
Lords, nor excuse the genial falsehood here,
We come to our *Triarii*,¹ last resource:
- 1495 We fall back on the inexpugnable,²
Submitting,—she confessed before she talked!
The sacrament obliterates the sin:
What is not,—was not, therefore, in a sense.
Let Molinists distinguish, “Souls washed white

¹ the reserves of the Roman army.

² impregnable, irrefutable.

1500 But red once, still show pinkish to the eye!"
 We say, abolition is nothingness,
 And nothingness has neither head nor tail,
 End nor beginning! Better estimate
 Exorbitantly, than disparage aught
 1505 Of the efficacy of the act, I hope!

*Solvuntur tabulae?*¹ May we laugh and go?
 Well,—not before (in filial gratitude
 To Law, who, mighty mother, waves adieu)
 We take on us to vindicate Law's self!

1510 For,—yea, Sirs,—curb the start, curtail the stare!—
 Remains that we apologize for haste
 I' the Law, our lady who here bristles up
 "Blame my procedure? Could the Court mistake?
 (Which were indeed a misery to think)

1515 Did not my sentence in the former stage
 O' the business bear a title plain enough?
Decretum"—I translate it word for word—
 "Decreed: the priest, for his complicity
 I' the flight and deviation of the dame,
 1520 As well as for unlawful intercourse,
 Is banished three years:’ crime and penalty,
 Declared alike. If he be taxed with guilt,
 How can you call Pompilia innocent?
 If both be innocent, have I been just?"

1525 Gently, O mother, judge men—whose mistake
 Is in the mere misapprehensiveness!
 The *Titulus*² a-top of your decree

¹ "Does the court adjourn?" (Adapted from Horace, *Satires* 2.1.86, "*Solvuntur risu tabulae*," "The case will be dismissed with a laugh.")

² statement of reasons at the beginning of the court's sentence.

- Was but to ticket there the kind of charge
 You in good time would arbitrate upon.
- 1530 Title is one thing,—arbitration's self,
Probatio, quite another possibly.
Subsistit, there holds good the old response,
Responsio tradita, we must not stick,
Quod non sit attendendus Titulus,
- 1535 To the Title, *sed Probatio*, but the Proof,
Resultans ex processu, the result
 O' the Trial, and the style of punishment,
Et poena per sententiam imposita.
 All is tentative, till the sentence come:
- 1540 An indication of what men expect,
 But nowise an assurance they shall find.
 Lords, what if we permissibly relax
 The tense bow, as the law-god Phoebus bids,¹
 Relieve our gravity at labour's close?
- 1545 I traverse Rome, feel thirsty, need a draught,
 Look for a wine-shop, find it by the bough
 Projecting² as to say "Here wine is sold!"
 So much I know,—"sold:" but what sort of wine?
 Strong, weak, sweet, sour, home-made or foreign drink?
- 1550 That much must I discover by myself.
 "Wine is sold," quoth the bough, "but good or bad,
 Find, and inform us when you smack your lips!"
 Exactly so, Law hangs her title forth,
 To show she entertains you with such case
- 1555 About such crime. Come in! she pours, you quaff.
 You find the Priest good liquor in the main,

¹ in Horace, *Odes* 2.10.19–20.

² From ancient Roman times onward, a bough or bush over a door was the sign of a wine shop.

But heady and provocative of brawls:
 Remand the residue to flask once more,
 Lay it low where it may deposit lees,
 1560 I' the cellar: thence produce it presently,
 Three years the brighter and the better!

Thus,

Law's son, have I bestowed my filial help,
 And thus I end, *tenax proposito*;¹
 1565 Point to point as I purposed have I drawn
 Pompilia, and implied as terribly
 Guido: so, gazing, let the world crown Law—
 Able once more, despite my impotence,
 And helped by the acumen of the Court,
 1570 To eliminate,² display, make triumph truth!
 What other prize than truth were worth the pains?

There's my oration—much exceeds in length
 That famed panegyric of Isocrates,³
 They say it took him fifteen years to pen.
 1575 But all those ancients could say anything!
 He put in just what rushed into his head:
 While I shall have to prune and pare and print.
 This comes of being born in modern times
 With priests for auditory. Still, it pays.

¹ "tenacious of my purpose" (Horace, *Odes* 3.3.1).

² divulge (secrets).

³ an oration advocating the invasion of Persia (380 BC), the composition of which is said to have taken ten years or more.

X
THE POPE

- LIKE to Ahasuerus,¹ that shrewd prince,
I will begin,—as is, these seven years now,
My daily wont,—and read a History²
(Written by one whose deft right hand was dust
5 To the last digit, ages ere my birth)
Of all my predecessors, Popes of Rome:
For though mine ancient early dropped the pen,
Yet others picked it up and wrote it dry,
Since of the making books there is no end.³
- 10 And so I have the Papacy complete
From Peter first to Alexander last;
Can question each and take instruction so.
Have I to dare?—I ask, how dared this Pope?
To suffer?—Suchanone, how suffered he?
- 15 Being about to judge, as now, I seek
How judged once, well or ill, some other Pope;
Study some signal judgment that subsists
To blaze on, or else blot, the page which seals
The sum up of what gain or loss to God
- 20 Came of His one more Vicar in the world.
So, do I find example, rule of life;

The time in the poem is February 21, three days after the court has adjudged Guido guilty. The actual date of the Pope's response to Guido's appeal, however, was February 20. Preview: I 1220-71.

¹ sleepless King of Persia (Esther 6.1).

² If a specific history of the popes is meant, it has not been identified.

³ Ecclesiastes 12.12.

So, square and set in order the next page,
 Shall be stretched smooth o'er my own funeral cyst.¹

Eight hundred years exact before the year

- 25 I was made Pope, men made Formosus² Pope,
 Say Sigebert³ and other chroniclers.
 Ere I confirm or quash the Trial here
 Of Guido Franceschini and his friends,
 Read,—How there was a ghastly Trial once
 30 Of a dead man by a live man, and both, Popes:
 Thus—in the antique penman's very phrase.

“Then Stephen,⁴ Pope and seventh of the name,
 Cried out, in synod as he sat in state,
 While choler quivered on his brow and beard,
 35 ‘Come into court, Formosus, thou lost wretch,
 That claimedst to be late Pope as even I!’

And at the word the great door of the church
 Flew wide, and in they brought Formosus' self,
 The body of him, dead, even as embalmed

- 40 And buried duly in the Vatican

¹ sac or bladder; here, coffin.

² Pope from 891 to 896. The controversy the Pope describes in ll. 32-149 hinged on the actions of the “cadaveric synod” which declared all decisions of Formosus invalid, including all ordinations solemnized during his reign. The long-sustained and bitter debate split Italy into two parties.

³ Sigebert of Gembloux (*c.*1030-1115), historian and hagiographer.

⁴ Pope Stephen VII (896-97). The other popes mentioned between this point and l. 142 are: Romanus (897); Theodore II (897); John IX (898-900); and Sergius III (904-11).

Eight months before, exhumed thus for the nonce.
They set it, that dead body of a Pope,
Clothed in pontifical vesture now again,
Upright on Peter's chair as if alive.

- 45 And Stephen, springing up, cried furiously
'Bishop of Porto, wherefore didst presume
To leave that see and take this Roman see,
Exchange the lesser for the greater see,
—A thing against the canons of the Church?'
- 50 Then one—(a Deacon who, observing forms,
Was placed by Stephen to repel the charge,
Be advocate and mouthpiece of the corpse)—
Spoke as he dared, set stammeringly forth
With white lips and dry tongue,—as but a youth,
55 For frightful was the corpse-face to behold,—
How nowise lacked there precedent for this.
- 60 But when, for his last precedent of all,
Emboldened by the Spirit, out he blurts
'And, Holy Father, didst not thou thyself
Vacate the lesser for the greater see,
Half a year since change Arago for Rome?'
—Ye have the sin's defence now, Synod mine!
Shrieks Stephen in a beastly froth of rage:
'Judge now betwixt him dead and me alive!
65 Hath he intruded, or do I pretend?
Judge, judge!—breaks wavelike one whole foam of wrath.

Whereupon they, being friends and followers,
Said 'Ay, thou art Christ's Vicar, and not he!'

Away with what is frightful to behold!

70 This act was uncanonic¹ and a fault.'

Then, swallowed up in rage, Stephen exclaimed

'So, guilty! So, remains I punish guilt!

He is unpoped, and all he did I damn:

The Bishop, that ordained him, I degrade:

75 Depose to laics those he raised to priests:

What they have wrought is mischief nor shall stand,

It is confusion, let it vex no more!

Since I revoke, annul and abrogate

All his decrees in all kinds: they are void!

80 In token whereof and warning to the world,

Strip me yon miscreant of those robes usurped,

And clothe him with vile serge befitting such!

Then hale the carrion to the market-place:

Let the town-hangman chop from his right hand

85 Those same three fingers which he blessed withal;

Next cut the head off once was crowned forsooth:

And last go fling them, fingers, head and trunk,

To Tiber that my Christian fish may sup!'

—Either because of ΙΧΘΥΣ which means Fish²

90 And very aptly symbolizes Christ,

Or else because the Pope is Fisherman,³

And seals with the Fisher's-signet.⁴

[———]

¹ in violation of church law.

² The Greek letters comprising the word for fish are the initials of the phrase "Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour."

³ Christ said to Peter and Andrew, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4.19).

⁴ The seal represents St. Peter fishing from his boat.

Anyway,

- So said, so done: himself, to see it done,
 95 Followed the corpse they trailed from street to street
 Till into Tiber wave they threw the thing.
 The people, crowded on the banks to see,
 Were loud or mute, wept or laughed, cursed or jeered,
 According as the deed addressed their sense;
 100 A scandal verily: and out spake a Jew
 'Wot ye your Christ had vexed our Herod thus?'

- Now when, Formosus being dead a year,
 His judge Pope Stephen tasted death in turn,
 Made captive by the mob and strangled straight,
 105 Romanus, his successor for a month,
 Did make protest Formosus was with God,
 Holy, just, true in thought and word and deed.
 Next Theodore, who reigned but twenty days,
 Therein convoked a synod, whose decree
 110 Did reinstate, repope the late unpoped,
 And do away with Stephen as accursed.
 So that when presently certain fisher-folk
 (As if the queasy river could not hold
 Its swallowed Jonas, but discharged the meal)
 115 Produced the timely product of their nets,
 The mutilated man, Formosus,—saved
 From putrefaction by the embalmer's spice,
 Or, as some said, by sanctity of flesh,—
 'Why, lay the body again,' bade Theodore,
 120 'Among his predecessors, in the church
 And burial-place of Peter!' which was done.
 'And,' addeth Luitprand,¹ 'many of repute,

¹ Italian chronicler, diplomat, and Bishop of Cremona (c.922–72). The name is also spelled "Liutprand."

- Pious and still alive, avouch to me
 That, as they bore the body up the aisle,
 125 The saints in imaged row bowed each his head
 For welcome to a brother-saint come back.'
- As for Romanus and this Theodore,
 These two Popes, through the brief reign granted each,
 Could but initiate what John came to close
- 130 And give the final stamp to: he it was
 Ninth of the name, (I follow the best guides)
 Who,—in full synod at Ravenna held
 With Bishops seventy-four, and present too
 Eude King of France¹ with his Archbishopry,—
- 135 Did condemn Stephen, anathematize²
 The disinterment, and make all blots blank,
 'For,' argueth here Auxilius³ in a place
De Ordinationibus, 'precedents
 Had been, no lack, before Formosus long,
- 140 Of Bishops so transferred from see to see,—
 Marinus,⁴ for example: ' read the tract.

- But, after John, came Sergius,⁵ reaffirmed
 The right of Stephen, cursed Formosus, nay
 Cast out, some say, his corpse a second time.
- 145 And here,—because the matter went to ground,

¹ Odo, Count of Paris, king of the western Franks in the late ninth century.

² condemn.

³ Auxilius of Naples, early tenth-century Frankish priest and polemicist who defended Formosus's claim to the papacy and consequently the legitimacy of his ordinations.

⁴ Pope Marinus I (882–84) brought the future Pope Formosus back from exile and restored his see.

⁵ But Benedict IV (900–903) and Leo V (903) intervened.

Fretted by new griefs, other cares of the age,—
 Here is the last pronouncing of the Church,
 Her sentence that subsists unto this day.
 Yet constantly opinion hath prevailed
 150 I' the Church, Formosus was a holy man."

Which of the judgments was infallible?¹
 Which of my predecessors spoke for God?
 And what availed Formosus that this cursed,
 That blessed, and then this other cursed again?
 155 "Fear ye not those whose power can kill the body
 And not the soul," saith Christ, "but rather those
 Can cast both soul and body into hell!"²

John judged thus in Eight Hundred Ninety Eight,
 Exact eight hundred years ago to-day
 160 When, sitting in his stead, Vice-gerent here,
 I must give judgment on my own behoof.
 So worked the predecessor: now, my turn!

In God's name! Once more on this earth of God's,
 While twilight lasts and time wherein to work,³
 165 I take His staff with my uncertain hand,
 And stay⁴ my six and fourscore years, my due
 Labour and sorrow, on His judgment-seat,

¹ This and the poem's several other allusions to papal infallibility reflect a major topic of discussion during the years Browning was writing the poem. The doctrine was promulgated as an article of faith by the Vatican Council of 1870. See C.T. Phipps, "Adaptation from the Past, Creation for the Present," *Studies in Philology* 65 (1968): 702–22.

² Matthew 10.28.

³ John 9.4.

⁴ rest.

- And forthwith think, speak, act, in place of Him—
 The Pope for Christ. Once more appeal is made
- 170 From man's assize to mine: I sit and see¹
 Another poor weak trembling human wretch
 Pushed by his fellows, who pretend the right,
 Up to the gulf which, where I gaze, begins
 From this world to the next,—gives way and way,
- 175 Just on the edge over the awful dark:
 With nothing to arrest him but my feet.
 He catches at me with convulsive face,
 Cries "Leave to live the natural minute more!"
 While hollowly the avengers echo "Leave?"
- 180 None! So has he exceeded man's due share
 In man's fit license, wrung by Adam's fall,
 To sin and yet not surely die,²—that we,
 All of us sinful, all with need of grace,
 All chary³ of our life,—the minute more
- 185 Or minute less of grace which saves a soul,—
 Bound to make common cause with who craves time,
 —We yet protest against the exorbitance
 Of sin in this one sinner, and demand
 That his poor sole remaining piece of time
- 190 Be plucked from out his clutch: put him to death!
 Punish him now! As for the weal or woe
 Hereafter, God grant mercy! Man be just,
 Nor let the felon boast he went scot-free!"
 And I am bound, the solitary judge,

¹ 170–93 Compare Caponsacchi's prophecy of Guido's fate, VI 1921–54.

² "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3.4).

³ zealous to preserve.

- 195 To weigh the worth, decide upon the plea,
And either hold a hand out, or withdraw
A foot and let the wretch drift to the fall.
Ay, and while thus I dally, dare perchance
Put fancies for a comfort 'twixt this calm
- 200 And yonder passion that I have to bear,—
As if reprieve were possible for both
Prisoner and Pope,—how easy were reprieve!
A touch o' the hand-bell here, a hasty word
To those who wait, and wonder they wait long,
- 205 I' the passage there, and I should gain the life!—
Yea, though I flatter me with fancy thus,
I know it is but nature's craven-trick.
The case is over, judgment at an end,
And all things done now and irrevocable:
- 210 A mere dead man is Franceschini here,
Even as Formosus centuries ago.
I have worn through this sombre wintry day,
With winter in my soul beyond the world's,
Over these dismalest of documents
- 215 Which drew night down on me ere eve befell,—
Pleadings and counter-pleadings, figure¹ of fact
Beside fact's self, these summaries to-wit,—
How certain three were slain by certain five:
I read here why it was, and how it went,
- 220 And how the chief o' the five preferred² excuse,
And how law rather chose defence should lie,—
What argument he urged by wary³ word
When free to play off wile, start subterfuge,

¹ semblance, shadow.

² proffered, urged.

³ wily, calculated.

- And what the unguarded groan told, torture'sfeat
225 When law grew brutal, outbreak, overbore
And glutted hunger on the truth, at last,—
No matter for the flesh and blood between.
All's a clear rede¹ and no more riddle now.
Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these—
230 Not absolutely in a portion, yet
Evolvable² from the whole: evolved at last
Painfully, held tenaciously by me.
Therefore there is not any doubt to clear
When I shall write the brief word presently
235 And chink the hand-bell, which I pause to do.
Irresolute? Not I, more than the mound
With the pine-trees on it yonder! Some surmise,
Perchance, that since man's wit is fallible,
Mine may fail here? Suppose it so,—what then?
240 Say,—Guido, I count guilty, there's no babe
So guiltless, for I misconceive the man!
What's in the chance should move me from my mind?
If, as I walk in a rough country-side,
Peasants of mine cry "Thou art he can help,
245 Lord of the land and counted wise to boot:
Look at our brother, strangling in his foam,
He fell so where we find him,—prove thy worth!"
I may presume, pronounce, "A frenzy-fit,
A falling-sickness or a fever-stroke!
250 Breathe³ a vein, copiously let blood at once!"

¹ story.

² The copy-text reads "evolvable," but both the printer's manuscript and the 1869 edition have "evolvable." The "ible" version was introduced in the 1872 edition, almost certainly a printer's error. The *OED*, in listing "evolvable," incorrectly cites an 1888 text by J. I. Swander as the first instance example. It then justifies the alternative "ible" spelling by citing, also incorrectly, the 1869 *Ring and the Book*.

³ lance.

- So perishes the patient, and anon
 I hear my peasants—"All was error, lord!
 Our story, thy prescription: for there crawled
 In due time from our hapless brother's breast
- 255 The serpent which had stung him: bleeding slew
 Whom a prompt cordial had restored to health."
 What other should I say than "God so willed:
 Mankind is ignorant, a man am I:
 Call ignorance my sorrow, not my sin!"
- 260 So and not otherwise, in after-time,
 If some acuter wit, fresh probing, sound
 This multifarious mass of words and deeds
 Deeper, and reach through guilt to innocence,
 I shall face Guido's ghost nor blench a jot.
- 265 "God who set me to judge thee, meted out
 So much of judging faculty, no more:
 Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!"
 I hold a heavier fault imputable
 Inasmuch as I changed a chaplain once,
- 270 For no cause,—no, if I must bare my heart,—
 Save that he snuffled somewhat saying mass.
 For I am ware it is the seed of act,
 God holds appraising in His hollow palm,
 Not act grown great thence on the world below,
- 275 Leafage and branchage, vulgar eyes admire.
 Therefore I stand on my integrity,
 Nor fear at all: and if I hesitate,
 It is because I need to breathe awhile,
 Rest, as the human right allows, review
- 280 Intent the little seeds of act, my tree,—
 The thought, which, clothed in deed, I give the world
 At chink of bell and push of arrased¹ door.

[— — —]

¹ curtained, tapestried.

- O pale departure, dim disgrace of day!
Winter's in wane, his vengeful worst art thou,
285 To dash the boldness of advancing March!
Thy chill persistent rain has purged our streets
Of gossipry;¹ pert tongue and idle ear
By this, consort 'neath archway, portico.
But wheresoe'er Rome gathers in the grey,
290 Two names now snap and flash from mouth to mouth—
(Sparks, flint and steel strike) Guido and the Pope.
By this same hour to-morrow eve—aha,
How do they call him?—the sagacious Swede²
Who finds by figures how the chances prove,
295 Why one comes rather than another thing,
As, say, such dots turn up by throw of dice,
Or, if we dip in Virgil³ here and there
And prick for such a verse, when such shall point.
Take this Swede, tell him, hiding name and rank,
300 Two men are in our city this dull eve;
One doomed to death,—but hundreds in such plight
Slip aside, clean escape by leave of law
Which leans to mercy in this latter time;
Moreover in the plenitude of life
305 Is he, with strength of limb and brain adroit,
Presumably of service here: beside,
This man is noble, backed by nobler friends:
Nay, they so wish him well, the city's self
Makes common cause with who—house-magistrate,
310 Patron of hearth and home, domestic lord—
But ruled his own, let aliens cavil. Die?

¹ idlers.

² possibly an anachronistic reference to Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who would have been just ten years old at the time of the Pope's monologue.

³ See note to V 402.

- He'll bribe a gaoler or break prison first!
 Nay, a sedition¹ may be helpful, give
 Hint to the mob to batter wall, burn gate,
 315 And bid the favourite malefactor march.
 Calculate now these chances of escape!
 "It is not probable, but well may be."
 Again, there is another man, weighed now
 By twice eight years beyond the seven-times-ten,
 320 Appointed overweight to break our branch.
 And this man's loaded branch lifts, more than snow,
 All the world's cark and care, though a bird's nest
 Were a superfluous burthen: notably
 Hath he been pressed, as if his age were youth,
 325 From to-day's dawn till now that day departs,
 Trying one question with true sweat of soul
 "Shall the said doomed man fitlier die or live?"
 When a straw swallowed in his posset, stool
 Stumbled on where his path lies, any puff
 330 That's incident to such a smoking flax,
 Hurries the natural end and quenches him!²
 Now calculate, thou sage, the chances here,
 Say, which shall die the sooner, this or that?
 "That, possibly, this in all likelihood."
 335 I thought so: yet thou tripp'st, my foreign friend!
 No, it will be quite otherwise,—to-day
 Is Guido's last: my term is yet to run.

- But say the Swede were right, and I forthwith
 Acknowledge a prompt summons and lie dead:
 340 Why, then I stand already in God's face

¹ incitement to rebellion.

² See note to VI 148.

And hear "Since by its fruit a tree is judged,¹
Show me thy fruit, the latest act of thine!
For in the last is summed the first and all,—
What thy life last put heart and soul into,
345 There shall I taste thy product." I must plead
This condemnation of a man to-day.

Not so! Expect nor question nor reply
At what we figure as God's judgment-bar!
None of this vile way by the barren words
350 Which, more than any deed, characterize
Man as made subject to a curse: no speech—
That still bursts o'er some lie which lurks inside,
As the split skin across the coppery snake,
And most denotes man! since, in all beside,
355 In hate or lust or guile or unbelief,
Out of some core of truth the excrescence comes,
And, in the last resort, the man may urge
"So was I made, a weak thing that gave way
To truth, to impulse only strong since true,
360 And hated, lusted, used guile, forwent faith."
But when man walks the garden of this world
For his own solace, and, unchecked by law,
Speaks or keeps silence as himself sees fit,
Without the least incumbency to lie,
365 —Why, can he tell you what a rose is like,
Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false
Though truth serve better? Man must tell his mate
Of you, me and himself, knowing he lies,
Knowing his fellow knows the same,—will think
370 "He lies, it is the method of a man!"

¹ Matthew 12.33.

- And yet will speak for answer "It is truth"
To him who shall rejoin "Again a lie!"
Therefore these filthy rags of speech, this coil
Of statement, comment, query and response,
375 Tatters all too contaminate for use,
Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
The Word.¹ We men, in our degree, may know
There, simply, instantaneously, as here
After long time and amid many lies,
380 Whatever we dare think we know indeed
—That I am I, as He is He,—what else?
But be man's method for man's life at least!
Wherefore, Antonio Pignatelli, thou
My ancient² self, who wast no Pope so long
385 But studiedst God and man, the many years
I' the school, i' the cloister, in the diocese
Domestic, legate-rule³ in foreign lands,—
Thou other force in those old busy days
Than this grey ultimate decrepitude,—
390 Yet sensible of fires that more and more
Visit a soul, in passage to the sky,
Left nakeder than when flesh-robe was new—
Thou, not Pope but the mere old man o' the world,
Supposed inquisitive and dispassionate,⁴
395 Wilt thou, the one whose speech I somewhat trust,
Question the after-me, this self now Pope,
Hear his procedure, criticize his work?
Wise in its generation is the world.⁵

[—]

¹ John 14.6.² former.³ papal embassy.⁴ disinterestedly seeking the truth.⁵ Luke 16.8.

- This is why Guido is found reprobate.¹
- 400 I see him furnished forth for his career,
On starting for the life-chance in our world,
With nearly all we count sufficient help:
Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,
A solid intellect: the wit to seek,
- 405 Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal
To deal in whatsoever circumstance
Should minister to man, make life succeed.
Oh, and much drawback! what were earth without?
Is this our ultimate stage, or starting-place
- 410 To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,
'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove
Advantage for who vaults from low to high
And makes the stumbling-block a stepping-stone?
So, Guido, born with appetite, lacks food:
- 415 Is poor, who yet could deftly play-off wealth:
Straitened,² whose limbs are restless till at large.
He, as he eyes each outlet of the cirque
And narrow penfold for probation,³ pines
After the good things just outside its grate,
- 420 With less monition, fainter conscience-twitch,
Rarer instinctive qualm at the first feel
Of greed unseemly, prompting grasp undue,
Than nature furnishes her main mankind,—
Making it harder to do wrong than right
- 425 The first time, careful lest the common ear
Break measure, miss the outstep of life's march.
Wherein I see a trial fair and fit

¹ guilty.

² confined.

³ test of moral strength.

- For one else too unfairly fenced about,
Set above sin, beyond his fellows here:
- 430 Guarded from the arch-tempter all must fight,
By a great birth, traditionaly name,
Diligent culture, choice companionship,
Above all, conversancy with the faith
Which puts forth for its base of doctrine just
- 435 "Man is born nowise to content himself,
But please God."¹ He accepted such a rule,
Recognized man's obedience; and the Church,
Which simply is such rule's embodiment,
He clave to, he held on by,—nay, indeed,
- 440 Near pushed inside of, deep as layman durst,
Professed so much of priesthood as might sue
For priest's-exemption where the layman sinned,—
Got his arm frocked which, bare, the law would bruise.
Hence, at this moment, what's his last resource,
- 445 His extreme stay and utmost stretch of hope
But that,—convicted of such crime as law
Wipes not away save with a worldling's blood,—
Guido, the three-parts consecrate, may 'scape?
Nay, the portentous² brothers of the man
- 450 Are veritably priests, protected each
May do his murder in the Church's pale,
Abate Paul, Canon Girolamo!
This is the man proves irreligiousest
Of all mankind, religion's parasite!
- 455 This may forsooth plead dinned ear, jaded sense,
The vice o' the watcher who bides near the bell,
Sleeps sound because the clock is vigilant,

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4.1.

² sinister.

And cares not whether it be shade or shine,
Doling out day and night to all men else!

- 460 Why was the choice o' the man to niche himself
Perversely 'neath the tower where Time's own tongue
Thus undertakes to sermonize the world?
Why, but because the solemn is safe too,
The belfry proves a fortress of a sort,
465 Has other uses than to teach the hour:
Turns sunscreen, paravent and ombrifuge¹
To whoso seeks a shelter in its pale,
—Ay, and attractive to unwary folk
Who gaze at storied portal, statued spire,
470 And go home with full head but empty purse,
Nor dare suspect the sacristan the thief!
Shall Judas,—hard upon the donor's heel,
To filch the fragments of the basket,²—plead
He was too near the preacher's mouth, nor sat
475 Attent³ with fifties in a company?⁴
No,—closer to promulgated decree,
Clearer the censure of default. Proceed!

I find him bound, then, to begin life well;
Fortified by propitious circumstance,

- 480 Great birth, good breeding, with the Church for guide,
How lives he? Cased thus in a coat of proof,⁵
Mailed like a man-at-arms, though all the while
A puny starveling,—does the breast pant big,

¹ protection against wind and rain (seemingly Browning's coinages).

² Mark 6.39–40. See note to VIII 1202–07.

³ attentive.

⁴ Luke 9.14.

⁵ armor.

- The limb swell to the limit, emptiness
 485 Strive to become solidity indeed?
 Rather, he shrinks up like the ambiguous fish,¹
 Detaches flesh from shell and outside show,
 And steals by moonlight (I have seen the thing)
 In and out, now to prey and now to skulk.
 490 Armour he boasts when a wave breaks on beach,
 Or bird stoops for the prize: with peril nigh,—
 The man of rank, the much-befriended-man,
 The man almost affiliate² to the Church,
 Such is to deal with, let the world beware!
 495 Does the world recognize, pass prudently?
 Do tides abate and sea-fowl hunt i' the deep?
 Already is the slug from out its mew,³
 Ignobly faring with all loose and free,
 Sand-fly and slush-worm at their garbage-feast,
 500 A naked blotch no better than they all:
 Guido had dropped nobility, slipped the Church,
 Plays trickster if not cut-purse, body and soul
 Prostrate among the filthy feeders—faugh!
 And when Law takes him by surprise at last,
 505 Catches the foul thing on its carrion-prey,
 Behold, he points to shell left high and dry,
 Pleads “But the case out yonder is myself!”
 Nay, it is thou, Law prongs amid thy peers,
 Congenial⁴ vermin; that was none of thee,
 510 Thine outside,—give it to the soldier-crab!

[— — —]

¹ any creature which, like the “soldier-crab” (hermit crab) of l. 510, can detach itself from its shell. The Pope does indeed relish a sea-side simile (IX 372–73); he will use others below.

² in the relation of a son.

³ place of confinement.

⁴ kindred, like.

- For I find this black mark impinge¹ the man,
 That he believes in just the vile of life.
 Low instinct, base pretension, are these truth?
 Then, that aforesaid armour, probity
 515 He figures in,² is falsehood scale on scale;
 Honour and faith,—a lie and a disguise,
 Probably for all livers in this world,
 Certainly for himself! All say good words
 To who will hear, all do thereby bad deeds
 520 To who must undergo; so thrive mankind!
 See this habitual creed exemplified
 Most in the last deliberate act; as last,
 So, very sum and substance of the soul
 Of him that planned and leaves one perfect piece,
 525 The sin brought under jurisdiction now,
 Even the marriage of the man: this act
 I sever from his life as sample, show
 For Guido's self, intend to test him by,
 As, from a cup filled fairly at the fount,
 530 By the components we decide enough
 Or to let flow as late, or staunch the source.

- He purposes this marriage, I remark,
 On no one motive that should prompt thereto—
 Farthest, by consequence, from ends alleged
 535 Appropriate to the action; so they were:
 The best, he knew and feigned, the worst he took.
 Not one permissible impulse moves the man,
 From the mere liking of the eye and ear,

¹ strike, but here (as Cook suggests) probably another coinage, meaning "paint."

² the guise of honesty.

- To the true longing of the heart that loves,
- 540 No trace of these: but all to instigate,
Is what sinks man past level of the brute
Whose appetite if brutish is a truth.
All is the lust for money: to get gold,—
Why, lie, rob, if it must be, murder! Make
- 545 Body and soul wring gold out, lured within
The clutch of hate by love, the trap's pretence!
What good else get from bodies and from souls?
This got, there were some life to lead thereby,
—What, where or how, appreciate those who tell
- 550 How the toad lives: it lives,—enough for me!
To get this good,—with but a groan or so,
Then, silence of the victims,—were the feat.
He foresaw, made a picture in his mind,—
Of father and mother stunned and echoless
- 555 To the blow, as they lie staring at fate's jaws
Their folly danced into, till the woe fell;
Edged in a month by strenuous cruelty
From even the poor nook whence they watched the wolf
Feast on their heart, the lamb-like child his prey;
- 560 Plundered to the last remnant of their wealth,
(What daily pittance pleased the plunderer dole)
Hunted forth to go hide head, starve and die,
And leave the pale awe-stricken wife, past hope
Of help i' the world now, mute and motionless,
- 565 His slave, his chattel, to first use, then destroy.
All this, he bent mind how to bring about,
Put plain in act and life, as painted plain,
So have success, reach crown of earthly good,
In this particular enterprise of man,
- 570 By marriage—undertaken in God's face

With all these lies so opposite God's truth,
For end so other than man's end.

- Thus schemes
- Guido, and thus would carry out his scheme:
 575 But when an obstacle first blocks the path,
 When he finds none may boast monopoly
 Of lies and trick i' the tricking lying world,—
 That sorry timid natures, even this sort
 O' the Comparini, want nor trick nor lie
 580 Proper to the kind,—that as the gor-crow¹ treats
 The bramble-finch so treats the finch the moth,
 And the great Guido is minutely matched
 By this same couple,—whether true or false
 The revelation of Pompilia's birth,
 585 Which in a moment brings his scheme to nought,—
 Then, he is piqued, advances yet a stage,
 Leaves the low region to the finch and fly,
 Soars to the zenith whence the fiercer fowl
 May dare the inimitable swoop. I see.
 590 He draws now on the curious² crime, the fine
 Felicity³ and flower of wickedness;
 Determines, by the utmost exercise
 Of violence, made safe and sure by craft,
 To satiate malice, pluck one last arch-pang
 595 From the parents, else would triumph out of reach,
 By punishing their child, within reach yet,
 Who, by thought, word or deed, could nowise wrong
 I' the matter that now moves him. So plans he,

¹ carrion crow.

² cunning, elaborate (with suggestion of "repulsive").

³ happy development.

- Always subordinating (note the point!)
- 600 **Revenge, the manlier sin, to interest¹**
The meaner,—would pluck pang forth, but unclench
No gripe in the act, let fall no money-piece.
Hence a plan for so plaguing, body and soul,
His wife, so putting, day by day, hour by hour,
- 605 **The untried torture to the untouched place,**
As must precipitate an end foreseen,
Goad her into some plain revolt, most like
Plunge upon patent suicidal shame,
Death to herself, damnation by rebound
- 610 **To those whose hearts he, holding hers, holds still:**
Such plan as, in its bad completeness, shall
Ruin the three together and alike,
Yet leave himself in luck and liberty,
No claim renounced, no right a forfeiture,
- 615 **His person unendangered, his good fame**
Without a flaw, his pristine worth intact,—
While they, with all their claims and rights that cling,
Shall forthwith crumble off him every side,
Scorched into dust, a plaything for the winds.
- 620 **As when, in our Campagna,² there is fired**
The nest-like work that overruns a hut;
And, as the thatch burns here, there, everywhere,
Even to the ivy and wild vine, that bound
And blessed the home where men were happy once,
- 625 **There rises gradual, black amid the blaze,**
Some grim and unscathed nucleus of the nest,—
Some old malicious tower, some obscene tomb
They thought a temple in their ignorance,

¹ that is, self-interest.

² the countryside surrounding Rome.

- And clung about and thought to lean upon—
- 630 There laughs it o'er their ravage,—where are they?
 So did his cruelty burn life about,
 And lay the ruin bare in dreadfulness,
 Try the persistency of torment so
 Upon the wife, that, at extremity,
- 635 Some crisis brought about by fire and flame,
 The patient frenzy-stung must needs break loose,
 Fly anyhow, find refuge anywhere,
 Even in the arms of who should front her first,
 No monster but a man—while nature shrieked
- 640 “Or thus escape, or die!” The spasm arrived,
 Not the escape by way of sin,—O God,
 Who shall pluck sheep Thou holdest, from Thy hand?¹
 Therefore she lay resigned to die,—so far
 The simple cruelty was foiled. Why then,
- 645 Craft to the rescue, let craft supplement
 Cruelty and show hell a masterpiece!
 Hence this consummate lie, this love-intrigue,
 Unmanly simulation of a sin,
 With place and time and circumstance to suit—
- 650 These letters false beyond all forgery—
 Not just handwriting and mere authorship,
 But false to body and soul they figure forth—
 As though the man had cut out shape and shape
 From fancies of that other Aretine,²
- 655 To paste below—incorporate the filth
 With cherub faces on a missal-page!

[— — —]

¹ John 10.28.

² See note to IX 1204.

Whereby the man so far attains his end
 That strange temptation is permitted,—see!

Pompilia wife, and Caponsacchi priest,

660 Are brought together as nor priest nor wife
 Should stand, and there is passion in the place,
 Power in the air for evil as for good,
 Promptings from heaven and hell, as if the stars
 Fought in their courses for a fate to be.

665 Thus stand the wife and priest, a spectacle,
 I doubt not, to unseen assemblage there.

No lamp will mark that window for a shrine,
 No tablet signalize the terrace, teach
 New generations which succeed the old

670 The pavement of the street is holy ground;
 No bard describe in verse how Christ prevailed
 And Satan fell like lightning!¹ Why repine?
 What does the world, told truth, but lie the more?

A second time the plot is foiled; nor, now,

675 By corresponding sin for countercheck,
 No wile and trick that baffle trick and wile,—
 The play o' the parents! Here the blot is blanched
 By God's gift of a purity of soul

That will not take pollution, ermine-like

680 Armed from dishonour by its own soft snow.
 Such was this gift of God who showed for once
 How He would have the world go white: it seems
 As a new attribute were born of each
 Champion of truth, the priest and wife I praise,—
 685 As a new safeguard sprang up in defence
 Of their new noble nature: so a thorn

¹ Luke 10.18.

- Comes to the aid of and completes the rose—
 Courage to-wit, no woman's gift nor priest's,
 I' the crisis; might leaps vindicating right.
- 690 See how the strong aggressor, bad and bold,
 With every vantage, preconcerts¹ surprise,
 Leaps of a sudden at his victim's throat
 In a byeway,—how fares he when face to face
 With Caponsacchi? Who fights, who fears now?
- 695 There quails Count Guido armed to the chattering teeth,
 Cowers at the steadfast eye and quiet word
 O' the Canon of the Pieve! There skulks crime
 Behind law called in to back cowardice:
 While out of the poor trampled worm the wife,
- 700 Springs up a serpent!

But anon of these.

- Him I judge now,—of him proceed to note,
 Failing the first, a second chance befriends
 Guido, gives pause ere punishment arrive.
- 705 The law he called, comes, hears, adjudicates,
 Nor does amiss i' the main,—secludes the wife
 From the husband, respites the oppressed one, grants
 Probation² to the oppressor, could he know
 The mercy of a minute's fiery purge!
- 710 The furnace-coals alike of public scorn,
 Private remorse, heaped glowing on his head,
 What if,—the force and guile, the ore's alloy,
 Eliminate, his baser soul refined—
 The lost be saved even yet, so as by fire?³

¹ contrives, arranges for.

² hearing, just trial.

³ 1 Corinthians 3.15.

- 715 Let him, rebuked, go softly all his days¹
 And, when no graver musings claim their due,
 Meditate on a man's immense mistake
 Who, fashioned to use feet and walk, deigns² crawl—
 Takes the unmanly means—ay, though to ends
 720 Man scarce should make for, would but reach thro'
 wrong.—
 May sin, but nowise needs shame manhood so:
 Since fowlers hawk, shoot, nay and snare the game,
 And yet eschew vile practice, nor find sport
 In torch-light treachery or the luring owl.
- 725 But how hunts Guido? Why, the fraudulent trap—
 Late spurned³ to ruin by the indignant feet
 Of fellows in the chase who loved fair play—
 Here he picks up its fragments to the least,
 Lades him and hies to the old lurking-place
 730 Where haply he may patch again, refit
 The mischief, file its blunted teeth anew,
 Make sure, next time, first snap shall break the bone.
 Craft, greed and violence complot revenge:
 Craft, for its quota, schemes to bring about
 735 And seize occasion and be safe withal:
 Greed craves its act may work both far and near,
 Crush the tree, branch and trunk and root, beside
 Whichever twig or leaf arrests a streak
 Of possible sunshine else would coin itself,
 740 And drop down one more gold piece in the path:
 Violence stipulates "Advantage proved"⁴

¹ Isaiah 38.15.

² chooses to.

³ kicked.

⁴ gain assured.

- And safety sure, be pain the overplus!
Murder with jagged knife! Cut but tear too!
Foiled oft, starved long, glut malice for amends!"
- 745 And what, craft's scheme? scheme sorrowful and strange
As though the elements, whom mercy checked,
Had mustered hate for one eruption more,
One final deluge to surprise the Ark¹
Cradled and sleeping on its mountain-top:
- 750 Their outbreak-signal—what but the dove's coo,
Back with the olive in her bill for news
Sorrow was over? 'T is an infant's birth,
Guido's first born, his son and heir, that gives
The occasion: other men cut free their souls
- 755 From care in such a case, fly up in thanks
To God, reach, recognize His love for once:
Guido cries "Soul, at last the mire is thine!
Lie there in likeness of a money-bag
My babe's birth so pins down past moving now,
- 760 That I dare cut adrift the lives I late
Scrupled to touch lest thou escape with them!
These parents and their child my wife,—touch one,
Lose all! Their rights determined² on a head
I could but hate, not harm, since from each hair
- 765 Dangled a hope for me: now—chance and change!
No right was in their child but passes plain
To that child's child and through such child to me.
I am a father now,—come what, come will,
I represent my child; he comes between—
- 770 Cuts sudden off the sunshine of this life
From those three: why, the gold is in his curls!

¹ Genesis 8.6–11.

² settled.

Not with old Pietro's, Violante's head,
 Not his grey horror, her more hideous black—
 Go these, devoted to the knife!"

775

"T is done:

Wherefore should mind misgive, heart hesitate?

He calls to counsel, fashions certain four

Colourless natures counted clean till now,

—Rustic simplicity, uncorrupted youth,

780

Ignorant virtue! Here's the gold o' the prime

When Saturn ruled,¹ shall shock our leaden day—

The clown abash² the courtier! Mark it, bards!

The courtier tries his hand on clownship here,

Speaks a word, names a crime, appoints a price,—

785

Just breathes on what, suffused with all himself,

Is red-hot henceforth past distinction now

I' the common glow of hell. And thus they break

And blaze on us at Rome, Christ's birthnight-eve!

Oh angels that sang erst "On the earth, peace!

790

To man, good will!"³—such peace finds earth to-day!

After the seventeen hundred years, so man

Wills good to man, so Guido makes complete

His murder! what is it I said?—cuts loose

Three lives that hitherto he suffered cling,

795

Simply because each served to nail secure,

By a corner of the money-bag, his soul,—

Therefore, lives sacred till the babe's first breath

O'erweights them in the balance,—off they fly!

[———]

¹ the golden age of Saturn. See note to IX 1227.

² discountenance, confound.

³ Luke 2.14.

- So is the murder managed, sin conceived
- 800 To the full: and why not crowned with triumph too?¹
Why must the sin, conceived thus, bring forth death?¹
I note how, within hair's-breadth of escape,
Impunity and the thing supposed success,
Guido is found when the check comes, the change,
- 805 The monitory touch o' the tether—felt
By few, not marked by many, named by none
At the moment, only recognized aright
I' the fulness of the days, for God's, lest sin
Exceed the service, leap the line: such check—
- 810 A secret which this life finds hard to keep,
And, often guessed, is never quite revealed—
Needs must trip Guido on a stumbling-block
Too vulgar, too absurdly plain i' the path!
Study this single oversight of care,
- 815 This hebetude² that marred sagacity,
Forgetfulness of all the man best knew,—
How any stranger having need to fly,
Needs but to ask and have the means of flight.
Why, the first urchin tells you, to leave Rome,
- 820 Get horses, you must show the warrant, just
The banal scrap, clerk's scribble, a fair word buys,
Or foul one, if a ducat sweeten word,—
And straight authority will back demand,
Give you the pick o' the post-house!—how should he,
- 825 Then, resident at Rome for thirty years,
Guido, instruct a stranger! And himself
Forgets just this poor paper scrap, wherewith
Armed, every door he knocks at opens wide

¹ James 1.15.

² stupidity.

- To save him: horsed and manned, with such advance
830 O' the hunt behind, why, 't were the easy task
Of hours told on the fingers of one hand,
To reach the Tuscan frontier, laugh at-home,
Light-hearted with his fellows of the place,—
Prepared by that strange shameful judgment, that
835 Satire upon a sentence just pronounced
By the Rota and confirmed by the Granduke,—
Ready in a circle to receive their peer,
Appreciate his good story how, when Rome,
The Pope-King and the populace of priests
840 Made common cause with their confederate
The other priestling who seduced his wife,
He, all unaided, wiped out the affront
With decent bloodshed and could face his friends,
Frolic it in the world's eye. Ay, such tale
845 Missed such applause, and by such oversight!
So, tired and footsore, those blood-flustered¹ five
Went reeling on the road through dark and cold,
The few permissible miles, to sink at length,
Wallow and sleep in the first wayside straw,
850 As the other herd quenched, i' the wash o' the wave,
—Each swine, the devil inside him:² so slept they,
And so were caught and caged—all through one trip,
One touch of fool in Guido the astute!
He curses the omission, I surmise,
855 More than the murder. Why, thou fool and blind,
It is the mercy-stroke that stops thy fate,
Hamstrings and holds thee to thy hurt,—but how?
On the edge o' the precipice! One minute more,

¹ half drunk with blood.

² Matthew 8.30–32.

- Thou hadst gone farther and fared worse, my son,
 860 Fathoms down on the flint and fire beneath!
 Thy comrades each and all were of one mind,
 Thy murder done, to straightway murder thee
 In turn, because of promised pay withheld.
 So, to the last, greed found itself at odds
 865 With craft in thee, and, proving conqueror,
 Had sent thee, the same night that crowned thy hope,
 Thither where, this same day, I see thee not,
 Nor, through God's mercy, need, to-morrow, see.

- Such I find Guido, midmost blotch of black
 870 Discernible in this group of clustered crimes
 Huddling together in the cave they call
 Their palace outraged day thus penetrates.
 Around him ranged, now close and now remote,
 Prominent or obscure to meet the needs
 875 O' the mage¹ and master, I detect each shape
 Subsidiary i' the scene nor loathed the less,
 All alike coloured, all described akin
 By one and the same pitchy furnace stirred
 At the centre: see, they lick the master's hand,—
 880 This fox-faced horrible priest, this brother-brute
 The Abate,—why, mere wolfishness looks well,
 Guido stands honest in the red o' the flame,
 Beside this yellow that would pass for white,
 Twice Guido, all craft but no violence,
 885 This copier of the mien and gait and garb
 Of Peter and Paul, that he may go disguised,
 Rob halt and lame, sick folk i' the temple-porch!²

¹ (evil) sorcerer.

² Acts 3.1–10.

- Armed with religion, fortified by law,
A man of peace, who trims the midnight lamp
- 890 And turns the classic page—and all for craft,
All to work harm with, yet incur no scratch!
While Guido brings the struggle to a close,
Paul steps back the due distance, clear o' the trap
He builds and baits. Guido I catch and judge;
- 895 Paul is past reach in this world and my time:
That is a case reserved. Pass to the next,
The boy of the brood, the young Girolamo
Priest, Canon, and what more? nor wolf nor fox,
But hybrid, neither craft nor violence
- 900 Wholly, part violence part craft: such cross
Tempts speculation—will both blend one day,
And prove hell's better product? Or subside
And let the simple quality emerge,
Go on with Satan's service the old way?
- 905 Meanwhile, what promise,—what performance too!
For there's a new distinctive touch, I see,
Lust—lacking in the two—hell's own blue tint
That gives a character and marks the man
More than a match for yellow and red. Once more,
- 910 A case reserved: why should I doubt? Then comes
The gaunt grey nightmare in the furthest smoke,
The hag that gave these three abortions birth,
Unmotherly mother and unwomanly
Woman, that near turns motherhood to shame,
- 915 Womanliness to loathing: no one word,
No gesture to curb cruelty a whit
More than the she-pard¹ thwarts her playsome whelps
Trying their milk-teeth on the soft o' the throat

¹ female leopard.

- O' the first fawn, flung, with those beseeching eyes,
920 Flat in the covert! How should she but couch,
Lick the dry lips, unsheathe the blunted claw,
Catch 'twixt her placid eyewinks at what chance
Old bloody half-forgotten dream may flit,
Born when herself was novice to the taste,
925 The while she lets youth take its pleasure. Last,
These God-abandoned wretched lumps of life,
These four companions,—country-folk this time,
Not tainted by the unwholesome civic breath,
Much less the curse o' the Court! Mere striplings too,
930 Fit to do human nature justice still!
Surely when impudence in Guido's shape
Shall propose crime and proffer money's-worth
To these stout tall rough bright-eyed black-haired boys,
The blood shall bound in answer to each cheek
935 Before the indignant outcry break from lip!
Are these i' the mood to murder, hardly loosed
From healthy autumn-finish of ploughed glebe,
Grapes in the barrel, work at happy end,
And winter near with rest and Christmas play?
940 How greet they Guido with his final task—
(As if he but proposed "One vineyard more
To dig, ere frost come, then relax indeed!")
"Anywhere, anyhow and anywhy,
Murder me some three people, old and young,
945 Ye never heard the names of,—and be paid
So much!" And the whole four accede at once.
Demur? Do cattle bidden march or halt?
Is it some lingering habit, old fond faith
I' the lord o' the land, instructs them,—birthright-badge
950 Of feudal tenure claims its slaves again?
Not so at all, thou noble human heart!

- All is done purely for the pay,—which, earned,
 And not forthcoming at the instant, makes
 Religion heresy, and the lord o' the land
 955 Fit subject for a murder in his turn.
 The patron with cut throat and rifled purse,
 Deposited i' the roadside-ditch, his due,
 Nought hinders each good fellow trudging home,
 The heavier by a piece or two in poke,
 960 And so with new zest to the common life,
 Mattock and spade, plough-tail and waggon-shaft,
 Till some such other piece of luck betide,
 Who knows? Since this is a mere start in life,
 And none of them exceeds the twentieth year.
- 965 Nay, more i' the background yet? Unnoticed forms
 Claim to be classed, subordinately vile?
 Complacent lookers-on that laugh,—perchance
 Shake head as their friend's horse-play grows too rough
 With the mere child he manages amiss—
 970 But would not interfere and make bad worse
 For twice the fractious tears and prayers: thou know'st
 Civility better, Marzi-Medici,¹
 Governor for thy kinsman the Granduke!
 Fit representative of law, man's lamp
 975 I' the magistrate's grasp full-flare, no rushlight-end
 Sputtering 'twixt thumb and finger of the priest!
 Whose answer to the couple's cry for help
 Is a threat,—whose remedy of Pompilia's wrong,
 A shrug o' the shoulder, and facetious word
 980 Or wink, traditional with Tuscan wits,
 To Guido in the doorway. Laud to law!

¹ the governor of Arezzo.

The wife is pushed back to the husband, he
 Who knows how these home-squabbings persecute¹
 People who have the public good to mind,
 985 And work best with a silence in the court!

Ah, but I save my word at least for thee,
 Archbishop, who art under me, i' the Church,
 As I am under God,—thou, chosen by both
 To do the shepherd's office, feed the sheep—
 990 How of this lamb that panted at thy foot
 While the wolf pressed on her within crook's reach?
 Wast thou the hireling that did turn and flee?²
 With thee at least anon the little word!

Such denizens o' the cave now cluster round
 995 And heat the furnace sevenfold: time indeed
 A bolt from heaven should cleave roof and clear place,
 Transfix and show the world, suspiring flame,
 The main offender, scar and brand the rest
 Hurrying, each miscreant to his hole: then flood
 1000 And purify the scene with outside day—
 Which yet, in the absolutest drench of dark,
 Ne'er wants a witness, some stray beauty-beam
 To the despair of hell.

First of the first,

1005 Such I pronounce Pompilia, then as now
 Perfect in whiteness: stoop thou down, my child,
 Give one good moment to the poor old Pope
 Heart-sick at having all his world to blame—

¹ annoy, are a nuisance to.

² John 10.12–13.

- Let me look at thee in the flesh as erst,
1010 Let me enjoy the old clean linen garb,
Not the new splendid vesture! Armed and crowned,
Would Michael, yonder,¹ be, nor crowned nor armed,
The less pre-eminent angel? Everywhere
I see in the world the intellect of man,
1015 That sword, the energy his subtle spear,
The knowledge which defends him like a shield—²
Everywhere; but they make not up, I think,
The marvel of a soul like thine, earth's flower
She holds up to the softened gaze of God!
- 1020 It was not given Pompilia to know much,
Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind,
Be memorized³ by who records my time.
Yet if in purity and patience, if
In faith held fast despite the plucking fiend,
1025 Safe like the signet stone with the new name
That saints are known by,⁴—if in right returned
For wrong, most pardon for worst injury,
If there be any virtue, any praise,—⁵
Then will this woman-child have proved—who
knows?—
- 1030 Just the one prize vouchsafed unworthy me,
Seven years a gardener of the untoward⁶ ground,
I till,—this earth, my sweat and blood manure
All the long day that barrenly grows dusk:

¹ on the mausoleum of Hadrian.

² Ephesians 6.14–17.

³ commemorated.

⁴ Revelation 2.17.

⁵ Philippians 4.8.

⁶ unyielding, stubborn.

- At least one blossom makes me proud at eve
1035 Born 'mid the briers of my enclosure! Still
(Oh, here as elsewhere, nothingness of man!)
Those be the plants, imbedded yonder South
To mellow in the morning, those made fat
By the master's eye, that yield such timid leaf,
1040 Uncertain bud, as product of his pains!
While—see how this mere chance-sown cleft-nursed seed
That sprang up by the wayside 'neath the foot
Of the enemy, this breaks all into blaze,
Spreads itself, one wide glory of desire
1045 To incorporate the whole great sun it loves
From the inch-height whence it looks and longs! My
flower,
- My rose, I gather for the breast of God,
This I praise most in thee, where all I praise,
That having been obedient to the end
1050 According to the light allotted, law
Prescribed thy life, still tried, still standing test,—
Dutiful to the foolish parents first,
Submissive next to the bad husband,—nay,
Tolerant of those meaner miserable
1055 That did his hests, eked out the dole of pain,—¹
Thou, patient thus, couldst rise from law to law,
The old to the new, promoted at one cry
O' the trump of God to the new service, not
To longer bear, but henceforth fight, be found
1060 Sublime in new impatience with the foe!
Endure man and obey God: plant firm foot
On neck of man, tread man into the hell

¹ followed his orders, which added to the portion of suffering.

- Meet for him, and obey God all the more!
Oh child that didst despise thy life so much
1065 When it seemed only thine to keep or lose,
How the fine ear felt fall the first low word
"Value life, and preserve life for My sake!"
Thou didst ... how shall I say? ... receive so long
The standing ordinance of God on earth,
1070 What wonder if the novel claim had clashed
With old requirement, seemed to supersede
Too much the customary law? But, brave,
Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,
1075 Accept the obligation laid on thee,
Mother elect, to save the unborn child,
As brute and bird do, reptile and the fly,
Ay and, I nothing doubt, even tree, shrub, plant
And flower o' the field, all in a common pact
1080 To worthily defend the trust of trusts,
Life from the Ever Living:—didst resist—
Anticipate the office that is mine—
And with his own sword stay the upraised arm,
The endeavour of the wicked, and defend
1085 Him who,—again in my default,—was there
For visible providence: one less true than thou
To touch, i' the past, less practised in the right,
Approved less far in all docility
To all instruction,—how had such an one
1090 Made scruple "Is this motion a decree?"
It was authentic to the experienced ear
O' the good and faithful servant. Go past me
And get thy praise,—and be not far to seek
Presently when I follow if I may!

- 1095 And surely not so very much apart
 Need I place thee, my warrior-priest,—in whom
 What if I gain the other rose, the gold,¹
 We grave to imitate God's miracle,
 Greet monarchs with, good rose in its degree?
- 1100 Irregular noble 'scapegrace—son the same!
 Faulty—and peradventure ours the fault
 Who still misteach, mislead, throw hook and line,
 Thinking to land leviathan forsooth,²
 Tame the scaled neck, play with him as a bird,
- 1105 And bind him for our maidens! Better bear
 The King of Pride go wantoning awhile,
 Unplagued by cord in nose and thorn in jaw,
 Through deep to deep, followed by all that shine,
 Churning the blackness hoary: He who made
- 1110 The comely terror,³ He shall make the sword
 To match that piece of netherstone⁴ his heart,
 Ay, nor miss praise thereby; who else shut fire
 I' the stone, to leap from mouth at sword's first stroke,
 In lamps of love and faith, the chivalry
- 1115 That dares the right and disregards alike
 The yea and nay o' the world? Self-sacrifice,—
 What if an idol took it? Ask the Church⁵

¹ a rose of gold annually given by the Pope to an eminent person to whom the Holy See was deeply indebted.

² Compare the earlier uses of the leviathan image at V 1504–05 and VIII 1739–44.

³ that is, “turned the beautiful *into* terror.”

⁴ “as hard as a piece of the nether millstone” (Job 41.24).

⁵ 1117–21 “After a period of merciless destruction, some classical monuments were spared by the Popes; temples were converted into churches, and statues of pagan gods were occasionally made to do duty as Christian images” (Cook; see Alexander Pope, note to *The Dunciad* 3.101).

- Why she was wont to turn each Venus here,—
 Poor Rome perversely lingered round, despite
 1120 Instruction, for the sake of purblind love,—
 Into Madonna's shape, and waste no whit
 Of aught so rare on earth as gratitude!
 All this sweet savour was not ours but thine,¹
 Nard² of the rock, a natural wealth we name
 1125 Incense, and treasure up as food for saints,
 When flung to us—whose function was to give
 Not find the costly perfume. Do I smile?
 Nay, Caponsacchi, much I find amiss,
 Blameworthy, punishable in this freak
 1130 Of thine, this youth prolonged, though age was ripe,
 This masquerade in sober day, with change
 Of motley too,—now hypocrite's disguise,
 Now fool's-costume: which lie was least like truth,
 Which the ungainlier, more discordant garb
 1135 With that symmetric soul inside my son,
 The churchman's or the worldling's,—let him judge,
 Our adversary who enjoys the task!
 I rather chronicle the healthy rage,—
 When the first moan broke from the martyr-maid
 1140 At that uncaging of the beasts,—made bare
 My athlete on the instant, gave such good
 Great undisguised leap over post and pale
 Right into the mid-cirque, free fighting-place.
 There may have been rash stripping—every rag
 1145 Went to the winds,—infringement manifold
 Of laws prescribed pudicity,³ I fear,

¹ Ephesians 5.2.

² aromatic herb.

³ "modesty, chastity" (*OED*).

In this impulsive and prompt self-display!
 Ever such tax comes of the foolish youth;
 Men mulct¹ the wiser manhood, and suspect
 1150 No veritable star swims out of cloud.²
 Bear thou such imputation, undergo
 The penalty I nowise dare relax,—
 Conventional chastisement and rebuke.
 But for the outcome, the brave starry birth
 1155 Conciliating earth with all that cloud,³
 Thank heaven as I do! Ay, such championship
 Of God at first blush, such prompt cheery thud
 Of glove on ground that answers ringingly
 The challenge of the false knight,—watch we long
 1160 And wait we vainly for its gallant like
 From those appointed to the service, sworn
 His body-guard with pay and privilege—
 White-cinct,⁴ because in white walks sanctity,
 Red-socked,⁵ how else proclaim fine scorn of flesh,
 1165 Unchariness⁶ of blood when blood faith begs!
 Where are the men-at-arms with cross on coat?
 Aloof, bewraying⁷ their attire: whilst thou
 In mask and motley, pledged to dance not fight,
 Sprang'st forth the hero! In thought, word and deed,
 1170 How throughout all thy warfare thou wast pure,
 I find it easy to believe: and if
 At any fateful moment of the strange

¹ punish.

² Compare III 846–51.

³ Compare VII 1405.

⁴ white-belted.

⁵ red-stockinged (the garb of cardinals; see V 228).

⁶ readiness (to shed).

⁷ betraying, proving unfaithful to.

- Adventure, the strong passion of that strait,¹
 Fear and surprise, may have revealed too much,—
- 1175 As when a thundrous midnight, with black air
 That burns, rain-drops that blister, breaks a spell,
 Draws out the excessive virtue of some sheathed
 Shut unsuspected flower that hoards and hides
 Immensity of sweetness,—so, perchance,
- 1180 Might the surprise and fear release too much
 The perfect beauty of the body and soul
 Thou savedst in thy passion for God's sake,
 He who is Pity. Was the trial sore?
 Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
- 1185 Why comes temptation but for man to meet
 And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
 And so be pedestaled in triumph? Pray
 "Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"
 Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
- 1190 Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
 Reluctant dragons,² up to who dares fight,
 That so he may do battle and have praise!
 Do I not see the praise?—that while thy mates
 Bound to deserve i' the matter, prove at need
- 1195 Unprofitable through the very pains
 We gave to train them well and start them fair,—
 Are found too stiff, with standing ranked and ranged,
 For onset in good earnest, too obtuse
 Of ear, through iteration of command,
- 1200 For catching quick the sense of the real cry,—

¹ crisis.

² Horace, *Odes* 4.4.11; but the Pope uses "reluctant" in the modern sense, whereas Horace's *reluctantes dracones* means that the "snakes" would struggle vigorously.

Thou, whose sword-hand was used to strike the lute,
Whose sentry-station graced some wanton's gate,
Thou didst push forward and show mettle, shame
The laggards, and retrieve the day. Well done!

- 1205 Be glad thou hast let light into the world
Through that irregular breach o' the boundary,—see
The same upon thy path and march assured,
Learning anew the use of soldiership,
Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,
1210 Loyalty to the life's end! Ruminata,
Deserve the initiatory spasm,—once more
Work, be unhappy but bear life, my son!

And troop you, somewhere 'twixt the best and worst,
Where crowd the indifferent product, all too poor

- 1215 Makeshift, starved samples of humanity!
Father and mother, huddle there and hide!
A gracious eye may find you! Foul and fair,
Sadly mixed natures: self-indulgent,—yet
Self-sacrificing too: how the love soars,
1220 How the craft, avarice, vanity and spite
Sink again! So they keep the middle course,
Slide into silly crime at unaware,
Slip back upon the stupid virtue, stay
Nowhere enough for being classed, I hope
1225 And fear. Accept the swift and rueful¹ death,
Taught, somewhat sternlier than is wont, what waits
The ambiguous creature,—how the one black tuft
Steadies the aim of the arrow just as well
As the wide faultless white on the bird's breast!
1230 Nay, you were punished in the very part

¹ sorrowful, pitiable.

That looked most pure of speck,—'t was honest love
 Betrayed you,—did love seem most worthy pains,
 Challenge such purging, since ordained survive
 When all the rest of you was done with? Go!

- 1235 Never again elude the choice of tints!
 White shall not neutralize the black, nor good
 Compensate bad in man, absolve him so:
 Life's business being just the terrible choice.

So do I see, pronounce on all and some

- 1240 Grouped for my judgment now,—profess no doubt
 While I pronounce: dark, difficult enough
 The human sphere, yet eyes grow sharp by use,
 I find the truth, dispart the shine from shade,
 As a mere man may, with no special touch

- 1245 O' the lynx-gift¹ in each ordinary orb:
 Nay, if the popular notion class me right,
 One of well-nigh decayed intelligence,—
 What of that? Through hard labour and good will,
 And habitude that gives a blind man sight
- 1250 At the practised finger-ends of him, I do
 Discern, and dare decree in consequence,
 Whatever prove the peril of mistake.
 Whence, then, this quite new quick cold thrill,—
 cloud-like,

This keen dread creeping from a quarter scarce

- 1255 Suspected in the skies I nightly scan?
 What slacks the tense nerve, saps the wound-up spring
 Of the act that should and shall be, sends the mount²

¹ ability to see through solid substances (see XI 917).

² amount, total.

And mass o' the whole man's-strength,—conglobed¹ so
late—

Shudderingly into dust, a moment's work?

1260 While I stand firm, go fearless, in this world,
For this life recognize² and arbitrate,

Touch and let stay, or else remove a thing,

Judge "This is right, this object out of place,"

Candle in hand that helps me and to spare,—

1265 What if a voice deride me, "Perk and pry!"³

Brighten each nook with thine intelligence!

Play the good householder, ply man and maid

With tasks prolonged into the midnight, test

Their work and nowise stint of the due wage

1270 Each worthy worker: but with gyves and whip
Pay⁴ thou misprision of a single point

Plain to thy happy self who lift'st the light,

Lament'st the darkling,—bold to all beneath!

What if thyself adventure, now the place

1275 Is purged so well? Leave pavement and mount roof,
Look round thee for the light of the upper sky,
The fire which lit thy fire which finds default
In Guido Franceschini to his cost!

What if, above in the domain of light,

1280 Thou miss the accustomed signs, remark eclipse?
Shalt thou still gaze on ground nor lift a lid,—
Steady in thy superb prerogative,

¹ formed into a rounded compact mass.

² examine.

³ "recover liveliness" and "inquire into or investigate closely" (*OED*).

⁴ punish.

Thy inch of inkling,—nor once face the doubt
I' the sphere above thee, darkness to be felt?"¹

- 1285 Yet my poor spark had for its source, the sun;
Thither I sent the great looks which compel
Light from its fount: all that I do and am
Comes from the truth, or seen or else surmised,
Remembered or divined, as mere man may:
- 1290 I know just so, nor otherwise. As I know,
I speak,—what should I know, then, and how speak
Were there a wild mistake of eye or brain
As to recorded governance above?
If my own breath, only, blew coal alight
- 1295 I styled celestial and the morning-star?
I, who in this world act resolvedly,
Dispose of men, their bodies and their souls,
As they acknowledge or gainsay the light
I show them,—shall I too lack courage?—leave
- 1300 I, too, the post of me, like those I blame?
Refuse, with kindred inconsistency,
To grapple danger whereby souls grow strong?
I am near the end; but still not at the end;
All to the very end is trial in life:
- 1305 At this stage is the trial of my soul
Danger to face, or danger to refuse?
Shall I dare try the doubt now, or not dare?

- O Thou,—as represented here to me
In such conception as my soul allows,—
1310 Under Thy measureless, my atom width!—

¹ Exodus 10.21.

- Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
 Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
 Picked out of the immensity of sky,
 To re-unite there, be our heaven for earth,
 1315 Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?
 Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
 Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,—
 There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)
 In the absolute immensity, the whole
 1320 Appreciable solely by Thyself,—
 Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
 To littleness that suits his faculty,
 In the degree appreciable too;
 Between Thee and ourselves—nay even, again,
 1325 Below us, to the extreme of the minute,
 Appreciable by how many and what diverse
 Modes of the life Thou madest be! (why live
 Except for love,—how love unless they know?)
 Each of them, only filling to the edge,
 1330 Insect or angel, his just length and breadth,
 Due facet of reflection,—full, no less,
 Angel or insect, as Thou framedst things.
 I it is who have been appointed here
 To represent Thee, in my turn, on earth,
 1335 Just as, if new philosophy¹ know aught,
 This one earth, out of all the multitude
 Of peopled worlds, as stars are now supposed,—
 Was chosen, and no sun-star of the swarm,
 For stage and scene of Thy transcendent act

¹ modern astronomy, especially that of Copernicus. A reminiscence of John Donne's "First Anniversary": "And new philosophy calls all in doubt" (l. 205); Browning's poetry was considerably influenced by Donne's.

- 1340 Beside which even the creation fades
 Into a puny exercise of power.
 Choice of the world, choice of the thing I am,
 Both emanate alike from Thy dread play
 Of operation outside this our sphere
- 1345 Where things are classed and counted small or great,—
 Incomprehensibly the choice is Thine!
 I therefore bow my head and take Thy place.
 There is, beside the works, a tale of Thee
 In the world's mouth, which I find credible:
- 1350 I love it with my heart: unsatisfied,
 I try it with my reason, nor discept¹
 From any point I probe and pronounce sound.
 Mind is not matter nor from matter, but
 Above,—leave matter then, proceed with mind!
- 1355 Man's be the mind recognized at the height,—
 Leave the inferior minds and look at man!
 Is he the strong, intelligent and good
 Up to his own conceivable height? Nowise.
 Enough o' the low,—soar the conceivable height,
- 1360 Find cause to match the effect in evidence,
 The work i' the world, not man's but God's; leave man!
 Conjecture of the worker by the work:
 Is there strength there?—enough: intelligence?
 Ample: but goodness in a like degree?
- 1365 Not to the human eye in the present state,
 An isoscele² deficient in the base.
 What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
 But just the instance which this tale supplies
 Of love without a limit? So is strength,

¹ disagree.

² triangle with two equal legs.

- 1370 So is intelligence; let love be so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.
Beyond the tale, I reach into the dark,
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands:
- 1375 I can believe this dread machinery
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else,
Devised,—all pain, at most expenditure
Of pain by Who devised pain,—to evolve,
By new machinery in counterpart,
- 1380 The moral qualities of man—how else?—
To make him love in turn and be beloved,
Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like, (ay,
“I have said ye are Gods,”¹—shall it be said for nought?)
- 1385 Enable man to wring, from out all pain,
All pleasure for a common heritage
To all eternity: this may be surmised,
The other is revealed,—whether a fact,
Absolute, abstract, independent truth,
- 1390 Historic, not reduced to suit man’s mind,—
Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass
A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye,—
The same and not the same, else unconceived—
Though quite conceivable to the next grade
- 1395 Above it in intelligence,—as truth
Easy to man were blindness to the beast
By parity of procedure,—the same truth
In a new form, but changed in either case:
What matter so intelligence be filled?

¹ Psalms 82.6; John 10.34.

- 1400 To a child, the sea is angry, for it roars:
 Frost bites, else why the tooth-like fret¹ on face?
 Man makes acoustics deal with the sea's wrath,
 Explains the choppy² cheek by chymic³ law,—
 To man and child remains the same effect
- 1405 On drum of ear and root of nose, change cause
 Never so thoroughly: so my heart be struck,
 What care I,—by God's gloved hand or the bare?
 Nor do I much perplex me with aught hard,
 Dubious in the transmitting of the tale,—
- 1410 No, nor with certain riddles set to solve.
 This life is training and a passage; pass,—
 Still, we march over some flat obstacle
 We made give way before us; solid truth
 In front of it, what motion for the world?
- 1415 The moral sense grows but by exercise.
 'T is even as man grew probatively⁴
 Initiated in Godship, set to make
 A fairer moral world than this he finds,
 Guess now what shall be known hereafter. Deal
- 1420 Thus with the present problem: as we see,
 A faultless creature is destroyed, and sin
 Has had its way i' the world where God should rule.
 Ay, but for this irrelevant circumstance
 Of inquisition after blood, we see
- 1425 Pompilia lost and Guido saved: how long?
 For his whole life: how much is that whole life?
 We are not babes, but know the minute's worth,

¹ roughness, chaps.

² chapped.

³ a form of "chemic"—"of or pertaining to alchemy" (*OED*).

⁴ by trial.

And feel that life is large and the world small,
So, wait till life have passed from out the world.

- 1430 Neither does this astonish at the end,
That whereas I can so receive and trust,
Other men, made with hearts and souls the same,
Reject and disbelieve,—subordinate
The future to the present,—sin, nor fear.
- 1435 This I refer still to the foremost fact,
Life is probation and the earth no goal
But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal,—
Why institute that race, his life, at all?
- 1440 But this does overwhelm me with surprise,
Touch me to terror,—not that faith, the pearl,
Should be let lie by fishers wanting food,—
Nor, seen and handled by a certain few
Critical and contemptuous, straight consigned
- 1445 To shore and shingle for the pebble it proves,—
But that, when haply found and known and named
By the residue made rich for evermore,
These,—that these favoured ones, should in a trice
Turn, and with double zest go dredge for whelks,
- 1450 Mud-worms that make the savoury soup! Enough
O' the disbelievers, see the faithful few!
How do the Christians here deport them, keep
Their robes of white unspotted by the world?
What is this Aretine Archbishop, this
- 1455 Man under me as I am under God,
This champion of the faith, I armed and decked,
Pushed forward, put upon a pinnacle,
To show the enemy his victor,—see!
What's the best fighting when the couple close?

- 1460 Pompilia cries, "Protect me from the wolf!"
 He—"No, thy Guido is rough, heady, strong,
 Dangerous to disquiet: let him bide!
 He needs some bone to mumble, help amuse
 The darkness of his den with: so, the fawn
- 1465 Which limps up bleeding to my foot and lies,
 —Come to me, daughter!—thus I throw him back!"
 Have we misjudged here, over-armed our knight,
 Given gold and silk where plain hard steel serves best,
 Enfeebled whom we sought to fortify,
- 1470 Made an archbishop and undone a saint?
 Well, then, descend these heights, this pride of life,
 Sit in the ashes with a barefoot monk¹
 Who long ago stamped out the worldly sparks,
 By fasting, watching, stone cell and wire scourge,
- 1475 —No such indulgence as unknits the strength—
 These breed the tight nerve and tough cuticle,²
 And the world's praise or blame runs rillet-wise
 Off the broad back and brawny breast, we know!
 He meets the first cold sprinkle of the world,
- 1480 And shudders to the marrow. "Save this child?
 Oh, my superiors, oh, the Archbishop's self!
 Who was it dared lay hand upon the ark³?
 His betters saw fall nor put finger forth?
 Great ones could help yet help not: why should small?
- 1485 I break my promise: let her break her heart!"
 These are the Christians not the worldlings, not
 The sceptics, who thus battle for the faith!

¹ perhaps a reference to St. Jerome (340-420 AD). Compare Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," ll. 74-75.

² skin.

³ See note to I 195.

- If foolish virgins disobey and sleep,¹
 What wonder? But, this time, the wise that watch,
 1490 Sell lamps and buy lutes, exchange oil for wine,
 The mystic Spouse betrays the Bridegroom here.²
 To our last resource, then! Since all flesh is weak,
 Bind weaknesses together, we get strength:
 The individual weighed, found wanting,³ try
 1495 Some institution, honest artifice
 Whereby the units grow compact and firm!
 Each props the other, and so stand is made
 By our embodied cowards that grow brave.
 The Monastery called of Convertites,⁴
 1500 Meant to help women because these helped Christ,—
 A thing existent only while it acts,
 Does as designed, else a nonentity,—
 For what is an idea unrealized?—
 Pompilia is consigned to these for help.
 1505 They do help: they are prompt to testify
 To her pure life and saintly dying days.
 She dies, and lo, who seemed so poor, proves rich.
 What does the body that lives through helpfulness
 To women for Christ's sake? The kiss turns bite,
 1510 The dove's note changes to the crow's cry: judge!
 "Seeing that this our Convent claims of right
 What goods belong to those we succour, be
 The same proved women of dishonest life,—
 And seeing that this Trial made appear
 1515 Pompilia was in such predicament,—

¹ Matthew 25.1–13.

² Ephesians 5.23–24.

³ Daniel 5.27.

⁴ See General Note 6 (p. 772).

- The Convent hereupon pretends to said
Succession of Pompilia, issues writ,
And takes possession by the Fisc's advice.”
Such is their attestation to the cause
1520 Of Christ, who had one saint at least, they hoped:
But, is a title-deed to filch, a corpse
To slander, and an infant-heir to cheat?
Christ must give up his gains then! They unsay
All the fine speeches,—who was saint is whore.
1525 Why, scripture yields no parallel for this!
The soldiers only threw dice for Christ's coat;¹
We want another legend of the Twelve
Disputing if it was Christ's coat at all,
Claiming as prize the woof of price²—for why?
1530 The Master was a thief, purloined the same,
Or paid for it out of the common bag!
Can it be this is end and outcome, all
I take with me to show as stewardship's fruit,
The best yield of the latest time, this year
1535 The seventeen-hundredth since God died for man?
Is such effect proportionate to cause?
And still the terror keeps on the increase
When I perceive ... how can I blink the fact?
That the fault, the obduracy to good,
1540 Lies not with the impracticable stuff
Whence man is made, his very nature's fault,
As if it were of ice the moon may gild
Not melt, or stone 't was meant the sun should warm
Not make bear flowers,—nor ice nor stone to blame:
1545 But it can melt, that ice, can bloom, that stone,

¹ Matthew 27.35.

² valuable cloth.

- Impassible¹ to rule of day and night!
This terrifies me, thus compelled perceive,
Whatever love and faith we looked should spring
At advent of the authoritative star,
- 1550 Which yet lie sluggish, curdled at the source,—
These have leapt forth profusely in old time,
These still respond with promptitude to-day,
At challenge of—what unacknowledged powers
O' the air, what uncommissioned meteors, warmth
- 1555 By law, and light by rule should supersede?
For see this priest, this Caponsacchi, stung
At the first summons,—“Help for honour's sake,
Play the man, pity the oppressed!”—no pause,
How does he lay about him in the midst,
- 1560 Strike any foe, right wrong at any risk,
All blindness, bravery and obedience!—blind?
Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,
Delirious with the plenitude of light
Should interfuse him to the finger-ends—
- 1565 Let him rush straight, and how shall he go wrong?
Where are the Christians in their panoply?²
The loins we girt about with truth, the breasts
Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith,
The helmet of salvation, and that sword
- 1570 O' the Spirit, even the word of God,—where these?
Slunk into corners! Oh, I hear at once
Hubbub of protestation! “What, we monks
We friars, of such an order, such a rule,
Have not we fought, bled, left our martyr-mark
- 1575 At every point along the boundary-line

¹ insensible to, independent of.

² Ephesians 6.14–17.

'Twixt true and false, religion and the world,
 Where this or the other dogma of our Church
 Called for defence?" And I, despite myself,
 How can I but speak loud what truth speaks low,
 1580 "Or better than the best, or nothing serves!
 What boots¹ deed, I can cap and cover straight
 With such another doughtiness to match,
 Done at an instinct of the natural man?"
 Immolate body, sacrifice soul too,—
 1585 Do not these publicans² the same? Outstrip!
 Or else stop race you boast runs neck and neck,
 You with the wings, they with the feet,—for shame!
 Oh, I remark your diligence and zeal!
 Five years long, now, rounds faith into my ears,
 1590 "Help thou, or Christendom is done to death!"
 Five years since, in the Province of To-kien,³
 Which is in China as some people know,
 Maigrot, my Vicar Apostolic there,
 Having a great qualm,⁴ issues a decree.
 1595 Alack, the converts use as God's name, not
Tien-chu but plain *Tien* or else mere *Shang-ti*,
 As Jesuits please to fancy politic,
 While, say Dominicans, it calls down fire,—
 For *Tien* means heaven, and *Shang-ti*, supreme prince,
 1600 While *Tien-chu* means the lord of heaven: all cry,
 "There is no business urgent for despatch

¹ is the good of.

² corrupt tax collectors; used here because of their association with "sinners" in the Gospels.

³ 1591–1604 This tempest in the China teapot of theological linguistics was an actual occurrence of the time. See Cook's summary, pp. 224–25.

⁴ attack of conscience.

As that thou send a legate, specially
 Cardinal Tournon, straight to Pekin, there
 To settle and compose the difference!"

- 1605 So have I seen a potentate all fume
 For some infringement of his realm's just right,
 Some menace to a mud-built straw-thatched farm
 O' the frontier; while inside the mainland lie,
 Quite undisputed-for in solitude,
- 1610 Whole cities plague may waste or famine sap:
 What if the sun crumble, the sands encroach,
 While he looks on sublimely at his ease?
 How does their ruin touch the empire's bound?

And is this little all that was to be?

- 1615 Where is the gloriously-decisive change,
 Metamorphosis the immeasurable
 Of human clay to divine gold, we looked
 Should, in some poor sort, justify its price?
 Had an adept of the mere Rosy Cross¹
- 1620 Spent his life to consummate the Great Work,
 Would not we start to see the stuff it touched
 Yield not a grain more than the vulgar got
 By the old smelting-process years ago?
 If this were sad to see in just the sage
- 1625 Who should profess so much, perform no more,
 What is it when suspected in that Power
 Who undertook to make and made the world,
 Devised and did effect man, body and soul,
 Ordained salvation for them both, and yet ...
- 1630 Well, is the thing we see, salvation?

¹ member of the Rosicrucian sect, dedicated to finding the "alchemist's stone" which could turn base metal into gold.

I

- Put no such dreadful question to myself,
Within whose circle of experience burns
The central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness,—God:
1635 I must outlive a thing ere know it dead:
When I outlive the faith there is a sun,
When I lie, ashes to the very soul,—
Someone, not I, must wail above the heap,
“He died in dark whence never morn arose.”
- 1640 While I see day succeed the deepest night—
How can I speak but as I know?—my speech
Must be, throughout the darkness, “It will end:
The light that did burn, will burn!” Clouds obscure—
But for which obscuration all were bright?
- 1645 Too hastily concluded! Sun-suffused,
A cloud may soothe the eye made blind by blaze,—
Better the very clarity of heaven:
The soft streaks are the beautiful and dear.
What but the weakness in a faith supplies
- 1650 The incentive to humanity, no strength
Absolute, irresistible, comports?¹
How can man love but what he yearns to help?
And that which men think weakness within strength,
But angels know for strength and stronger yet—
- 1655 What were it else but the first things made new,
But repetition of the miracle,
The divine instance of self-sacrifice
That never ends and aye begins for man?
So, never I miss footing in the maze,
- 1660 No,—I have light nor fear the dark at all.

[— — —]

¹ permits.

- But are mankind not real, who pace outside
 My petty circle, world that's measured me?
 And when they stumble even as I stand,
 Have I a right to stop ear when they cry,
- 1665 As they were phantoms who took clouds for crags,
 Tripped and fell, where man's march might safely move?
 Beside, the cry is other than a ghost's,
 When out of the old time there pleads some bard,
 Philosopher, or both,¹ and—whispers not,
- 1670 But words it boldly. "The inward work and worth
 Of any mind, what other mind may judge
 Save God who only knows the thing He made,
 The veritable service He exacts?
 It is the outward product men appraise.
- 1675 Behold, an engine hoists a tower aloft:
 'I looked that it should move the mountain too!'
 Or else 'Had just a turret toppled down,
 Success enough!'—may say the Machinist²
 Who knows what less or more result might be:
- 1680 But we, who see that done we cannot do,
 'A feat beyond man's force,' we men must say.
 Regard me and that shake I gave the world!
 I was born, not so long before Christ's birth
 As Christ's birth haply did precede thy day,—
- 1685 But many a watch before the star of dawn:
 Therefore I lived,—it is thy creed affirms,
 Pope Innocent, who art to answer me!—
 Under conditions, nowise to escape,
 Whereby salvation was impossible.
- 1690 Each impulse to achieve the good and fair,

¹ Euripides, who speaks from l. 1670 to l. 1790.

² Zeus. See note to IV 15.

- Each aspiration to the pure and true,
 Being without a warrant or an aim,
 Was just as sterile a felicity
 As if the insect, born to spend his life
 1695 Soaring his circles, stopped them to describe
 (Painfully motionless in the mid-air)
 Some word of weighty counsel for man's sake,
 Some 'Know thyself' or 'Take the golden mean!'¹
 —Forwent his happy dance and the glad ray,
 1700 Died half an hour the sooner and was dust.
 I, born to perish like the brutes, or worse,
 Why not live brutishly, obey brutes' law?
 But I, of body as of soul complete,
 A gymnast at the games, philosopher
 1705 I' the schools, who painted, and made music,—all
 Glories that met upon the tragic stage
 When the Third Poet's tread surprised the Two,—²
 Whose lot fell in a land where life was great
 And sense went free and beauty lay profuse,
 1710 I, untouched by one adverse circumstance,
 Adopted virtue as my rule of life,
 Waived all reward, loved but for loving's sake,
 And, what my heart taught me, I taught the world,
 And have been teaching now two thousand years.
 1715 Witness my work,—plays that should please, forsooth!
 'They might please, they may displease, they shall teach,
 For truth's sake,' so I said, and did, and do.
 Five hundred years ere Paul spoke, Felix heard,—³

¹ the two most famous moral maxims of ancient Greece.

² The Third Poet was Euripides; the (older) "Two" were Aeschylus and Sophocles.

³ Acts 24.22–27.

- How much of temperance and righteousness,
1720 Judgment to come, did I find reason for,
Corroborate with my strong style¹ that spared
No sin, nor swerved the more from branding brow
Because the sinner was called Zeus and God?
How nearly did I guess at that Paul knew?
1725 How closely come, in what I represent
As duty, to his doctrine yet a blank?
And as that limner not untruly limns
Who draws an object round or square, which square
Or round seems to the unassisted eye,
1730 Though Galileo's tube display the same
Oval or oblong,—so, who controverts
I rendered rightly what proves wrongly wrought
Beside Paul's picture? Mine was true for me.
I saw that there are, first and above all,
1735 The hidden forces, blind necessities,
Named Nature, but the thing's self unconceived:
Then follow,—how dependent upon these,
We know not, how imposed above ourselves,
We well know,—what I name the gods, a power
1740 Various or one: for great and strong and good
Is there, and little, weak and bad there too,
Wisdom and folly: say, these make no God,—
What is it else that rules outside man's self?
A fact then,—always, to the naked eye,—
1745 And so, the one revealment possible
Of what were unimagined else by man.
Therefore, what gods do, man may criticize,
Applaud, condemn,—how should he fear the truth?—
But likewise have in awe because of power,

¹ pen, stylus (instrument for writing on wax tablets).

- 1750 Venerate for the main munificence,
And give the doubtful deed its due excuse
From the acknowledged creature of a day
To the Eternal and Divine. Thus, bold
Yet self-mistrusting, should man bear himself,
1755 Most assured on what now concerns him most—
The law of his own life, the path he prints,—
Which law is virtue and not vice, I say,—
And least inquisitive where search least skills,
I' the nature we best give the clouds to keep.
1760 What could I paint beyond a scheme like this
Out of the fragmentary truths where light
Lay fitful in a tenebrific¹ time?
You have the sunrise now, joins truth to truth,
Shoots life and substance into death and void;
1765 Themselves compose the whole we made before:
The forces and necessity grow God,—
The beings so contrarious that seemed gods,
Prove just His operation manifold
And multiform, translated, as must be,
1770 Into intelligible shape so far
As suits our sense and sets us free to feel.
What if I let a child think, childhood-long,
That lightning, I would have him spare his eye,
Is a real arrow shot at naked orb?
1775 The man knows more, but shuts his lids the same:
Lightning's cause comprehends nor man nor child.
Why then, my scheme, your better knowledge broke,
Presently re-adjusts itself, the small
Proportioned largelier, parts and whole named new:
1780 So much, no more two thousand years have done!

¹ dark.

Pope, dost thou dare pretend to punish me,
 For not descrying sunshine at midnight,
 Me who crept all-fours, found my way so far—
 While thou rewardest teachers of the truth,
 1785 Who miss the plain way in the blaze of noon,—
 Though just a word from that strong style of mine,
 Grasped honestly in hand as guiding-staff,
 Had pricked them a sure path across the bog,
 That mire of cowardice and slush of lies
 1790 Wherein I find them wallow in wide day!"

How should I answer this Euripides?
 Paul,—'t is a legend,¹—answered Seneca,
 But that was in the day-spring; noon is now:
 We have got too familiar with the light.
 1795 Shall I wish back once more that thrill of dawn?
 When the whole truth-touched man burned up, one fire?
 —Assured the trial, fiery, fierce, but fleet,
 Would, from his little heap of ashes, lend
 Wings to that conflagration of the world
 1800 Which Christ awaits ere He makes all things new:²
 So should the frail become the perfect, rapt
 From glory of pain to glory of joy; and so,
 Even in the end,—the act renouncing earth,
 Lands, houses, husbands, wives and children here,—
 1805 Begin that other act which finds all, lost,
 Regained, in this time even, a hundredfold,³
 And, in the next time, feels the finite love

¹ contained in certain (forged) letters alleged to have been exchanged by Seneca and St. Paul.

² Revelation 21.5.

³ Luke 18.30.

- Blent and embalmed with the eternal life.
 So does the sun ghastly seem to sink
- 1810 In those north parts, lean all but out of life,
 Desist a dread mere breathing-stop, then slow
 Re-assert day, begin the endless rise.
 Was this too easy for our after-stage?
 Was such a lighting-up of faith, in life,
- 1815 Only allowed initiate, set man's step
 In the true way by help of the great glow?
 A way wherein it is ordained he walk,
 Bearing to see the light from heaven still more
 And more encroached on by the light of earth,
- 1820 Tentatives¹ earth puts forth to rival heaven,
 Earthly incitements that mankind serve God
 For man's sole sake, not God's and therefore man's.
 Till at last, who distinguishes the sun
 From a mere Druid² fire on a far mount?
- 1825 More praise to him who with his subtle prism
 Shall decompose both beams and name the true.
 In such sense, who is last proves first indeed;³
 For how could saints and martyrs fail see truth
 Streak the night's blackness? Who is faithful now?
- 1830 Who untwists heaven's white from the yellow flare
 O' the world's gross torch, without night's foil that
 helped
 Produce the Christian act so possible
 When in the way stood Nero's cross and stake,—
 So hard now when the world smiles "Right and wise!"
- 1835 Faith points the politic, the thrifty way,

¹ attempts, reachings.

² the religion of the ancient Celts in Gaul and Britain.

³ Matthew 19.30.

- Will make who plods it in the end returns
Beyond mere fool's-sport and improvidence.
We fools dance thro' the cornfield of this life,
Pluck ears to left and right and swallow raw,
1840 —Nay, tread, at pleasure, a sheaf underfoot,
To get the better at some poppy-flower,—
Well aware we shall have so much less wheat
In the eventual harvest: you meantime
Waste not a spike,—the richlier will you reap!
1845 What then? There will be always garnered meal
Sufficient for our comfortable loaf,
While you enjoy the undiminished sack!"
Is it not this ignoble confidence,
Cowardly hardihood, that dulls and damps,
1850 Makes the old heroism impossible?

- Unless ... what whispers me of times to come?
What if it be the mission of that age
My death will usher into life, to shake
This torpor of assurance from our creed,
1855 Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring
That formidable danger back, we drove
Long ago to the distance and the dark?
No wild beast now prowls round the infant camp:
We have built wall and sleep in city safe:
1860 But if some earthquake try the towers that laugh
To think they once saw lions rule outside,
And man stand out again, pale, resolute,
Prepared to die,—which means, alive at last?
As we broke up that old faith of the world,
1865 Have we, next age, to break up this the new—
Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report—
Whence need to bravely disbelieve report

- Through increased faith i' the thing reports belie?
 Must we deny,—do they, these Molinists,
 1870 At peril of their body and their soul,—
 Recognized truths, obedient to some truth
 Unrecognized yet, but perceptible?—
 Correct the portrait by the living face,
 Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man?
- 1875 Then, for the few that rise to the new height,
 The many that must sink to the old depth,
 The multitude found fall away! A few,
 E'en ere new law speak clear, may keep the old,
 Preserve the Christian level, call good good
- 1880 And evil evil, (even though razed and blank
 The old titles,) helped by custom, habitude,
 And all else they mistake for finer sense
 O' the fact than reason warrants,—as before,
 They hope perhaps, fear not impossibly.
- 1885 At least some one Pompilia left the world
 Will say "I know the right place by foot's feel,
 I took it and tread firm there; wherefore change?"
 But what a multitude will surely fall
 Quite through the crumbling truth, late subjacent,¹
- 1890 Sink to the next discoverable base,
 Rest upon human nature, settle there
 On what is firm, the lust and pride of life!²
 A mass of men, whose very souls even now
 Seem to need re-creating,—so they slink
- 1895 Worm-like into the mud, light now lays bare,—
 Whose future we dispose of with shut eyes
 And whisper—"They are grafted, barren twigs,

¹ underneath.

² 1 John 2.16.

- 1900 Into the living stock of Christ: may bear
 One day, till when they lie death-like, not dead,"—
 Those who with all the aid of Christ succumb,
 How, without Christ, shall they, unaided, sink?
 Whither but to this gulf before my eyes?
 Do not we end, the century and I?
 The impatient antimasque¹ treads close on kibe²
 1905 O' the very masque's self it will mock,—on me,
 Last lingering personage, the impatient mime
 Pushes already,—will I block the way?
 Will my slow trail of garments ne'er leave space
 For pantaloon, sock, plume and castanet?³
 1910 Here comes the first experimentalist
 In the new order of things,—he plays a priest;
 Does he take inspiration from the Church,
 Directly make her rule his law of life?
 Not he: his own mere impulse guides the man—
 1915 Happily sometimes, since ourselves allow
 He has danced, in gaiety of heart, i' the main
 The right step through the maze we bade him foot.
 But if his heart had prompted him break loose
 And mar the measure? Why, we must submit,
 1920 And thank the chance that brought him safe so far.
 Will he repeat the prodigy?⁴ Perhaps.
 Can he teach others how to quit themselves,
 Show why this step was right while that were wrong?

¹ interlude between the acts of a masque (dramatic performance involving elaborate settings and costumes, music and dancing), which it often burlesqued.

² (infected, ulcerated) heel.

³ the costume and equipment of a performer in the antimasque.

⁴ astonishing achievement.

- How should he? "Ask your hearts as I asked mine,
 1925 And get discreetly through the morrice¹ too;
 If your hearts misdirect you,—quit the stage,
 And make amends,—be there amends to make!"
 Such is, for the Augustin² that was once,
 This Canon Caponsacchi we see now.
- 1930 "But my heart answers to another tune,"
 Puts in the Abate, second in the suite,³
 "I have my taste too, and tread no such step!
 You choose the glorious life, and may, for me!
 I like the lowest of life's appetites,—
- 1935 So you judge,—but the very truth of joy
 To my own apprehension which decides.
 Call me knave and you get yourself called fool!
 I live for greed, ambition, lust, revenge;
 Attain these ends by force, guile: hypocrite,
- 1940 To-day, perchance to-morrow recognized
 The rational man, the type of common sense."
 There's Loyola⁴ adapted to our time!
 Under such guidance Guido plays his part,
 He also influencing in the due turn
- 1945 These last clods where I track intelligence
 By any glimmer, these four at his beck
 Ready to murder any, and, at their own,
 As ready to murder him,—such make the world!
 And, first effect of the new cause of things,
- 1950 There they lie also duly,—the old pair

¹ morris dance.

² the saint who made the church's rule "his law of life" (l. 1913).

³ procession.

⁴ St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, celebrated for its worldliness and casuistry.

Of the weak head and not so wicked heart,
 With the one Christian mother, wife and girl,
 —Which three gifts seem to make an angel up,—
 The world's first foot o' the dance is on their heads!

- 1955 Still, I stand here, not off the stage though close
 On the exit: and my last act, as my first,
 I owe the scene, and Him who armed me thus
 With Paul's sword¹ as with Peter's key. I smite
 With my whole strength once more, ere end my part,
 1960 Ending, so far as man may, this offence.
 And when I raise my arm, who plucks my sleeve?
 Who stops me in the righteous function,—foe
 Or friend? Oh, still as ever, friends are they
 Who, in the interest of outraged truth
 1965 Deprecate such rough handling of a lie!
 The facts being proved and incontestable,
 What is the last word I must listen to?
 Perchance—"Spare yet a term this barren stock
 We pray thee dig about and dung and dress
 1970 Till he repent and bring forth fruit even yet!"²
 Perchance—"So poor and swift a punishment
 Shall throw him out of life with all that sin:
 Let mercy rather pile up pain on pain
 Till the flesh expiate what the soul pays else!"
 1975 Nowise! Remonstrants on each side commence
 Instructing, there's a new tribunal now
 Higher than God's—the educated man's!
 Nice sense of honour in the human breast

¹ the symbol of his warfare on behalf of Christ; not Biblical, but attributed to him in medieval and Renaissance art.

² Luke 13.8-9.

- Supersedes here the old coarse oracle—
 1980 Confirming none the less a point or so
 Wherein blind predecessors worked aright
 By rule of thumb: as when Christ said,—when, where?
 Enough, I find it pleaded in a place,—
 “All other wrongs done, patiently I take:¹
 1985 But touch my honour and the case is changed!
 I feel the due resentment,—*nemini*
Honorem trado is my quick retort.”
 Right of Him, just as if pronounced to-day!
 Still, should the old authority be mute
 1990 Or doubtful or in speaking clash with new,
 The younger takes permission to decide.
 At last we have the instinct of the world
 Ruling its household without tutelage:
 And while the two laws, human and divine,
 1995 Have busied finger with this tangled case,
 In pushes the brisk junior, cuts the knot,
 Pronounces for acquittal. How it trips
 Silverly o'er the tongue! “Remit the death!
 Forgive, ... well, in the old way, if thou please,
 2000 Decency and the relics of routine
 Respected,—let the Count go free as air!
 Since he may plead a priest's immunity,—
 The minor orders help enough for that,
 With Farinacci's licence,²—who decides
 2005 That the mere implication of such man,
 So privileged, in any cause, before
 Whatever Court except the Spiritual,

¹ The Pope is taken in by a sly misuse of Scripture. See note to VIII 664.

² See note to VIII 148.

- Straight quashes law-procedure,—quash it, then!
 Remains a pretty loophole of escape
- 2010 Moreover, that, beside the patent fact
 O' the law's allowance, there's involved the weal
 O' the Popedom: a son's privilege at stake,
 Thou wilt pretend the Church's interest,
 Ignore all finer reasons to forgive!
- 2015 But herein lies the crowning cogency—¹
 (Let thy friends teach thee while thou tellest beads)
 That in this case the spirit of culture speaks,
 Civilization is imperative.
 To her shall we remand all delicate points
- 2020 Henceforth, nor take irregular advice
 O' the sly, as heretofore: she used to hint
 Remonstrances, when law was out of sorts
 Because a saucy tongue was put to rest,
 An eye that roved was cured of arrogance:
- 2025 But why be forced to mumble under breath
 What soon shall be acknowledged as plain fact,
 Outspoken, say, in thy successor's time?
 Methinks we see the golden age² return!
 Civilization and the Emperor
- 2030 Succeed to Christianity and Pope.
 One Emperor then, as one Pope now: meanwhile,
 Anticipate a little! We tell thee 'Take
 Guido's life, sapped society shall crash,
 Whereof the main prop was, is, and shall be
- 2035 —Supremacy of husband over wife!'
 Does the man rule i' the house, and may his mate
 Because of any plea dispute the same?

¹ convincing argument.

² See note to ll. 780–81 above.

- Oh, pleas of all sorts shall abound, be sure,
 One but allowed validity,—for, harsh
 2040 And savage, for, inept and silly-sooth,
 For, this and that, will the ingenious sex
 Demonstrate¹ the best master e'er graced slave:
 And there's but one short way to end the coil,—
 Acknowledge right and reason steadily
 2045 I' the man and master: then the wife submits
 To plain truth broadly stated. Does the time
 Advise we shift—a pillar? nay, a stake
 Out of its place i' the social tenement?²
 One touch may send a shudder through the heap
 2050 And bring it toppling on our children's heads!
 Moreover, if ours breed a qualm in thee,
 Give thine own better feeling play for once!
 Thou, whose own life winks o'er the socket-edge,
 Wouldst thou it went out in such ugly snuff
 2055 As dooming sons dead, e'en though justice prompt?
 Why, on a certain feast, Barabbas' self³
 Was set free, not to cloud the general cheer:
 Neither shalt thou pollute thy Sabbath⁴ close!
 Mercy is safe and graceful. How one hears
 2060 The howl begin, scarce the three little taps
 O' the silver mallet⁵ silent on thy brow,—
 'His last act was to sacrifice a Count
 And thereby screen a scandal of the Church!

¹ prove to be.

² structure.

³ Matthew 27.16–17.

⁴ originally the last day of the week, but here, by extension, the Pope's last days.

⁵ the ceremony conducted at the deathbed of a pope to verify his passing.

- Guido condemned, the Canon justified
 2065 Of course,—delinquents of his cloth go free!
 And so the Luthers chuckle, Calvins scowl,
 So thy hand helps Molinos to the chair
 Whence he may hold forth till doom's day on just
 These *petit-maître*¹ priestlings,—in the choir
 2070 *Sanctus et Benedictus*, with a brush
 Of soft guitar-strings that obey the thumb,
 Touched by the bedside, for accompaniment!
 Does this give umbrage to a husband? Death
 To the fool, and to the priest impunity!
 2075 But no impunity to any friend
 So simply over-loyal as these four
 Who made religion of their patron's cause,
 Believed in him and did his bidding straight,
 Asked not one question but laid down the lives
 2080 This Pope took,—all four lives together made
 Just his own length of days,—so, dead they lie,
 As these were times when loyalty's a drug,
 And zeal in a subordinate too cheap
 And common to be saved when we spend life!
 2085 Come, 't is too much good breath we waste in words:
 The pardon, Holy Father! Spare grimace,
 Shrugs and reluctance! Are not we the world,
 Art not thou Priam?² Let soft culture plead
 Hecuba-like, '*non tali*' (Virgil serves)
 2090 'Auxilio' and the rest! Enough, it works!
 The Pope relaxes, and the Prince is loth,

¹ dandyish, affected.

² As Troy was about to fall and the aged Priam sought to enter the battle, Hecuba protested, "The hour does not call for such aid or such defenders" (*Aeneid* 2.521–22).

The father's bowels yearn, the man's will bends,
 Reply is apt. Our tears on tremble, hearts
 Big with a benediction, wait the word
 2095 Shall circulate thro' the city in a trice,
 Set every window flaring, give each man
 O' the mob his torch to wave for gratitude.
 Pronounce then, for our breath and patience fail!"

I will, Sirs: but a voice other than yours
 2100 Quickens my spirit. "*Quis pro Domino?*
 Who is upon the Lord's side?" asked the Count.¹
 I, who write—

"On receipt of this command,
 Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
 2105 They die to-morrow: could it be to-night,
 The better, but the work to do, takes time.
 Set with all diligence a scaffold up,
 Not in the customary place, by Bridge
 Saint Angelo, where die the common sort;
 2110 But since the man is noble, and his peers
 By predilection haunt the People's Square,
 There let him be beheaded in the midst,
 And his companions hanged on either side:
 So shall the quality see, fear and learn.
 2115 All which work takes time: till to-morrow, then,
 Let there be prayer incessant for the five!"

For the main criminal I have no hope
 Except in such a suddenness of fate.
 I stood at Naples once, a night so dark

¹ The Count did so at V 1549.

- 2120 I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all:
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
Through her whole length of mountain visible:
- 2125 There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
- 2130 Into that sad obscure sequestered state¹
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain; which must not be.
Enough, for I may die this very night
And how should I dare die, this man let live?
- 2135 Carry this forthwith to the Governor!

¹ purgatory.

XI
GUIDO

- You are the Cardinal Acciaiuoli, and you,
 Abate Panciatichi—two good Tuscan names:
 Acciaiuoli—ah, your ancestor it was
 Built the huge battlemented convent-block
- 5 Over the little forked flashing Greve
 That takes the quick turn at the foot o' the hill
 Just as one first sees Florence: oh those days!
 'T is Ema, though, the other rivulet,
 The one-arched brown brick bridge yawns over,—yes,
- 10 Gallop and go five minutes, and you gain
 The Roman Gate from where the Ema's bridged:
 Kingfishers fly there: how I see the bend
 O'erturreted by Certosa¹ which he built,
 That Senescal² (we styled him) of your House!
- 15 I do adjure you, help me, Sirs! My blood
 Comes from as far a source: ought it to end
 This way, by leakage through their scaffold-planks
 Into Rome's sink where her red refuse runs?
 Sirs, I beseech you by blood-sympathy,
- 20 If there be any vile experiment
 In the air,—if this your visit simply prove,
 When all's done, just a well-intentioned trick
 That tries for truth truer than truth itself,
 By startling up a man, ere break of day,

The time is before dawn on the day following the Pope's rejection of
 Guido's appeal. Preview: I 1272–1329.

¹ Carthusian monastery near Florence.

² official in charge of feasting and ceremonies in a medieval household.

- 25 To tell him he must die at sunset,—pshaw!
That man's a Franceschini; feel his pulse,
Laugh at your folly, and let's all go sleep!
You have my last word,—innocent am I
As Innocent my Pope and murderer,
- 30 Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own,
As Mary's self,—I said, say and repeat,—
And why, then, should I die twelve hours hence? I—
Whom, not twelve hours ago, the gaoler bade
Turn to my straw-truss, settle and sleep sound
- 35 That I might wake the sooner, promptlier pay
His due of meat-and-drink-indulgence, cross
His palm with fee of the good-hand,¹ beside,
As gallants use who go at large again!
For why? All honest Rome approved my part;
- 40 Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,—nay,
Mistress,—had any shadow of any right
That looks like right, and, all the more resolved,
Held it with tooth and nail,—these manly men
Approved! I being for Rome, Rome was for me.
- 45 Then, there's the point reserved, the subterfuge
My lawyers held by, kept for last resource,
Firm should all else,—the impossible fancy!—fail,
And sneaking burgess-spirit win the day.
The knaves! One plea at least would hold,—they
laughed,—
- 50 One grappling-iron scratch the bottom-rock
Even should the middle mud let anchor go!
I hooked my cause on to the Clergy's,—plea
Which, even if law tipped off my hat and plume,
Revealed my priestly tonsure, saved me so.

¹ tip.

- 55 The Pope moreover, this old Innocent,
Being so meek and mild and merciful,
So fond o' the poor and so fatigued of earth,
So ... fifty thousand devils in deepest hell!
Why must he cure us of our strange conceit
- 60 Of the angel in man's likeness, that we loved
And looked should help us at a pinch? He help?
He pardon? Here's his mind and message—death!
Thank the good Pope! Now, is he good in this,
Never mind, Christian,—no such stuff's extant,—
- 65 But will my death do credit to his reign,
Show he both lived and let live, so was good?
Cannot I live if he but like? "The law!"
Why, just the law gives him the very chance,
The precise leave to let my life alone,
- 70 Which the archangelic soul of him (he says)
Yearns after! Here they drop it in his palm,
My lawyers, capital o' the cursed kind,—
Drop life to take and hold and keep: but no!
He sighs, shakes head, refuses to shut hand,
- 75 Motions away the gift they bid him grasp,
And of the coyness¹ comes—that off I run
And down I go, he best knows whither! mind,
He knows, who sets me rolling all the same!
Disinterested Vicar of our Lord,
- 80 This way he abrogates and disallows,
Nullifies and ignores,—reverts in fine
To the good and right, in detriment of me!
Talk away! Will you have the naked truth?²
He's sick of his life's supper,—swallowed lies:

¹ reserve.

² The "naked truth" was personified by Pompilia at IX 891–93.

- 85 So, hobbling bedward, needs must ease his maw
Just where I sit o' the door-sill. Sir Abate,
Can you do nothing? Friends, we used to frisk:
What of this sudden slash in a friend's face,
This cut across our good companionship
- 90 That showed its front so gay when both were young?
Were not we put into a beaten path,
Bid pace the world, we nobles born and bred,
We body of friends with each his scutcheon¹ full
Of old achievement and impunity,—
- 95 Taking the laugh of morn and Sol's salute
As forth we fared, pricked² on to breathe³ our steeds
And take equestrian sport over the green
Under the blue, across the crop,—what care?
If we went prancing up hill and down dale,
- 100 In and out of the level and the straight,
By the bit of pleasant byeway, where was harm?
Still Sol salutes me and the morning laughs:
I see my grandsire's hoof-prints,—point the spot
Where he drew rein, slipped saddle, and stabbed knave
- 105 For daring throw gibe—much less, stone—from pale:⁴
Then back, and on, and up with the cavalcade.
Just so wend we, now canter, now converse,
Till, 'mid the jaunting⁵ pride and jaunty port,⁶
Something of a sudden jerks at somebody—
- 110 A dagger is out, a flashing cut and thrust,

¹ armorial shield.

² galloped.

³ exercise.

⁴ fence.

⁵ prancing.

⁶ elegant, well-bred manner.

- Because I play some prank my grandsire played,
And here I sprawl: where is the company? Gone!
A trot and a trample! only I lie trapped,
Writhe in a certain novel springe¹ just set
- 115 By the good old Pope: I'm first prize. Warn me? Why?
Apprise me that the law o' the game is changed?
Enough that I'm a warning, as I writhe,
To all and each my fellows of the file,
And make law plain henceforward past mistake,
120 "For such a prank, death is the penalty!"
Pope the Five Hundredth (what do I know or care?)
Deputes your Eminency and Abateship
To announce that, twelve hours from this time, he needs
I just essay upon my body and soul
- 125 The virtue of his brand-new engine,² prove
Represser of the pranksome! I'm the first!
Thanks. Do you know what teeth you mean to try
The sharpness of, on this soft neck and throat?
I know it,—I have seen and hate it,—ay,
- 130 As you shall, while I tell you! Let me talk,
Or leave me, at your pleasure! talk I must:
What is your visit but my lure to talk?
Nay, you have something to disclose?—a smile,
At end of the forced sternness, means to mock
- 135 The heart-beats here? I call your two hearts stone!
Is your charge to stay with me till I die?
Be tacit³ as your bench, then! Use your ears,
I use my tongue: how glibly yours will run
At pleasant supper-time ... God's curse! ... to-night

¹ trap.

² the guillotine.

³ taciturn, silent.

- 140 When all the guests jump up, begin so brisk
 "Welcome, his Eminence who shrived the wretch!
 Now we shall have the Abate's story!"

Life!

- How I could spill this overplus of mine
 145 Among those hoar-haired, shrunk-shanked odds and ends
 Of body and soul old age is chewing dry!
 Those windlestraws¹ that stare while purblind death
 Mows here, mows there, makes hay of juicy me,
 And misses just the bunch of withered weed
 150 Would brighten hell and streak its smoke with flame!
 How the life I could shed yet never shrink,
 Would drench their stalks with sap like grass in May!
 Is it not terrible, I entreat you, Sirs?—
 With manifold and plenitudinous life,
 155 Prompt at death's menace to give blow for threat,
 Answer his "Be thou not!" by "Thus I am!"—
 Terrible so to be alive yet die?

- How I live, how I see! so,—how I speak!
 Lucidity of soul unlocks the lips:
 160 I never had the words at will before.
 How I see all my folly at a glance!
 "A man requires a woman and a wife:"
 There was my folly; I believed the saw.
 I knew that just myself concerned myself,
 165 Yet needs must look for what I seemed to lack,
 In a woman,—why, the woman's in the man!
 Fools we are, how we learn things when too late!

¹ literally, dried stalks of grass; here used also in the figurative sense of feeble, scrawny old men.

- Overmuch life turns round my woman-side:
 The male and female in me, mixed before,
 170 Settle of a sudden: I'm my wife outright
 In this unmanly appetite for truth,
 This careless courage as to consequence,
 This instantaneous sight through things and through,
 This voluble rhetoric, if you please,—'t is she!
 175 Here you have that Pompilia whom I slew,
 Also the folly for which I slew her!

Fool!

- And, fool-like, what is it I wander from?
 What did I say of your sharp iron tooth?
 180 Ah,—that I know the hateful thing! this way.
 I chanced to stroll forth, many a good year gone,
 One warm Spring eve in Rome, and unaware
 Looking, mayhap, to count what stars were out,
 Came on your fine axe in a frame, that falls
 185 And so cuts off a man's head underneath,
 Mannaia,—thus we made acquaintance first:
 Out of the way, in a by-part o' the town,
 At the Mouth-of-Truth¹ o' the river-side, you know:
 One goes by the Capitol: and wherefore coy,
 190 Retiring out of crowded noisy Rome?
 Because a very little time ago
 It had done service, chopped off head from trunk
 Belonging to a fellow whose poor house
 The thing must make a point to stand before—
 195 Felice Whatsoever-was-the-name
 Who stabled buffaloes and so gained bread,
 (Our clowns unyoke them in the ground hard by)

¹ a marble head of an open-mouthed Triton in the church of St. Maria in Cosmedin.

- And, after use of much improper speech,
 Had struck at Duke Some-title-or-other's face,
- 200 Because he kidnapped, carried away and kept
 Felice's sister who would sit and sing
 I' the filthy doorway while she plaited fringe
 To deck the brutes with,—on their gear it goes,—
 The good girl with the velvet in her voice.
- 205 So did the Duke, so did Felice, so
 Did Justice, intervening with her axe.
 There the man-mutilating engine stood
 At ease, both gay and grim, like a Swiss guard¹
 Off duty,—purified itself as well,
- 210 Getting dry, sweet and proper for next week,—
 And doing incidental good, 't was hoped,
 To the rough lesson-lacking populace
 Who now and then, forsooth, must right their wrongs!
 There stood the twelve-foot-square of scaffold, railed
- 215 Considerately round to elbow-height,
 For fear an officer should tumble thence
 And sprain his ankle and be lame a month
 Through starting when the axe fell and head too!
 Railed likewise were the steps whereby 't was reached.
- 220 All of it painted red: red, in the midst,
 Ran up two narrow tall beams barred across,
 Since from the summit, some twelve feet to reach,
 The iron plate with the sharp shearing edge
 Had slammed, jerked, shot, slid,—I shall soon find
 which!—
- 225 And so lay quiet, fast in its fit place,
 The wooden half-moon collar, now eclipsed
 By the blade which blocked its curvature: apart,

¹ member of the Vatican security force. See l. 626 ff.

- The other half,—the under half-moon board
Which, helped by this, completes a neck's embrace,—
- 230 Joined to a sort of desk that wheels aside
Out of the way when done with,—down you kneel,
In you're pushed, over you the other drops,
Tight you're clipped, whiz, there's the blade cleaves its
best,
- Out trundles body, down flops head on floor,
235 And where's your soul gone? That, too, I shall find!
This kneeling-place was red, red, never fear!
But only slimy-like with paint, not blood,
For why? a decent pitcher stood at hand,
A broad dish to hold sawdust, and a broom
- 240 By some unnamed utensil,—scraper-rake,—
Each with a conscious air of duty done.
Underneath, loungers,—boys and some few men,—
Discoursed¹ this platter, named the other tool,
Just as, when grooms tie up and dress a steed,
- 245 Boys lounge and look on, and elucidate²
What the round brush is used for, what the square,—
So was explained—to me the skill-less then—
The manner of the grooming for next world
Undergone by Felice What's-his-name.
- 250 There's no such lovely month in Rome as May—
May's crescent is no half-moon of red plank,
And came now tilting o'er the wave i' the west,
One greenish-golden sea, right 'twixt those bars
Of the engine—I began acquaintance with,
- 255 Understood, hated, hurried from before,
To have it out of sight and cleanse my soul!

¹ chattered about.

² learnedly explain.

Here it is all again, conserved for use:
 Twelve hours hence, I may know more, not hate worse.

That young May-moon-month! Devils of the deep!

- 260 Was not a Pope then Pope as much as now?
 Used not he chirrup o'er the Merry Tales,¹
 Chuckle,—his nephew so exact the wag
 To play a jealous cullion² such a trick
 As wins the wife i' the pleasant story! Well?
- 265 Why do things change? Wherefore is Rome un-Romed?
 I tell you, ere Felice's corpse was cold,
 The Duke, that night, threw wide his palace-doors,
 Received the compliments o' the quality
 For justice done him,—bowed and smirked his best,
- 270 And in return passed round a pretty thing,
 A portrait of Felice's sister's self,
 Florid old rogue Albano's³ masterpiece,
 As—better than virginity in rags—
 Bouncing Europa on the back o' the bull:
- 275 They laughed and took their road the safelier home.
 Ah, but times change, there's quite another Pope,
 I do the Duke's deed, take Felice's place,
 And, being no Felice, lout and clout,⁴
 Stomach but ill the phrase "I lose my head!"
- 280 How euphemistic! Lose what? Lose your ring,
 Your snuff-box, tablets,⁵ kerchief!—but, your head?

¹ Pope Alexander VII (1655–67) was said to have been such a merry man. For the Merry Tales, see V 560 and note.

² dupe.

³ Francesco Albano, Bolognese painter (1578–1660).

⁴ clod.

⁵ memorandum books, pocket diaries.

- I learnt the process at an early age;
 'T was useful knowledge, in those same old days,
 To know the way a head is set on neck.
- 285 My fencing-master urged "Would you excel?
 Rest not content with mere bold give-and-guard,
 Nor pink the antagonist somehow-anyhow!
 See me dissect a little, and know your game!
 Only anatomy makes a thrust the thing."
- 290 Oh Cardinal, those lithe live necks of ours!
 Here go the vertebrae, here's *Atlas*, here
Axis,¹ and here the symphyses² stop short,
 So wisely and well,—as, o'er a corpse, we cant,—³
 And here's the silver cord which ... what's our word?
- 295 Depends from the gold bowl,⁴ which loosed (not "lost")
 Lets us from heaven to hell,—one chop, we're loose!
 "And not much pain i' the process," quoth a sage:
 Who told him? Not Felice's ghost, I think!
 Such "losing" is scarce Mother Nature's mode.
- 300 She fain would have cord ease itself away,
 Worn to a thread by threescore years and ten,
 Snap while we slumber: that seems bearable.
 I'm told one clot of blood extravasate⁵
 Ends one as certainly as Roland's sword,—⁶
- 305 One drop of lymph⁷ suffused proves Oliver's mace,—⁸
 Intruding, either of the pleasant pair,

¹ the top vertebrae.

² the unions of bones.

³ chant (with suggestion of hypocrisy, affected piety).

⁴ Ecclesiastes 12.6.

⁵ escaped from the proper vessel, such as an artery.

⁶ See note to II 1495.

⁷ body fluid that flows into the blood stream.

⁸ That is, it was fatal (Oliver was Roland's companion in arms).

- On the arachnoid tunic¹ of my brain.
 That's Nature's way of loosing cord!—but Art,
 How of Art's process with the engine here,
 310 When bowl and cord alike are crushed across,
 Bored between, bruised through? Why, if Fagon's self,²
 The French Court's pride, that famed practitioner,
 Would pass his cold pale lightning of a knife,
 Pistoja-ware,³ adroit 'twixt joint and joint,
 315 With just a "See how facile, gentlefolk!"—
 The thing were not so bad to bear! Brute force
 Cuts as he comes, breaks in, breaks on, breaks out
 O' the hard and soft of you: is that the same?
 A lithe snake thrids the hedge, makes throb no leaf:
 320 A heavy ox sets chest to brier and branch,
 Bursts somehow through, and leaves one hideous hole
 Behind him!

- And why, why must this needs be?
 Oh, if men were but good! They are not good,
 325 Nowise like Peter: people called him rough,
 But if, as I left Rome, I spoke the Saint,
 —"Petrus, quo vadis?"⁴—doubtless, I should hear,
 "To free the prisoner and forgive his fault!
 I plucked the absolute dead from God's own bar,
 330 And raised up Dorcas,⁵—why not rescue thee?"

¹ membrane coating.

² chief physician to Louis XIV.

³ fine cutlery (including weapons) made at Pistoia, near Florence.

⁴ Fleeing Nero's persecution, St. Peter met Jesus on the Appian Way and inquired "Domine quo vadis?" Jesus replied "Venio iterum crucifigi;" whereupon St. Peter returned to be martyred. So runs the legend told by St. Ambrose.

⁵ Acts 9.36-41.

- What would cost one such nullifying word?
If Innocent succeeds to Peter's place,
Let him think Peter's thought, speak Peter's speech!
I say, he is bound to it: friends, how say you?
- 335 Concede I be all one bloodguiltiness
And mystery of murder in the flesh,¹
Why should that fact keep the Pope's mouth shut fast?
He execrates my crime,—good!—sees hell yawn
One inch from the red plank's end which I press,—
- 340 Nothing is better! What's the consequence?
How should a Pope proceed that knows his cue?
Why, leave me linger out my minute here,
Since close on death comes judgment and comes doom,
Not crib at dawn its pittance from a sheep
- 345 Destined ere dewfall to be butcher's-meat!
Think, Sirs, if I have done you any harm,
And you require the natural revenge,
Suppose, and so intend to poison me,
—Just as you take and slip into my draught
- 350 The paperful of powder that clears scores,
You notice on my brow a certain blue:
How you both overset the wine at once!
How you both smile! “Our enemy has the plague!
Twelve hours hence he'll be scraping his bones bare
- 355 Of that intolerable flesh, and die,
Frenzied with pain: no need for poison here!
Step aside and enjoy the spectacle!”
Tender for souls are you, Pope Innocent!
Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world:²
- 360 Respite me, save a soul, then, curse the world!

¹ the very embodiment of the act of murder.

² Matthew 16.26, Mark 8.36.

- “No,” venerable sire, I hear you smirk,
 “No: for Christ’s gospel changes names, not things,
 Renews the obsolete, does nothing more!
 Our fire-new gospel is re-tinkered law,
 365 Our mercy, justice,—Jove’s rechristened God,—
 Nay, whereas, in the popular conceit,
 ’T is pity that old harsh Law somehow limps,
 Lingers on earth, although Law’s day be done,
 Else would benignant Gospel interpose,
 370 Not furtively as now, but bold and frank
 O’erflutter us with healing in her wings,¹
 Law being harshness, Gospel only love—
 We tell the people, on the contrary,
 Gospel takes up the rod which Law lets fall;
 375 Mercy is vigilant when justice sleeps!
 Does Law permit a taste of Gospel-grace?
 The secular arm allow the spiritual power
 To act for once?—no compliment so fine
 As that our Gospel handsomely turn harsh,
 380 Thrust victim back on Law the nice and coy!”²
 Yes, you do say so, else you would forgive
 Me whom Law does not touch but tosses you!
 Don’t think to put on the professional face!
 You know what I know: casuists as you are,
 385 Each nerve must creep, each hair start, sting and stand,
 At such illogical inconsequence!
 Dear my friends, do but see! A murder’s tried,
 There are two parties to the cause: I’m one,
 —Defend myself, as somebody must do:
 390 I have the best o’ the battle: that’s a fact,

¹ Malachi 4.2.

² reserved, reluctant.

- Simple fact,—fancies find no place just now.
What though half Rome condemned me? Half approved:
And, none disputes, the luck is mine at last,
All Rome, i' the main, acquitting me: whereon,
395 What has the Pope to ask but "How finds Law?"
"I find," replies Law, "I have erred this while:
Guilty or guiltless, Guido proves a priest,
No layman: he is therefore yours, not mine:
I bound him: loose him, you whose will is Christ's!"
400 And now what does this Vicar of our Lord,
Shepherd o' the flock,—one of whose charge bleats sore
For crook's help from the quag wherein it drowns?
Law suffers him employ the crumpled end:
His pleasure is to turn staff, use the point,
405 And thrust the shuddering sheep, he calls a wolf,
Back and back, down and down to where hell gapes!
"Guiltless," cries Law—"Guilty" corrects the Pope!
"Guilty," for the whim's sake! "Guilty," he somehow
thinks,
And anyhow says: 't is truth; he dares not lie!
- 410 Others should do the lying. That's the cause
Brings you both here: I ought in decency
Confess to you that I deserve my fate,
Am guilty, as the Pope thinks,—ay, to the end,
Keep up the jest, lie on, lie ever, lie
415 I' the latest gasp of me! What reason, Sirs?
Because to-morrow will succeed to-day
For you, though not for me: and if I stick
Still to the truth, declare with my last breath,
I die an innocent and murdered man,—
420 Why, there's the tongue of Rome will wag apace
This time to-morrow: don't I hear the talk!

- “So, to the last he proved impenitent?
 Pagans have said as much of martyred saints!
 Law demurred, washed her hands of the whole case.
- 425 Prince Somebody said this, Duke Something, that.
 Doubtless the man’s dead, dead enough, don’t fear!
 But, hang it, what if there have been a spice,
 A touch of ...¹ eh? You see, the Pope’s so old,
 Some of us add, obtuse: age never slips
- 430 The chance of shoving youth to face death first!”
 And so on. Therefore to suppress such talk
 You two come here, entreat I tell you lies,
 And end, the edifying way. I end,
 Telling the truth! Your self-styled shepherd thieves!
- 435 A thief—and how thieves hate the wolves we know:
 Damage to theft, damage to thrift, all’s one!
 The red hand is sworn foe of the black jaw.
 That’s only natural, that’s right enough:
 But why the wolf should compliment the thief
- 440 With shepherd’s title, bark out life in thanks,
 And, spiteless, lick the prong that spits him,—eh,
 Cardinal? My Abate, scarcely thus!
 There, let my sheepskin-garb, a curse on ’t, go—
 Leave my teeth free if I must show my shag!
- 445 Repent? What good shall follow? If I pass
 Twelve hours repenting, will that fact hold fast
 The thirteenth at the horrid dozen’s end?
 If I fall forthwith at your feet, gnash, tear,
 Foam, rave, to give your story the due grace,²
- 450 Will that assist the engine half-way back

¹ The suppressed word probably is “doubt”: see below, l. 721, “a spice of doubt.”

² credibility.

Into its hiding-house?—boards, shaking now,
Bone against bone, like some old skeleton bat
That wants, at winter 's end, to wake and prey!
Will howling put the spectre back to sleep?

- 455 Ah, but I misconceive your object, Sirs!
Since I want new life like the creature,—life,
Being done with here, begins i' the world away:
I shall next have "Come, mortals, and be judged!"
There's but a minute betwixt this and then:
- 460 So, quick, be sorry since it saves my soul!
Sirs, truth shall save it, since no lies assist!
Hear the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,
Civilization and society!
Come, one good grapple, I with all the world!
- 465 Dying in cold blood is the desperate thing;
The angry heart explodes, bears off in blaze
The indignant soul, and I'm combustion-ripe.
Why, you intend to do your worst with me!
That's in your eyes! You dare no more than death,
- 470 And mean no less. I must make up my mind.
So Pietro,—when I chased him here and there,
Morsel by morsel cut away the life
I loathed,—cried for just respite to confess
And save his soul: much respite did I grant!
- 475 Why grant me respite who deserve my doom?
Me—who engaged to play a prize, fight you,
Knowing your arms, and foil you, trick for trick,
At rapier-fence, your match and, maybe, more.
I knew that if I chose sin certain sins,
- 480 Solace my lusts out of the regular way
Prescribed me, I should find you in the path,
Have to try skill with a redoubted foe;
You would lunge, I would parry, and make end.

- At last, occasion of a murder comes:
- 485 We cross blades, I, for all my brag, break guard,
And in goes the cold iron at my breast,
Out at my back, and end is made of me.
You stand confessed the adroiter swordsman,—ay,
But on your triumph you increase, it seems,
- 490 Want more of me than lying flat on face:
I ought to raise my ruined head, allege
Not simply I pushed worse blade o' the pair,
But my antagonist dispensed with steel!
There was no passage of arms, you looked me low,
- 495 With brow and eye abolished cut and thrust
Nor used the vulgar weapon! This chance scratch,
This incidental hurt, this sort of hole
I' the heart of me? I stumbled, got it so!
Fell on my own sword as a bungler may!
- 500 Yourself proscribe such heathen tools, and trust
To the naked virtue: it was virtue stood
Unarmed and awed me,—on my brow there burned
Crime out so plainly intolerably red,
That I was fain to cry—"Down to the dust
- 505 With me, and bury there brow, brand and all!"
Law had essayed the adventure,—but what's Law?
Morality exposed the Gorgon shield!¹
Morality and Religion conquer me.
If Law sufficed would you come here, entreat
- 510 I supplement law, and confess forsooth?
Did not the Trial show things plain enough?
"Ah, but a word of the man's very self

¹ Athena's shield with the Gorgon's head in the center; whoever looked on it was turned to stone.

Would somehow put the keystone in its place
And crown the arch!" Then take the word you want!

- 515 I say that, long ago, when things began,
All the world made agreement, such and such
Were pleasure-giving profit-bearing acts,
But henceforth extra-legal, nor to be:
You must not kill the man whose death would please
520 And profit you, unless his life stop yours
Plainly, and need so be put aside:
Get the thing by a public course, by law,
Only no private bloodshed as of old!
All of us, for the good of every one,
525 Renounced such licence and conformed to law:
Who breaks law, breaks pact therefore, helps himself
To pleasure and profit over and above the due,
And must pay forfeit,—pain beyond his share:
For, pleasure being the sole good in the world,
530 Anyone's pleasure turns to someone's pain,
So, law must watch for everyone,—say we,
Who call things wicked that give too much joy,
And nickname mere reprisal, envy makes,
Punishment: quite right! thus the world goes round.
535 I, being well aware such pact there was,
I, in my time who found advantage come
Of law's observance and crime's penalty,—
Who, but for wholesome fear law bred in friends,
Had doubtless given example long ago,
540 Furnished forth some friend's pleasure with my pain,
And, by my death, pieced out his scanty life,—
I could not, for that foolish life of me,
Help risking law's infringement,—I broke bond,
And needs must pay price,—wherefore, here's my head,

- 545 Flung with a flourish! But, repentance too?
 But pure and simple sorrow for law's breach
 Rather than blunderer's-ineptitude?
 Cardinal, no! Abate, scarcely thus!
 'T is the fault, not that I dared try a fall
- 550 With Law and straightway am found undermost,
 But that I failed to see, above man's law,
 God's precept you, the Christians, recognize?
 Colly my cow!¹ Don't fidget, Cardinal!
 Abate, cross your breast and count your beads
- 555 And exorcize the devil, for here he stands
 And stiffens in the bristly nape of neck,
 Daring you drive him hence! You, Christians both?
 I say, if ever was such faith at all
 Born in the world, by your community
- 560 Suffered to live its little tick of time,
 'T is dead of age, now, ludicrously dead;
 Honour its ashes, if you be discreet,
 In epitaph only! For, concede its death,
 Allow extinction, you may boast unchecked
- 565 What feats the thing did in a crazy land
 At a fabulous epoch,—treat your faith, that way,
 Just as you treat your relics: "Here's a shred
 Of saintly flesh, a scrap of blessed bone,
 Raised King Cophetua,² who was dead, to life
- 570 In Mesopotamia twelve centuries since,
 Such was its virtue!"—twangs the Sacristan,
 Holding the shrine-box up, with hands like feet
 Because of gout in every finger joint:

¹ variously explained; probably a mere mild expletive.

² legendary Ethiopian king, probably best known to Victorian readers through Tennyson's poem "The Beggar Maid."

- Does he bethink him to reduce one knob,
575 Allay one twinge by touching what he vaunts?
I think he half uncrooks fist to catch fee,
But, for the grace, the quality of cure,—
Cophetua was the man put that to proof!
Not otherwise, your faith is shrined and shown
580 And shamed at once: you banter while you bow!
Do you dispute this? Come, a monster-laugh,
A madman's laugh, allowed his Carnival
Later ten days than when all Rome, but he,
Laughed at the candle-contest:¹ mine's alight,
585 'T is just it sputter till the puff o' the Pope
End it to-morrow and the world turn Ash.
Come, thus I wave a wand and bring to pass
In a moment, in the twinkle of an eye,
What but that—feigning everywhere grows fact,
590 Professors turn possessors, realize
The faith they play with as a fancy now,
And bid it operate, have full effect
On every circumstance of life, to-day,
In Rome,—faith's flow set free at fountain-head!
595 Now, you'll own, at this present, when I speak,
Before I work the wonder, there's no man
Woman or child in Rome, faith's fountain-head,
But might, if each were minded, realize
Conversely unbelief, faith's opposite—
600 Set it to work on life unflinchingly,
Yet give no symptom of an outward change:
Why should things change because men disbelieve?

¹ To mark the end of Carnival, everyone in the streets sought to extinguish the others' lighted tapers, which were relighted as often as they were put out until they were utterly consumed.

- What's incompatible, in the whitened tomb,
With bones and rottenness one inch below?
- 605 What saintly act is done in Rome to-day
But might be prompted by the devil,—“is”
I say not,—“has been, and again may be,—”
I do say, full i’ the face o’ the crucifix
You try to stop my mouth with! Off with it!
- 610 Look in your own heart, if your soul have eyes!
You shall see reason why, though faith were fled,
Unbelief still might work the wires and move
Man, the machine, to play a faithful part.
Preside your college, Cardinal, in your cape,
- 615 Or,—having got above his head, grown Pope,—
Abate, gird your loins and wash my feet!¹
Do you suppose I am at loss at all
Why you crook, why you cringe, why fast or feast?
Praise, blame, sit, stand, lie or go!—all of it,
- 620 In each of you, purest unbelief may prompt,
And wit explain to who has eyes to see.
But, lo, I wave wand, make the false the true!
Here’s Rome believes in Christianity!
What an explosion, how the fragments fly
- 625 Of what was surface, mask and make-believe!
Begin now,—look at this Pope’s-halberdier²
In wasp-like black and yellow foolery!
He, doing duty at the corridor,
Wakes from a muse and stands convinced of sin!
- 630 Down he flings halbert, leaps the passage-length,
Pushes into the presence, pantingly

¹ John 13.4–14.

² a member of the Swiss guard (above, l. 208) who carried an eight-foot-long halberd (combination of axe and spear).

- Submits the extreme peril of the case
 To the Pope's self,—whom in the world beside?—
 And the Pope breaks talk with ambassador,
 635 Bids aside bishop, wills the whole world wait
 Till he secure that prize, outweighs the world,
 A soul, relieve the sentry of his qualm!
 His Altitude the Referendary,—¹
 Robed right, and ready for the usher's word
 640 To pay devoir,—is, of all times, just then
 'Ware of a master-stroke of argument
 Will cut the spinal cord ... ugh, ugh! ... I mean,
 Paralyse Molinism for evermore!
 Straight he leaves lobby, trundles, two and two,
 645 Down steps to reach home, write, if but a word
 Shall end the impudence: he leaves who likes
 Go pacify the Pope: there's Christ to serve!
 How otherwise would men display their zeal?
 If the same sentry had the least surmise
 650 A powder-barrel 'neath the pavement lay
 In neighbourhood with what might prove a match,
 Meant to blow sky-high Pope and presence both—²
 Would he not break through courtiers, rank and file,
 Bundle up, bear off and save body so,
 655 The Pope, no matter for his priceless soul?
 There's no fool's-freak here, nought to soundly swinge,

¹ important Vatican official.

² Browning's readers would have recognized this as an allusion to the so-called Gunpowder Plot that agitated London in 1605, just seven years after Guido's trial and execution, when a band of fanatical Roman Catholics planted thirty-six barrels of explosives underneath the House of Lords. The conspiracy was discovered just in time, and the confederates were duly executed. Guy Fawkes Day (November 5) still commemorates the event.

- Only a man in earnest, you'll so praise
And pay and prate about, that earth shall ring!
Had thought possessed the Referendary
660 His jewel-case at home was left ajar,
What would be wrong in running, robes awry,
To be beforehand with the pilferer?
What talk then of indecent haste? Which means,
That both these, each in his degree, would do
665 Just that,—for a comparative nothing's sake,
And thereby gain approval and reward,—
Which, done for what Christ says is worth the world,¹
Procures the doer curses, cuffs and kicks.
I call such difference 'twixt act and act,
670 Sheer lunacy unless your truth on lip
Be recognized a lie in heart of you!
How do you all act, promptly or in doubt,
When there's a guest poisoned at supper-time
And he sits chatting on with spot on cheek?
675 "Pluck him by the skirt, and round him in the ears,
Have at him by the beard, warn anyhow!"
Good, and this other friend that's cheat and thief
And dissolute,—go stop the devil's feast,
Withdraw him from the imminent hell-fire!
680 Why, for your life, you dare not tell your friend
"You lie, and I admonish you for Christ!"
Who yet dare seek that same man at the Mass
To warn him—on his knees, and tinkle near,—²
He left a cask a-tilt, a tap unturned,
685 The Trebbian³ running: what a grateful jump

¹ that is, the saving of a soul (Matthew 16.26).

² the ringing of the bell at the elevation of the Host.

³ a wine from northwestern Italy.

- Out of the Church rewards your vigilance!
 Perform that self-same service just a thought
 More maladroitly,—since a bishop sits
 At function!—and he budges not, bites lip,—
- 690 “You see my case: how can I quit my post?
 He has an eye to any such default.
 See to it, neighbour, I beseech your love!”
 He and you know the relative worth of things,
 What is permissible or inopportune.
- 695 Contort your brows! You know I speak the truth:
 Gold is called gold, and dross called dross, i’ the Book:¹
 Gold you let lie and dross pick up and prize!
 —Despite your muster of some fifty monks
 And nuns a-maundering here and mumping there,²
- 700 Who could, and on occasion would, spurn dross,
 Clutch gold, and prove their faith a fact so far,—
 I grant you! Fifty times the number squeak
 And gibber in the madhouse—firm of faith,
 This fellow, that his nose supports the moon;
- 705 The other, that his straw hat crowns him Pope:
 Does that prove all the world outside insane?
 Do fifty miracle-mongers match the mob
 That acts on the frank faithless principle,
 Born-baptized-and-bred Christian-atheists, each
- 710 With just as much a right to judge as you,—
 As many senses in his soul, and nerves
 I’ neck of him as I,—whom, soul and sense,
 Neck and nerve, you abolish presently,—
 I being the unit in creation now
- 715 Who pay the Maker, in this speech of mine,

¹ Psalms 119.119, 127; Proverbs 25.4, 11–12.

² Both verbs mean “muttering.”

- A creature's duty, spend my last of breath
In bearing witness, even by my worst fault,
To the creature's obligation, absolute,
Perpetual: my worst fault protests, "The faith
720 Claims all of me: I would give all she claims,
But for a spice of doubt: the risk's too rash:
Double or quits, I play, but, all or nought,
Exceeds my courage: therefore, I descend
To the next faith with no dubiety—
- 725 Faith in the present life, made last as long
And prove as full of pleasure as may hap,
Whatever pain it cause the world." I'm wrong?
I've had my life, whate'er I lose: I'm right?
I've got the single good there was to gain.
- 730 Entire faith, or else complete unbelief!
Aught between has my loathing and contempt,
Mine and God's also, doubtless: ask yourself,
Cardinal, where and how you like a man!
Why, either with your feet upon his head,
- 735 Confessed your caudatory,¹ or, at large,
The stranger in the crowd who caps to you
But keeps his distance,—why should he presume?
You want no hanger-on and dropper-off,
Now yours, and now not yours but quite his own,
- 740 According as the sky looks black or bright.
Just so I capped to and kept off from faith—
You promised trudge behind through fair and foul,
Yet leave i' the lurch at the first spit of rain.
Who holds to faith whenever rain begins?
- 745 What does the father when his son lies dead,

¹ train bearer (literally, "tail"; Browning's invention).

- The merchant when his money-bags take wing,
The politician whom a rival ousts?
No case but has its conduct, faith prescribes:
Where's the obedience that shall edify?¹
- 750 Why, they laugh frankly in the face of faith
And take the natural course,—this rends his hair
Because his child is taken to God's breast,
That gnashes teeth and raves at loss of trash²
Which rust corrupts and thieves break through and
steal,³
- 755 And this, enabled to inherit earth
Through meekness,⁴ curses till your blood runs cold!
Down they all drop to my low level, rest
Heart upon dungy earth that's warm and soft,
And let who please attempt the altitudes.
- 760 Each playing prodigal son of heavenly sire,⁵
Turning his nose up at the fatted calf,
Fain to fill belly with the husks, we swine
Did eat by born depravity of taste!
- Enough of the hypocrites. But you, Sirs, you—
765 Who never budged from litter where I lay,
And buried snout i' the draff-box⁶ while I fed,
Cried amen to my creed's one article—
“Get pleasure, 'scape pain,—give your preference
To the immediate good, for time is brief,

¹ 1 Corinthians 8.1 (which has “charity,” not “obedience”).

² Matthew 8.12.

³ Matthew 6.19.

⁴ Matthew 5.5.

⁵ Luke 15.16–23.

⁶ trough of refuse, swill.

- 770 And death ends good and ill and everything!
What's got is gained, what's gained soon is gained twice,
And,—inasmuch as faith gains most,—feign faith!"
So did we brother-like pass word about:
—You, now,—like bloody drunkards but half-drunk,
- 775 Who fool men yet perceive men find them fools,—
Vexed that a titter gains the gravest mouth,—
O' the sudden you must needs re-introduce
Solemnity, straight sober undue mirth
By a blow dealt me your boon companion here
- 780 Who, using the old licence, dreamed of harm
No more than snow in harvest: yet it falls!
You check the merriment effectually
By pushing your abrupt machine i' the midst,
Making me Rome's example: blood for wine!
- 785 The general good needs that you chop and change!
I may dislike the hocus-pocus,—Rome,
The laughter-loving people, won't they stare
Chap-fallen!¹—while serious natures sermonize
"The magistrate, he beareth not the sword
- 790 In vain; who sins may taste its edge, we see!"²
Why my sin, drunkards? Where have I abused
Liberty, scandalized you all so much?
Who called me, who crooked finger till I came,
Fool that I was, to join companionship?
- 795 I knew my own mind, meant to live my life,
Elude your envy, or else make a stand,
Take my own part and sell you my life dear.
But it was "Fie! No prejudice in the world
To the proper manly instinct! Cast your lot

¹ slack-jawed, crestfallen.

² Romans 13.4.

- 800 Into our lap, one genius¹ ruled our births,
We'll compass joy by concert;² take with us
The regular irregular way i' the wood;
You'll miss no game through riding breast by breast,
In this preserve, the Church's park and pale,
805 Rather than outside where the world lies waste!"
Come, if you said not that, did you say this?
Give plain and terrible warning, "Live, enjoy?
Such life begins in death and ends in hell!
Dare you bid us assist your sins, us priests
810 Who hurry sin and sinners from the earth?
No such delight for us, why then for you?
Leave earth, seek heaven or find its opposite!"
Had you so warned me, not in lying words
But veritable deeds with tongues of flame,
815 That had been fair, that might have struck a man,
Silenced the squabble between soul and sense,
Compelled him to make mind up, take one course
Or the other, peradventure!—wrong or right,
Foolish or wise, you would have been at least
820 Sincere, no question,—forced me choose, indulge
Or else renounce my instincts, still play wolf
Or find my way submissive to your fold,
Be red-crossed on my fleece, one sheep the more.
But you as good as bade me wear sheep's wool
825 Over wolf's skin, suck blood and hide the noise
By mimicry of something like a bleat,—
Whence it comes that because, despite my care,
Because I smack my tongue too loud for once,
Drop baaing, here's the village up in arms!

¹ presiding spirit, "good angel."

² find pleasure together.

- 830 Have at the wolf's throat, you who hate the breed!
Oh, were it only open yet to choose—
One little time more—whether I'd be free
Your foe, or subsidized your friend forsooth!
Should not you get a growl through the white fangs
835 In answer to your beckoning! Cardinal,
Abate, managers o' the multitude,
I'd turn your gloved hands to account, be sure!
You should manipulate the coarse rough mob:
'T is you I'd deal directly with, not them,—
840 Using your fears: why touch the thing myself
When I could see you hunt, and then cry "Shares!
Quarter the carcase or we quarrel; come,
Here's the world ready to see justice done!"
Oh, it had been a desperate game, but game
845 Wherein the winner's chance were worth the pains!
We'd try conclusions!—at the worst, what worse
Than this Mannaia-machine, each minute's talk
Helps push an inch the nearer me? Fool, fool!

- You understand me and forgive, sweet Sirs?
850 I blame you, tear my hair and tell my woe—
All's but a flourish, figure of rhetoric!
One must try each expedient to save life.
One makes fools look foolisher fifty-fold
By putting in their place men wise like you,
855 To take the full force of an argument
Would buffet their stolidity in vain.
If you should feel aggrieved by the mere wind
O' the blow that means to miss you and maul them,
That's my success! Is it not folly, now,
860 To say with folk, "A plausible defence—
We see through notwithstanding, and reject?"

- Reject the plausible they do, these fools,
Who never even make pretence to show
One point beyond its plausibility
- 865 In favour of the best belief they hold!
“Saint Somebody-or-other raised the dead:”
Did he? How do you come to know as much?
“Know it, what need? The story’s plausible,
Avouched for by a martyrologist,
- 870 And why should good men sup on cheese and leeks
On such a saint’s day, if there were no saint?”
I praise the wisdom of these fools, and straight
Tell them my story—“plausible, but false!”
False, to be sure! What else can story be
- 875 That runs—a young wife tired of an old spouse,
Found a priest whom she fled away with,—both
Took their full pleasure in the two-days’ flight,
Which a grey-headed greyer-hearted pair,
(Whose best boast was, their life had been a lie)
- 880 Helped for the love they bore all liars. Oh,
Here incredulity begins! Indeed?
Allow then, were no one point strictly true,
There’s that i’ the tale might seem like truth at least
To the unlucky husband,—jaundiced patch—¹
- 885 Jealousy maddens people, why not him?
Say, he was maddened, so forgivable!
Humanity pleads that though the wife were true,
The priest true, and the pair of liars true,
They might seem false to one man in the world!
- 890 A thousand gnats make up a serpent’s sting,
And many sly soft stimulants to wrath
Compose a formidable wrong at last

¹ jealous fool.

- That gets called easily by some one name
 Not applicable to the single parts,
 895 And so draws down a general revenge,
 Excessive if you take crime, fault by fault.
 Jealousy! I have known a score of plays,
 Were listened to and laughed at in my time
 As like the everyday-life on all sides,
 900 Wherein the husband, mad as a March hare,
 Suspected all the world contrived his shame.
 What did the wife? The wife kissed both eyes blind,¹
 Explained away ambiguous circumstance,
 And while she held him captive by the hand,
 905 Crowned his head,²—you know what's the mockery,—
 By half her body behind the curtain. That's
 Nature now! That's the subject of a piece'
 I saw in Vallombrosa Convent,³ made
 Expressly to teach men what marriage was!
 910 But say "Just so did I misapprehend,
 Imagine she deceived me to my face,"
 And that's pretence too easily seen through!
 All those eyes of all husbands in all plays,
 At stare like one expanded peacock-tail,
 915 Are laughed at for pretending to be keen
 While horn-blind: but the moment I step forth—
 Oh, I must needs o' the sudden prove a lynx⁴
 And look the heart, that stone-wall, through and through!
 Such an eye, God's may be,—not yours nor mine.

[— — —]

¹ The kiss of an adulterous wife was said to blind her husband to her infidelity.

² that is, with the horns of a cuckold.

³ monastery near Florence.

⁴ See note to X 1245.

- 920 Yes, presently ... what hour is fleeting now?
When you cut earth away from under me,
I shall be left alone with, pushed beneath
Some such an apparitional¹ dread orb
As the eye of God, since such an eye there glares:
- 925 I fancy it go filling up the void
Above my mote-self it devours, or what
Proves—wrath, immensity wreaks on nothingness.
Just how I felt once, couching through the dark,
Hard by Vittiano; young I was, and gay,
- 930 And wanting to trap fieldfares:² first a spark
Tipped a bent,³ as a mere dew-globule might
Any stiff grass-stalk on the meadow,—this
Grew fiercer, flamed out full, and proved the sun.
What do I want with proverbs, precepts here?
- 935 Away with man! What shall I say to God?
This, if I find the tongue and keep the mind—
“Do Thou wipe out the being of me, and smear
This soul from off Thy white of things, I blot!
I am one huge and sheer mistake,—whose fault?
- 940 Not mine at least, who did not make myself!”
Someone declares my wife excused me so!
Perhaps she knew what argument to use.
Grind your teeth, Cardinal: Abate, writhe!
What else am I to cry out in my rage,
- 945 Unable to repent one particle
O’ the past? Oh, how I wish some cold wise man
Would dig beneath the surface which you scrape,
Deal with the depths, pronounce on my desert

¹ spectral, phantasmal.

² thrushes.

³ stiff stalk of grass.

- Groundedly! I want simple sober sense,
950 That asks, before it finishes with a dog,
Who taught the dog that trick you hang him for?
You both persist to call that act a crime,
Which sense would call ... yes, I maintain it, Sirs, ...
A blunder! At the worst, I stood in doubt
955 On cross-road, took one path of many paths:
It leads to the red thing, we all see now,
But nobody saw at first: one primrose-patch
In bank, one singing-bird in bush, the less,
Had warned me from such wayfare: let me prove!
960 Put me back to the cross-road, start afresh!
Advise me when I take the first false step!
Give me my wife: how should I use my wife,
Love her or hate her? Prompt my action now!
There she is, there she stands alive and pale,
965 The thirteen-years'-old child, with milk for blood,
Pompilia Comparini, as at first,
Which first is only four brief years ago!
I stand too in the little ground-floor room
O' the father's house at Via Vittoria: see!
970 Her so-called mother,—one arm round the waist
O' the child to keep her from the toys, let fall
At wonder I can live yet look so grim,—
Ushers her in, with deprecating wave
Of the other,—and she fronts me loose at last,
975 Held only by the mother's finger-tip.
Struck dumb,—for she was white enough before!—
She eyes me with those frightened balls of black,
As heifer—the old simile¹ comes pat—
Eyes tremblingly the altar and the priest.

¹ in, for example, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 1.97–99.

- 980 The amazed look, all one insuppressive prayer,—
 Might she but breathe, set free as heretofore,
 Have this cup leave her lips unblistered, bear
 Any cross anywhither anyhow,
 So but alone, so but apart from me!
- 985 You are touched? So am I, quite otherwise,
 If 't is with pity. I resent my wrong,
 Being a man: I only show man's soul
 Through man's flesh: she sees mine, it strikes her thus!
 Is that attractive? To a youth perhaps—
- 990 Calf-creature, one-part boy to three-parts girl,
 To whom it is a flattering novelty
 That he, men use to motion from their path,
 Can thus impose, thus terrify in turn
 A chit whose terror shall be changed apace
- 995 To bliss unbearable when grace and glow,
 Prowess and pride descend the throne and touch
 Esther in all that pretty tremble,¹ cured
 By the dove o' the sceptre! But myself am old,
 O' the wane at least, in all things: what do you say
- 1000 To her who frankly thus confirms my doubt?
 I am past the prime, I scare the woman-world,
 Done-with that way: you like this piece of news?
 A little saucy rose-bud minx can strike
 Death-damp into the breast of doughty king
- 1005 Though 't were French Louis,²—soul I understand,—
 Saying, by gesture of repugnance, just
 “Sire, you are regal, puissant and so forth,
 But—young you have been, are not, nor will be!”

¹ Esther 15.5–16 (Apocrypha), where Esther is repeatedly so portrayed as she petitions Ahasuerus for her countrymen.

² See note to ll. 2279–80 below.

- In vain the mother nods, winks, bustles up,
 1010 "Count, girls incline to mature worth like you!
 As for Pompilia, what's flesh, fish, or fowl
 To one who apprehends no difference,
 And would accept you even were you old
 As you are ... youngish by her father's side?
 1015 Trim but your beard a little, thin your bush
 Of eyebrow; and for presence, portliness,¹
 And decent gravity, you beat a boy!"
 Deceive yourself one minute, if you may,
 In presence of the child that so loves age,
 1020 Whose neck writhes, cords itself against your kiss,
 Whose hand you wring stark, rigid with despair!
 Well, I resent this; I am young in soul,
 Nor old in body,—thews and sinews here,—
 Though the vile surface be not smooth as once,—
 1025 Far beyond that first wheelwork² which went wrong
 Through the untempered iron ere 't was proof:³
 I am the wrought man worth ten times the crude,
 Would woman see what this declines to see,
 Declines to say "I see,"—the officious⁴ word
 1030 That makes the thing, pricks on the soul to shoot
 New fire into the half-used cinder, flesh!
 Therefore 't is she begins with wronging me,
 Who cannot but begin with hating her.
 Our marriage follows: there she stands again!
 1035 Why do I laugh? Why, in the very gripe

¹ dignity, stateliness.

² clockwork.

³ of tested strength, impenetrable.

⁴ efficacious, with an overtone of "officious lie": one "told as an act of kindness to further another's interests" (*OED*).

- O' the jaws of death's gigantic skull, do I
Grin back his grin, make sport of my own pangs?
Why from each clashing of his molars, ground
To make the devil bread from out my grist,
1040 Leaps out a spark of mirth, a hellish toy?
Take notice we are lovers in a church,
Waiting the sacrament to make us one
And happy! Just as bid, she bears herself,
Comes and kneels, rises, speaks, is silent,—goes:
1045 So have I brought my horse, by word and blow,
To stand stock-still and front the fire he dreads.
How can I other than remember this,
Resent the very obedience? Gain thereby?
Yes, I do gain my end and have my will,—
1050 Thanks to whom? When the mother speaks the word,
She obeys it—even to enduring me!
There had been compensation in revolt—
Revolt's to quell: but martyrdom rehearsed,
But predetermined saintship for the sake
1055 O' the mother?—"Go!" thought I, "we meet again!"
Pass the next weeks of dumb contented death,
She lives,—wakes up, installed in house and home,
Is mine, mine all day-long, all night-long mine.
Good folk begin at me with open mouth
1060 "Now, at least, reconcile the child to life!
Study and make her love ... that is, endure
The ... hem! the ... all of you though somewhat old,
Till it amount to something, in her eye,
As good as love, better a thousand times,—
1065 Since nature helps the woman in such strait,
Makes passiveness her pleasure: failing which,
What if you give up boy-and-girl-fools'-play
And go on to wise friendship all at once?

- Those boys and girls kiss themselves cold, you know,
 1070 Toy themselves tired and slink aside full soon
 To friendship, as they name satiety:
 Thither go you and wait their coming!" Thanks,
 Considerate advisers,—but, fair play!
 Had you and I, friends, started fair at first,
 1075 We, keeping fair, might reach it, neck by neck,
 This blessed goal, whenever fate so please:
 But why am I to miss the daisied mile
 The course begins with, why obtain the dust
 Of the end precisely at the starting-point?
 1080 Why quaff life's cup blown free of all the beads,
 The bright red froth wherein our beard should steep
 Before our mouth essay the black o' the wine?
 Foolish, the love-fit? Let me prove it such
 Like you, before like you I puff things clear!
 1085 "The best's to come, no rapture but content!
 Not love's first glory but a sober glow,
 Not a spontaneous outburst in pure boon,
 So much as, gained by patience, care and toil,
 Proper appreciation and esteem!"
 1090 Go preach that to your nephews, not to me
 Who, tired i' the midway of my life, would stop
 And take my first refreshment, pluck a rose:
 What's this coarse woolly hip, worn smooth of leaf,
 You counsel I go plant in garden-plot,
 1095 Water with tears, manure with sweat and blood,¹
 In confidence the seed shall germinate
 And, for its very best, some far-off day,
 Grow big, and blow me out a dog-rose² bell?

¹ a repetition of the image at X 1031–33.

² small flower of the wild brier in hedges and thickets.

- Why must your nephews begin breathing spice
 1100 O' the hundred-petalled Provence prodigy?¹
 Nay, more and worse,—would such my root bear rose—
 Prove really flower and favourite, not the kind
 That's queen, but those three leaves that make one cup
 And hold the hedge-bird's breakfast,—then indeed
 1105 The prize though poor would pay the care and toil!
 Respect we Nature that makes least as most,
 Marvellous in the minim! But this bud,
 Bit through and burned black by the tempter's tooth,
 This bloom whose best grace was the slug outside
 1110 And the wasp inside its bosom,—call you "rose"?
 Claim no immunity from a weed's fate
 For the horrible present! What you call my wife
 I call a nullity in female shape,
 Vapid disgust, soon to be pungent plague,
 1115 When mixed with, made confusion and a curse
 By two abominable nondescripts,
 That father and that mother: think you see
 The dreadful bronze our boast, we Aretines,
 The Etruscan monster,² the three-headed thing,
 1120 Bellerophon's foe! How name you the whole beast?
 You choose to name the body from one head,
 That of the simple kid which droops the eye,
 Hangs the neck and dies tenderly enough:
 I rather see the griesly lion belch
 1125 Flame out i' the midst, the serpent writhe her rings,
 Grafted into the common stock for tail,
 And name the brute, Chimaera which I slew!
 How was there ever more to be—(concede

¹ a large rose.

² Chimaera (l. 1127).

- My wife's insipid harmless nullity)—
- 1130 Dissociation from that pair of plagues—
 That mother with her cunning and her cant—¹
 The eyes with first their twinkle of conceit,
 Then, dropped to earth in mock-demureness,—now,
 The smile self-satisfied from ear to ear,
- 1135 Now, the prim pursed-up mouth's protruded lips,
 With deferential duck, slow swing of head,
 Tempting the sudden fist of man too much,—
 That owl-like screw of lid and rock of ruff!²
 As for the father,—Cardinal, you know,
- 1140 The kind of idiot!—such are rife in Rome,
 But they wear velvet commonly; good fools,
 At the end of life, to furnish forth young folk
 Who grin and bear with imbecility:
 Since the stalled ass, the joker, sheds from jaw
- 1145 Corn, in the joke, for those who laugh or starve.
 But what say we to the same solemn beast
 Wagging his ears and wishful of our pat,
 When turned, with holes in hide and bones laid bare,
 To forage for himself i' the waste o' the world,
- 1150 Sir Dignity i' the dumps?³ Pat him? We drub
 Self-knowledge, rather, into frowzy pate,
 Teach Pietro to get trappings⁴ or go hang!
 Fancy this quondam⁵ oracle in vogue
 At Via Vittoria, this personified
- 1155 Authority when time was,—Pantaloons⁶

¹ whining.

² sway of its collar of feathers.

³ gloomy, with a pun suggested by "forage ... i' the waste o' the world."

⁴ harness.

⁵ former.

⁶ foolish old man in Italian pantomime.

- Flaunting his tom-fool tawdry just the same
As if Ash-Wednesday were mid-Carnival!
That's the extreme and unforgiveable
Of sins, as I account such. Have you stooped
1160 For your own ends to bestialize yourself
By flattery of a fellow of this stamp?
The ends obtained or else shown out of reach,
He goes on, takes the flattery for pure truth,—
"You love, and honour me, of course: what next?"
1165 What, but the trifle of the stabbing, friend?—
Which taught you how one worships when the shrine
Has lost the relic that we bent before.
Angry! And how could I be otherwise?
'T is plain: this pair of old pretentious fools
1170 Meant to fool me: it happens, I fooled them.
Why could not these who sought to buy and sell
Me,—when they found themselves were bought and sold,
Make up their mind to the proved rule of right,
Be chattel and not chapman any more?
1175 Miscalculation has its consequence;
But when the shepherd crooks a sheep-like thing
And meaning to get wool, dislodges fleece
And finds the veritable wolf beneath,
(How that staunch image serves at every turn!)
1180 Does he, by way of being politic,
Pluck the first whisker grimly visible?
Or rather grow in a trice all gratitude,
Protest this sort-of-what-one-might-name sheep
Beats the old other curly-coated kind,
1185 And shall share board and bed, if so it deign,
With its discoverer, like a royal ram?
Ay, thus, with chattering teeth and knocking knees,
Would wisdom treat the adventure! these, forsooth,

- Tried whisker-plucking, and so found what trap
1190 The whisker kept perdue, two rows of teeth—
Sharp, as too late the prying fingers felt.
What would you have? The fools transgress, the fools
Forthwith receive appropriate punishment:
They first insult me, I return the blow,
1195 There follows noise enough: four hubbub months,
Now hue and cry, now whimpering and wail—
A perfect goose-yard cackle of complaint
Because I do not gild the geese their oats,—
I have enough of noise, ope wicket wide,
1200 Sweep out the couple to go whine elsewhere,
Frightened a little, hurt in no respect,
And am just taking thought to breathe again,
Taste the sweet sudden silence all about,
When, there they raise it, the old noise I know,
1205 At Rome i' the distance! "What, begun once more?
Whine on, wail ever, 't is the loser's right!"
But eh, what sort of voice grows on the wind?
Triumph it sounds and no complaint at all!
And triumph it is. My boast was premature:
1210 The creatures, I turned forth, clapped wing and crew
Fighting-cock-fashion,—they had filched a pearl
From dung-heap, and might boast with cause enough!
I was defrauded of all bargained for:
You know, the Pope knows, not a soul but knows
1215 My dowry was derision, my gain—muck,
My wife, (the Church declared my flesh and blood)
The nameless bastard of a common whore:
My old name turned henceforth to ... shall I say
"He that received the ordure in his face"?
1220 And they who planned this wrong, performed this wrong,
And then revealed this wrong to the wide world,

Rounded myself in the ears with my own wrong,—
Why, these were (note hell's lucky malice, now!)
These were just they who, they alone, could act
1225 And publish and proclaim their infamy,
Secure that men would in a breath believe
Compassionate and pardon them,—for why?
They plainly were too stupid to invent,
Too simple to distinguish wrong from right,—
1230 Inconscious agents they, the silly-sooth,
Of heaven's retributive justice on the strong
Proud cunning violent oppressor—me!
Follow them to their fate and help your best,
You Rome, Arezzo, foes called friends of me,
1235 They gave the good long laugh to, at my cost!
Defray your share o' the cost, since you partook
The entertainment! Do!—assured the while,
That not one stab, I dealt to right and left,
But went the deeper for a fancy—this—
1240 That each might do me two-fold service, find
A friend's face at the bottom of each wound,
And scratch its smirk a little!

Panciatichi!

There's a report at Florence,—is it true?—
1245 That when your relative the Cardinal
Built, only the other day, that barrack-bulk,
The palace in Via Larga, someone picked
From out the street a saucy quip enough
That fell there from its day's flight through the town,
1250 About the flat front and the windows wide
And bulging heap of cornice,—hitched the joke
Into a sonnet, signed his name thereto,
And forthwith pinned on post the pleasantry:
For which he's at the galleys, rowing now

- 1255 Up to his waist in water,—just because
Panciatic and *lymphatic* rhymed so pat!
 I hope, Sir, those who passed this joke on me
 Were not unduly punished? What say you,
 Prince of the Church, my patron? Nay, indeed,
- 1260 I shall not dare insult your wits so much
 As think this problem difficult to solve.
 This Pietro and Violante then, I say,
 These two ambiguous insects, changing name
 And nature with the season's warmth or chill,—
- 1265 Now, grovelled, grubbing toiling moiling ants,
 A very synonym of thrift and peace,—
 Anon, with lusty June to prick their heart,
 Soared i' the air, winged flies for more offence,
 Circled me, buzzed me deaf and stung me blind,
- 1270 And stunk me dead with fetor in the face
 Until I stopped the nuisance: there's my crime!
 Pity I did not suffer them subside
 Into some further shape and final form
 Of execrable life? My masters, no!
- 1275 I, by one blow, wisely cut short at once
 Them and their transformations of disgust,¹
 In the snug little Villa out of hand.
 "Grant me confession, give bare time for that!"—
 Shouted the sinner till his mouth was stopped.
- 1280 His life confessed!—that was enough for me,
 Who came to see that he did penance. 'S death!
 Here's a coil raised, a pother and for what?
 Because strength, being provoked by weakness, fought
 And conquered,—the world never heard the like!
- 1285 Pah, how I spend my breath on them, as if

¹ disgusting metamorphoses, changes of nature (ll. 1263–65).

'T was their fate troubled me, too hard to range
Among the right and fit and proper things!

Ay, but Pompilia,—I await your word,—

She, unimpeached of crime, unimplicate

1290 In folly, one of alien blood to these

I punish, why extend my claim, exact

Her portion of the penalty? Yes, friends,

I go too fast: the orator's at fault:

Yes, ere I lay her, with your leave, by them

1295 As she was laid at San Lorenzo late,

I ought to step back, lead you by degrees,

Recounting at each step some fresh offence,

Up to the red bed,—never fear, I will!

Gaze at her, where I place her, to begin,

1300 Confound me with her gentleness and worth!

The horrible pair have fled and left her now,

She has her husband for her sole concern:

His wife, the woman fashioned for his help,

Flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone,¹ the bride

1305 To groom as is the Church and Spouse to Christ:²

There she stands in his presence: "Thy desire

Shall be to the husband, o'er thee shall he rule!"³

— "Pompilia, who declare that you love God,

You know who said that: then, desire my love,

1310 Yield me contentment and be ruled aright!"

She sits up, she lies down, she comes and goes,

Kneels at the couch-side, overleans the sill

O' the window, cold and pale and mute as stone,

¹ Genesis 2.23.

² Ephesians 5.23–25.

³ Genesis 3.16.

- Strong as stone also. "Well, are they not fled?
1315 Am I not left, am I not one for all?
Speak a word, drop a tear, detach a glance,
Bless me or curse me of your own accord!
Is it the ceiling only wants your soul,
Is worth your eyes?" And then the eyes descend,
1320 And do look at me. Is it at the meal?
"Speak!" she obeys, "Be silent!" she obeys,
Counting the minutes till I cry "Depart,"
As brood-bird when you saunter past her eggs.
Departs she? just the same through door and wall
1325 I see the same stone strength of white despair.
And all this will be never otherwise!
Before, the parents' presence lent her life:
She could play off her sex's armoury,
Entreat, reproach, be female to my male,
1330 Try all the shrieking doubles¹ of the hare,
Go clamour to the Commissary, bid
The Archbishop hold my hands and stop my tongue,
And yield fair sport so: but the tactics change,
The hare stands stock-still to enrage the hound!
1335 Since that day when she learned she was no child
Of those she thought her parents,—that their trick
Had tricked me whom she thought sole trickster late,—
Why, I suppose she said within herself
"Then, no more struggle for my parents' sake!
1340 And, for my own sake, why needs struggle be?"
But is there no third party to the pact?
What of her husband's relish or dislike
For this new game of giving up the game,
This worst offence of not offending more?

¹ sharp or backward turns.

- 1345 I'll not believe but instinct wrought in this,
Set her on to conceive and execute
The preferable plague: how sure they probe—
These jades, the sensitivest soft of man!
The long black hair was wound now in a wisp,
1350 Crowned sorrow better than the wild web late:
No more soiled dress, 't is trimness triumphs now,
For how should malice go with negligence?
The frayed silk looked the fresher for her spite!
There was an end to springing out of bed,
1355 Praying me, with face buried on my feet,
Be hindered of my pastime,—so an end
To my rejoinder, "What, on the ground at last?
Vanquished in fight, a suppliant for life?
What if I raise you? 'Ware the casting down
1360 When next you fight me!" Then, she lay there, mine:
Now, mine she is if I please wring her neck,—
A moment of disquiet, working eyes,
Protruding tongue, a long sigh, then no more,—
As if one killed the horse one could not ride!
1365 Had I enjoined "Cut off the hair!"—why, snap
The scissors, and at once a yard or so
Had fluttered in black serpents to the floor:
But till I did enjoin it, how she combs,
Uncurls and draws out to the complete length,
1370 Plaits, places the insulting rope on head
To be an eyesore past dishevelment!
Is all done? Then sit still again and stare!
I advise—no one think to bear that look
Of steady wrong, endured as steadily
1375 —Through what sustainment of deluding hope?
Who is the friend i' the background that notes all?
Who may come presently and close accounts?

- This self-possession to the uttermost,
 How does it differ in aught, save degree,
 1380 From the terrible patience of God?¹
- "All which just means,
 She did not love you!" Again the word is launched
 And the fact fronts me! What, you try the wards²
 With the true key and the dead lock flies ope?
 1385 No, it sticks fast and leaves you fumbling still!
 You have some fifty servants, Cardinal,—
 Which of them loves you? Which subordinate
 But makes parade of such officiousness³
 That,—if there's no love prompts it,—love, the sham,
 1390 Does twice the service done by love, the true?
 God bless us liars, where's one touch of truth
 In what we tell the world, or world tells us,
 Of how we love each other? All the same,
 We calculate on word and deed, nor err,—
 1395 Bid such a man do such a loving act,
 Sure of effect and negligent of cause,
 Just as we bid a horse, with cluck of tongue,
 Stretch his legs arch-wise, crouch his saddled back
 To foot-reach of the stirrup—all for love,
 1400 And some for memory of the smart of switch
 On the inside of the foreleg—what care we?
 Yet where's the bond obliges horse to man
 Like that which binds fast wife to husband? God
 Laid down the law: gave man the brawny arm
 1405 And ball of fist—woman the beardless cheek
 And proper place to suffer in the side:

¹ Psalms 7.12 (Prayer Book version).

² projections inside a lock.

³ servility.

- Since it is he can strike, let her obey!
Can she feel no love? Let her show the more,
Sham the worse, damn herself praiseworthy!
- 1410 Who's that soprano Rome went mad about
Last week while I lay rotting in my straw?
The very jailer gossiped in his praise—
How,—dressed up like Armida,¹ though a man;
And painted to look pretty, though a fright,—
- 1415 He still made love so that the ladies swooned,
Being an eunuch. "Ah, Rinaldo mine!
But to breathe by thee while Jove slays us both!"
All the poor bloodless creature never felt,
Si, do, re, me, fa, squeak and squall—for what?
- 1420 Two gold zecchines the evening. Here's my slave,
Whose body and soul depend upon my nod,
Can't falter out the first note in the scale
For her life! Why blame me if I take the life?
All women cannot give men love, forsooth!
- 1425 No, nor all pullets lay the henwife eggs—
Whereat she bids them remedy the fault,
Brood on a chalk-ball: soon the nest is stocked—
Otherwise, to the plucking and the spit!
This wife of mine was of another mood—
- 1430 Would not begin the lie that ends with truth,
Nor feign the love that brings real love about:
Wherefore I judged, sentenced and punished her.
But why particularize, defend the deed?
Say that I hated her for no one cause
- 1435 Beyond my pleasure so to do,—what then?
Just on as much incitement acts the world,

¹ Armida and Rinaldo are characters in an opera based on Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*.

- All of you! Look and like! You favour one,
 Browbeat another, leave alone a third,—
 Why should you master natural caprice?
- 1440 Pure nature! Try: plant elm by ash in file;
 Both unexceptionable trees enough,
 They ought to overlean each other, pair
 At top, and arch across the avenue
 The whole path to the pleasaunce:¹ do they so—
- 1445 Or loathe, lie off abhorrent each from each?
 Lay the fault elsewhere: since we must have faults,
 Mine shall have been,—seeing there's ill in the end
 Come of my course,—that I fare somehow worse
 For the way I took: my fault ... as God's my judge,
- 1450 I see not where my fault lies, that's the truth!
 I ought ... oh, ought in my own interest
 Have let the whole adventure go untried,
 This chance by marriage: or else, trying it,
 Ought to have turned it to account, some one
- 1455 O' the hundred otherwises? Ay, my friend,
 Easy to say, easy to do: step right
 Now you've stepped left and stumbled on the thing,
 —The red thing! Doubt I any more than you
 That practice makes man perfect? Give again
- 1460 The chance,—same marriage and no other wife,
 Be sure I'll edify you! That's because
 I'm practised, grown fit guide for Guido's self.
 You proffered guidance,—I know, none so well,—
 You laid down law and rolled decorum² out,
- 1465 From pulpit-corner on the gospel-side,—³

¹ secluded garden.

² rules of proper behavior.

³ the left side as one faces the altar.

- Wanted to make your great experience mine,
 Save me the personal search and pains so: thanks!
 Take your word on life's use? When I take his—
 The muzzled ox that treadeth out the corn,¹
 1470 Gone blind in padding round and round one path,—
 As to the taste of green grass in the field!
 What do you know o' the world that's trodden flat
 And salted sterile with your daily dung,
 Leavened into a lump of loathsomeness?
 1475 Take your opinion of the modes of life,
 The aims of life, life's triumph or defeat,
 How to feel, how to scheme, and how to do
 Or else leave undone? You preached long and loud
 On high-days, "Take our doctrine upon trust!"
 1480 Into the mill-house with you! Grind our corn,
 Relish our chaff, and let the green grass grow!"
 I tried chaff, found I famished on such fare,
 So made this mad rush at the mill-house-door,
 Buried my head up to the ears in dew,
 1485 Browsed on the best: for which you brain me, Sirs!
 Be it so. I conceived of life that way,
 And still declare—life, without absolute use
 Of the actual sweet therein, is death, not life.
 Give me,—pay down,—not promise, which is air,—²
 1490 Something that's out of life and better still,
 Make sure reward, make certain punishment,
 Entice me, scare me,—I'll forgo this life;
 Otherwise, no!—the less that words, mere wind,
 Would cheat me of some minutes while they plague,
 1495 Baulk fulness of revenge here,—blame yourselves

¹ Deuteronomy 25.4; see previous use at V 136–37.

² "I eat the air, promise-crammed" (*Hamlet* 3.2.99).

- For this eruption of the pent-up soul
You prisoned first and played with afterward!
"Deny myself" meant simply pleasure you,
The sacred and superior, save the mark!
- 1500 You,—whose stupidity and insolence
I must defer to, soothe at every turn,—
Whose swine-like snuffling greed and grunting lust
I had to wink at or help gratify,—
While the same passions,—dared they perk in me,
- 1505 Me, the immeasurably marked, by God,
Master of the whole world of such as you,—
I, boast such passions? 'T was "Suppress them straight!
Or stay, we'll pick and choose before destroy.
Here's wrath in you, a serviceable sword,—
- 1510 Beat it into a ploughshare!¹ What's this long
Lance-like ambition? Forge a pruning-hook,
May be of service when our vines grow tall!
But—sword use swordwise, spear thrust out as spear?
Anathema!² Suppression is the word!"
- 1515 My nature, when the outrage was too gross,
Widened itself an outlet over-wide
By way of answer, sought its own relief
With more of fire and brimstone than you wished.
All your own doing: preachers, blame yourselves!
- 1520 'T is I preach while the hour-glass runs and runs!
God keep me patient! All I say just means—
My wife proved, whether by her fault or mine,—
That's immaterial,—a true stumbling-block
I' the way of me her husband. I but plied

¹ Isaiah 2.4.

² a curse upon it!

- 1525 The hatchet yourselves use to clear a path,
Was politic, played the game you warrant wins,
Plucked at law's robe a-rustle through the courts,
Bowed down to kiss divinity's buckled shoe
Cushioned i' the church: efforts all wide the aim!
- 1530 Procedures to no purpose! Then flashed truth.
The letter kills, the spirit keeps alive¹
In law and gospel: there be nods and winks
Instruct a wise man to assist himself
In certain matters, nor seek aid at all.
- 1535 "Ask money of me,"—quoth the clownish saw,—
"And take my purse! But,—speaking with respect,—
Need you a solace for the troubled nose?
Let everybody wipe his own himself!"
Sirs, tell me free and fair! Had things gone well
- 1540 At the wayside inn: had I surprised asleep
The runaways, as was so probable,
And pinned them each to other partridge-wise,
Through back and breast to breast and back, then bade
Bystanders witness if the spit, my sword,
- 1545 Were loaded with unlawful game for once—
Would you have interposed to damp the glow
Applauding me on every husband's cheek?
Would you have checked the cry "A judgment, see!
A warning, note! Be henceforth chaste, ye wives,
- 1550 Nor stray beyond your proper precinct, priests!"
If you had, then your house against itself
Divides, nor stands your kingdom any more.²
Oh why, why was it not ordained just so?
Why fell not things out so nor otherwise?

¹ 2 Corinthians 3.6.

² Matthew 12.25.

- 1555 Ask that particular devil whose task it is
To trip the all-but-at perfection,—slur
The line o' the painter just where paint leaves off
And life begins,—put ice into the ode
O' the poet while he cries "Next stanza—fire!"
- 1560 Inscribe all human effort with one word,
Artistry's haunting curse, the Incomplete!
Being incomplete, my act escaped success.
Easy to blame now! Every fool can swear
To hole in net that held and slipped the fish.
- 1565 But, treat my act with fair unjaundiced eye,
What was there wanting to a masterpiece
Except the luck that lies beyond a man?
My way with the woman, now proved grossly wrong,
Just missed of being gravely grandly right
- 1570 And making mouths laugh on the other side.
Do, for the poor obstructed artist's sake,
Go with him over that spoiled work once more!
Take only its first flower, the ended act
Now in the dusty pod, dry and defunct!
- 1575 I march to the Villa, and my men with me,
That evening, and we reach the door and stand.
I say ... no, it shoots through me lightning-like
While I pause, breathe, my hand upon the latch,
"Let me forebode! Thus far, too much success:
- 1580 I want the natural failure—find it where?
Which thread will have to break and leave a loop
I' the meshy combination, my brain's loom
Wove this long while, and now next minute tests?
Of three that are to catch, two should go free,
- 1585 One must: all three surprised,—impossible!
Beside, I seek three and may chance on six,—
This neighbour, t' other gossip,—the babe's birth

- Brings such to fireside, and folks give them wine,—
'T is late: but when I break in presently
1590 One will be found outlingering the rest
For promise of a posset,—one whose shout
Would raise the dead down in the catacombs,
Much more the city-watch that goes its round.
When did I ever turn adroitly up
1595 To sun some brick embedded in the soil,
And with one blow crush all three scorpions there?
Or Pietro or Violante shambles off—
It cannot be but I surprise my wife—
If only she is stopped and stamped on, good!
1600 That shall suffice: more is improbable.
Now I may knock!" And this once for my sake
The impossible was effected: I called king,
Queen and knave in a sequence, and cards came,
All three, three only! So, I had my way,
1605 Did my deed: so, unbrokenly lay bare
Each taenia¹ that had sucked me dry of juice,
At last outside me, not an inch of ring
Left now to writhe about and root itself
I' the heart all powerless for revenge! Henceforth
1610 I might thrive: these were drawn and dead and damned.
Oh Cardinal, the deep long sigh you heave
When the load's off you, ringing as it runs
All the way down the serpent-stair to hell!
No doubt the fine delirium flustered me,
1615 Turned my brain with the influx of success
As if the sole need now were to wave wand
And find doors fly wide,—wish and have my will,—
The rest o' the scheme would care for itself: escape?

¹ tapeworm.

- Easy enough were that, and poor beside!
- 1620 It all but proved so,—ought to quite have proved,
Since, half the chances had sufficed, set free
Anyone, with his senses at command,
From thrice the danger of my flight. But, drunk,
Redundantly triumphant,—some reverse
- 1625 Was sure to follow! There's no other way
Accounts for such prompt perfect failure then
And there on the instant. Any day o' the week,
A ducat slid discreetly into palm
O' the mute post-master, while you whisper him—
- 1630 How you the Count and certain four your knaves,
Have just been mauling who was malapert,¹
Suspect the kindred may prove troublesome,
Therefore, want horses in a hurry,—that
And nothing more secures you any day
- 1635 The pick o' the stable! Yet I try the trick,
Double the bribe, call myself Duke for Count,
And say the dead man only was a Jew,
And for my pains find I am dealing just
With the one scrupulous fellow in all Rome—
- 1640 Just this immaculate official stares,
Sees I want hat on head and sword in sheath,
Am splashed with other sort of wet than wine,
Shrugs shoulder, puts my hand by, gold and all,
Stands on the strictness of the rule o' the road!
- 1645 "Where's the Permission?" Where's the wretched rag
With the due seal and sign of Rome's Police,
To be had for asking, half-an-hour ago?
"Gone? Get another, or no horses hence!"
He dares not stop me, we five glare too grim,

¹ impudent.

- 1650 But hinders,—hacks and hamstrings¹ sure enough,
Gives me some twenty miles of miry road
More to march in the middle of that night
Whereof the rough beginning taxed the strength
O' the youngsters, much more mine, both soul and flesh,
1655 Who had to think as well as act: dead-beat,
We gave in ere we reached the boundary
And safe spot out of this irrational Rome,—
Where, on dismounting from our steeds next day,
We had snapped our fingers at you, safe and sound,
1660 Tuscans once more in blessed Tuscany,
Where laws make wise allowance, understand
Civilized life and do its champions right!
Witness the sentence of the Rota there,
Arezzo uttered, the Granduke confirmed,
1665 One week before I acted on its hint,—
Giving friend Guillichini, for his love,
The galleys, and my wife your saint, Rome's saint,—
Rome manufactures saints enough to know,—
Seclusion at the Stinche² for her life.
1670 All this, that all but was, might all have been,
Yet was not! baulked by just a scrupulous knave
Whose palm was horn through handling horses' hoofs
And could not close upon my proffered gold!
What say you to the spite of fortune? Well,
1675 The worst's in store: thus hindered, haled this way
To Rome again by hangdogs, whom find I
Here, still to fight with, but my pale frail wife?
—Riddled with wounds by one not like to waste
The blows he dealt,—knowing anatomy,—

¹ disables (by cutting tendons).

² See IV 1516.

- 1680 (I think I told you) bound to pick and choose
The vital parts! 'T was learning all in vain!
She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,
Come and confront me—not at judgment-seat
Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,
- 1685 And turn her truth into a lie,—but there,
O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,
Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,
Tell her own story her own way, and turn
My plausibility to nothingness!
- 1690 Four whole days did Pompilia keep alive,
With the best surgery of Rome agape
At the miracle,—this cut, the other slash,
And yet the life refusing to dislodge,
Four whole extravagant impossible days,
- 1695 Till she had time to finish and persuade
Every man, every woman, every child
In Rome, of what she would: the selfsame she
Who, but a year ago, had wrung her hands,
Reddened her eyes and beat her breasts, rehearsed
- 1700 The whole game at Arezzo, nor availed
Thereby to move one heart or raise one hand!
When destiny intends you cards like these,
What good of skill and preconcerted play?
Had she been found dead, as I left her dead,
- 1705 I should have told a tale brooked no reply:
You scarcely will suppose me found at fault
With that advantage! "What brings me to Rome?
Necessity to claim and take my wife:
Better, to claim and take my new-born babe,—
- 1710 Strong in paternity a fortnight old,
When 't is at strongest: warily I work,
Knowing the machinations of my foe;

- I have companionship and use the night:
I seek my wife and child,—I find—no child
- 1715 But wife, in the embraces of that priest
Who caused her to elope from me. These two,
Backed by the pander-pair who watch the while,
Spring on me like so many tiger-cats,
Glad of the chance to end the intruder. I—
- 1720 What should I do but stand on my defence,
Strike right, strike left, strike thick and threefold, slay,
Not all—because the coward priest escapes.
Last, I escape, in fear of evil tongues,
And having had my taste of Roman law.”
- 1725 What’s disputable, refutable here?—
Save by just this one ghost-thing half on earth,
Half out of it,—as if she held God’s hand
While she leant back and looked her last at me,
Forgiving me (here monks begin to weep)
- 1730 Oh, from her very soul, commanding mine
To heavenly mercies which are infinite,—
While fixing fast my head beneath your knife!
’T is fate not fortune. All is of a piece!
When was it chance informed me of my youths?
- 1735 My rustic four o’ the family, soft swains,
What sweet surprise had they in store for me,
Those of my very household,—what did Law
Twist with her rack-and-cord-contrivance late
From out their bones and marrow? What but this—
- 1740 Had no one of these several stumbling-blocks
Stopped me, they yet were cherishing a scheme,
All of their honest country homespun wit,
To quietly next day at crow of cock
Cut my own throat too, for their own behoof,
- 1745 Seeing I had forgot to clear accounts

O' the instant, nowise slackened speed for that,—
 And somehow never might find memory,
 Once safe back in Arezzo, where things change,
 And a court-lord needs mind no country lout.

1750 Well, being the arch-offender, I die last,—
 May, ere my head falls, have my eyesight free,
 Nor miss them dangling high on either hand,
 Like scarecrows in a hemp-field, for their pains!

And then my Trial,—'t is my Trial that bites
 1755 Like a corrosive, so the cards are packed,
 Dice loaded, and my life-stake tricked away!
 Look at my lawyers, lacked they grace of law,
 Latin or logic? Were not they fools to the height,
 Fools to the depth, fools to the level between,

1760 O' the foolishness set to decide the case?
 They feign, they flatter; nowise does it skill,¹

Everything goes against me: deal each judge
 His dole of flattery and feigning,—why,

He turns and tries and snuffs and savours it,

1765 As some old fly the sugar-grain, your gift;
 Then eyes your thumb and finger, brushes clean
 The absurd old head of him, and whisks away,
 Leaving your thumb and finger dirty. Faugh!

And finally, after this long-drawn range

1770 Of affront and failure, failure and affront,—
 This path, 'twixt crosses leading to a skull,²
 Paced by me barefoot, bloodied by my palms
 From the entry to the end,—there's light at length,

¹ avail.

² the road to Calvary (Matthew 27.33).

- A cranny of escape: appeal may be
1775 To the old man, to the father, to the Pope,
For a little life—from one whose life is spent,
A little pity—from pity's source and seat,
A little indulgence to rank, privilege,
From one who is the thing personified,
1780 Rank, privilege, indulgence, grown beyond
Earth's bearing, even, ask Jansenius¹ else!
Still the same answer, still no other tune
From the cicala perched at the tree-top
Than crickets noisy round the root: 't is "Die!"
1785 Bids Law—"Be damned!" adds Gospel,—nay,
No word so frank,—'t is rather, "Save yourself!"
The Pope subjoins—"Confess and be absolved!
So shall my credit countervail² your shame,
And the world see I have not lost the knack
1790 Of trying all the spirits:³ yours, my son,
Wants but a fiery washing to emerge
In clarity! Come, cleanse you, ease the ache
Of these old bones, refresh our bowels, boy!"
Do I mistake your mission from the Pope?
1795 Then, bear his Holiness the mind of me!
I do get strength from being thrust to wall,
Successively wrenched from pillar and from post
By this tenacious hate of fortune, hate
Of all things in, under, and above earth.
1800 Warfare, begun this mean unmanly mode,
Does best to end so,—gives earth spectacle
Of a brave fighter who succumbs to odds

¹ See note to I 307.

² offset, compensate for.

³ 1 John 4.1.

- That turn defeat to victory. Stab, I fold
My mantle round me! Rome approves my act:
1805 Applauds the blow which costs me life but keeps
My honour spotless: Rome would praise no more
Had I fallen, say, some fifteen years ago,
Helping Vienna when our Aretines
Flocked to Duke Charles and fought Turk Mustafa;¹
- 1810 Nor would you two be trembling o'er my corpse
With all this exquisite solicitude.
Why is it that I make such suit to live?
The popular sympathy that's round me now
Would break like bubble that o'er-domes a fly:
1815 Solid enough while he lies quiet there,
But let him want the air and ply the wing,
Why, it breaks and bespatters him, what else?
Cardinal, if the Pope had pardoned me,
And I walked out of prison through the crowd,
1820 It would not be your arm I should dare press!
Then, if I got safe to my place again,
How sad and sapless were the years to come!
I go my old ways and find things grown grey;
You priests leer at me, old friends look askance,
1825 The mob's in love, I'll wager, to a man,
With my poor young good beauteous murdered wife:
For hearts require instruction how to beat,
And eyes, on warrant of the story, wax
Wanton² at portraiture in white and black
1830 Of dead Pompilia gracing ballad-sheet,

¹ "In 1683 Duke Charles of Lorraine was one of the leaders assisting John Sobieski when he marched to relieve Vienna from the siege of the Turks" (Hodell).

² gloat.

- Which eyes, lived she unmurdered and unsung,
Would never turn though she paced street as bare
As the mad penitent ladies do in France.
My brothers quietly would edge me out
1835 Of use and management of things called mine;
Do I command? "You stretched command before!"
Show anger? "Anger little helped you once!"
Advise? "How managed you affairs of old?"
My very mother, all the while they gird,¹
1840 Turns eye up, gives confirmatory groan;
For unsuccess, explain it how you will,
Disqualifies you, makes you doubt yourself,
—Much more, is found decisive by your friends.
Beside, am I not fifty years of age?
1845 What new leap would a life take, checked like mine
I' the spring at outset? Where's my second chance?
Ay, but the babe ... I had forgot my son,²
My heir! Now for a burst of gratitude!
There's some appropriate service to intone,
1850 Some *gaudeamus*³ and thanksgiving-psalm!
Old, I renew my youth in him, and poor
Possess a treasure,—is not that the phrase?
Only I must wait patient twenty years—
Nourishing all the while, as father ought,
1855 The excrescence with my daily blood of life.
Does it respond to hope, such sacrifice,—
Grows the wen plump while I myself grow lean?
Why, here's my son and heir in evidence,

¹ taunt, gibe.

² In the following passage, contrast Arcangel's view of the father-son relationship.

³ let us rejoice.

- Who stronger, wiser, handsomer than I
1860 By fifty years, relieves me of each load,—
Tames my hot horse, carries my heavy gun,
Courts my coy mistress,—has his apt advice
On house-economy, expenditure,
And what not. All which good gifts and great growth
1865 Because of my decline, he brings to bear
On Guido, but half apprehensive how
He cumbers earth, crosses the brisk young Count,
Who civilly would thrust him from the scene.
Contrariwise, does the blood-offering fail?
1870 There's an ineptitude, one blank the more
Added to earth in semblance of my child?
Then, this has been a costly piece of work,
My life exchanged for his!—why he, not I,
Enjoy the world, if no more grace accrue?
1875 Dwarf me, what giant have you made of him?
I do not dread the disobedient son:
I know how to suppress rebellion there,
Being not quite the fool my father was.
But grant the medium measure of a man,
1880 The usual compromise 'twixt fool and sage,
—You know—the tolerably-obstinate,
The not-so-much-perverse but you may train,
The true son-servant that, when parent bids¹
“Go work, son, in my vineyard!” makes reply
1885 “I go, Sir!”—Why, what profit in your son
Beyond the drudges you might subsidize,
Have the same work from, at a paul the head?
Look at those four young precious olive-plants
Reared at Vittiano,—not on flesh and blood,

¹ Matthew 21.28–30.

- 1890 These twenty years, but black bread and sour wine!
I bade them put forth tender branch, hook, hold,
And hurt three enemies I had in Rome:
They did my hest as reluctantly,
At promise of a dollar, as a son
- 1895 Adjured by mumping memories of the past.
No, nothing repays youth expended so—
Youth, I say, who am young still: grant but leave
To live my life out, to the last I'd live
And die conceding age no right of youth!
- 1900 It is the will runs the renewing nerve
Through flaccid flesh that faints before the time.
Therefore no sort of use for son have I—
Sick, not of life's feast but of steps to climb
To the house where life prepares her feast,—of means
- 1905 To the end: for make the end attainable
Without the means,—my relish were like yours.
A man may have an appetite enough
For a whole dish of robins ready cooked,
And yet lack courage to face sleet, pad snow,
- 1910 And snare sufficiently for supper.

Thus

- The time's arrived when, ancient Roman-like,
I am bound to fall on my own sword: why not
Say—Tuscan-like, more ancient, better still?
1915 Will you hear truth can do no harm nor good?
I think I never was at any time
A Christian, as you nickname all the world,
Me among others: truce to nonsense now!
Name me, a primitive religionist—
- 1920 As should the aboriginary be
I boast myself, Etruscan, Aretine,

- One sprung,—your frigid Virgil's fieriest word,—¹
 From fauns and nymphs, trunks and the heart of oak,
 With,—for a visible divinity,—
- 1925 The portent of a Jove Aegiochus²
 Descried 'mid clouds, lightning and thunder, couched
 On topmost crag of your Capitoline:
 'T is in the Seventh *Aeneid*,—what, the Eighth?
 Right,—thanks, Abate,—though the Christian's dumb,
- 1930 The Latinist's vivacious in you yet!
 I know my grandsire had our tapestry
 Marked with the motto, 'neath a certain shield,
 Whereto his grandson presently will give gules³
 To vary azure. First we fight for faiths,
- 1935 But get to shake hands at the last of all:
 Mine's your faith too,—in Jove Aegiochus!
 Nor do Greek gods, that serve as supplement,
 Jar with the simpler scheme, if understood.
 We want such intermediary race
- 1940 To make communication possible;
 The real thing were too lofty, we too low,
 Midway hang these: we feel their use so plain
 In linking height to depth, that we doff hat
 And put no question nor pry narrowly
- 1945 Into the nature hid behind the names.
 We grudge no rite the fancy may demand;
 But never, more than needs, invent, refine,
 Improve upon requirement, idly wise

¹ It is "indigenae" (*Aeneid* 8.314).

² the bearer of a goatskin breastplate (*Aeneid* 8.352–55). Guido's mistake below may be a diplomatic error of the same kind that Caponsacchi's friends recommended that he make—VI 1751–53.

³ red (in heraldry).

- Beyond the letter, teaching gods their trade,
 1950 Which is to teach us: we'll obey when taught.
 Why should we do our duty past the need?
 When the sky darkens, Jove is wroth,—say prayer!
 When the sun shines and Jove is glad,—sing psalm!¹
 But wherefore pass prescription and devise
 1955 Blood-offering for sweat-service, lend the rod
 A pungency through pickle of our own?
 Learned Abate,—no one teaches you
 What Venus means and who's Apollo here!
 I spare you, Cardinal,—but, though you wince,
 1960 You know me, I know you, and both know that!
 So, if Apollo bids us fast, we fast:
 But where does Venus order we stop sense²
 When Master Pietro³ rhymes a pleasantry?⁴
 Give alms prescribed on Friday: but, hold hand
 1965 Because your foe lies prostrate,—where's the word
 Explicit in the book debars revenge?
 The rationale of your scheme is just
 "Pay toll here, there pursue your pleasure free!"
 So do you turn to use the medium-powers,⁵
 1970 Mars and Minerva, Bacchus and the rest,
 And so are saved propitiating—whom?
 What all-good, all-wise and all-potent Jove
 Vexed by the very sins in man, himself
 Made life's necessity when man he made?

¹ This, in a nutshell, is the anthropomorphic theism vented by the title character in Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos," published in 1864.

² close our ears or eyes.

³ Pietro Aretino. See note to IX 1204.

⁴ salacious poem.

⁵ intercessory gods, the "intermediary race" of I. 1939.

- 1975 Irrational bunglers! So, the living truth
 Revealed to strike Pan dead,¹ ducks low at last,
 Prays leave to hold its own and live good days²
 Provided it go masque grotesquely, called
 Christian not Pagan. Oh, you purged the sky
- 1980 Of all gods save the One, the great and good,
 Clapped hands and triumphed! But the change came fast:
 The inexorable need in man for life—
 (Life, you may mulct³ and diminish to a grain
 Out of the lump, so that the grain but live)
- 1985 Laughed at your substituting death for life,
 And bade you do your worst: which worst was done
 In just that age styled primitive and pure
 When Saint this, Saint that, dutifully starved,
 Froze, fought with beasts, was beaten and abused
- 1990 And finally ridded of his flesh by fire:
 He kept life-long unspotted from the world!⁴
 Next age, how goes the game, what mortal gives
 His life and emulates Saint that, Saint this?
 Men mutter, make excuse or mutiny,
- 1995 In fine are minded all to leave the new,
 Stick to the old,—enjoy old liberty,
 No prejudice in enjoyment, if you please,
 To the new profession: sin o' the sly, henceforth!
 The law stands though the letter kills: what then?

¹ According to legend, during the reign of Tiberius—perhaps at the very moment of the crucifixion—voyagers at sea between Greece and Italy heard a voice from shore proclaiming that Pan was dead (Plutarch, *De Oracularum Defectu* 17).

² Psalms 34.12; 1 Peter 3.10.

³ reduce (by deprivation, punishment).

⁴ James 1.27.

- 2000 The spirit saves as unmistakeably.
Omniscience sees, Omnipotence could stop,
Omnibenevolence pardons: it must be,
Frown law its fiercest, there's a wink somewhere!
- 2005 Such was the logic in this head of mine:
2005 I, like the rest, wrote "poison" on my bread,
But broke and ate:—said "Those that use the sword
Shall perish by the same;"¹ then stabbed my foe.
I stand on solid earth, not empty air:
Dislodge me, let your Pope's crook hale me hence!
- 2010 Not he, nor you! And I so pity both,
I'll make the true charge you want wit to make:
"Count Guido, who reveal our mystery,"²
And trace all issues to the love of life:
We having life to love and guard, like you,
- 2015 Why did you put us upon self-defence?
You well knew what prompt pass-word would appease
The sentry's ire when folk infringed his bounds,
And yet kept mouth shut: do you wonder then
If, in mere decency, he shot you dead?
- 2020 He can't have people play such pranks as yours
Beneath his nose at noonday: you disdained
To give him an excuse before the world
By crying 'I break rule to save our camp!'
Under the old rule, such offence were death;
- 2025 And you had heard the Pontifex pronounce
'Since you slay foe and violate the form,
Slaying turns murder, which were sacrifice

¹ Matthew 26.52.

² tricks of the trade.

Had you, while, say, law-suiting foe to death,
But raised an altar to the Unknown God¹

2030 Or else the Genius of the Vatican.'

Why then this pother?—all because the Pope,
Doing his duty, cried 'A foreigner,

You scandalize the natives: here at Rome

Romano vivitur more?² wise men, here,

2035 Put the Church forward and efface themselves.

The fit defence had been,—you stamped on wheat,

Intending all the time to trample tares,—

Were fain extirpate, then, the heretic,

You now find, in your haste was slain a fool:

2040 Nor Pietro, nor Violante, nor your wife

Meant to breed up your babe a Molinist!

Whence you are duly contrite. Not one word

Of all this wisdom did you urge: which slip

Death must atone for."

2045 So, let death atone!

So ends mistake, so end mistakers!—end

Perhaps to recommence,—how should I know?

Only, be sure, no punishment, no pain

Childish, preposterous, impossible,

2050 But some such fate as Ovid could foresee,—³

Byblis in fluvium, let the weak soul end

In water, *sed Lycaon in lupum*, but

The strong become a wolf for evermore!

Change that Pompilia to a puny stream

¹ Acts 17.23.

² "when in Rome, do as the Romans do."

³ The tearful Byblis, in love with her own brother, was transformed into a fountain (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.663–65). The cruel Lycaon was turned into a wolf.

- 2055 Fit to reflect the daisies on its bank!
Let me turn wolf, be whole, and sate, for once,—
Wallow in what is now a wolfishness
Coerced¹ too much by the humanity
That's half of me as well! Grow out of man,
2060 Glut the wolf-nature,—what remains but grow
Into the man again, be man indeed
And all man? Do I ring the changes right?
Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed,
conformed!²
- The honest instinct, pent and crossed³ through life,
2065 Let surge by death into a visible flow
Of rapture: as the strangled thread of flame
Painfully winds, annoying and annoyed,
Malignant and maligned, thro' stone and ore,
Till earth exclude the stranger:⁴ vented once,
2070 It finds full play, is recognized a-top
Some mountain as no such abnormal birth,
Fire for the mount, not streamlet for the vale!
Ay, of the water was that wife of mine—
Be it for good, be it for ill, no run
- 2075 O' the red thread through that insignificance!
Again, how she is at me with those eyes!
Away with the empty stare! Be holy still,
And stupid ever! Occupy your patch
Of private snow that's somewhere in what world
2080 May now be growing icy round your head,

¹ restrained, curbed.

² "And be not conformed to the world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12.2).

³ dammed up.

⁴ alien element.

- And aguish at your foot-print,—freeze not me,
Dare follow not another step I take,
Not with so much as those detested eyes,
No, though they follow but to pray me pause
2085 On the incline, earth's edge that's next to hell!
None of your abnegation of revenge!
Fly at me frank, tug while I tear again!
There's God, go tell Him, testify your worst!
Not she! There was no touch in her of hate:
2090 And it would prove her hell, if I reached mine!
To know I suffered, would still sadden her,
Do what the angels might to make amends!
Therefore there's either no such place as hell,
Or thence shall I be thrust forth, for her sake,
2095 And thereby undergo three hells, not one—
I who, with outlet for escape to heaven,
Would tarry if such flight allowed my foe
To raise his head, relieved of that firm foot
Had pinned him to the fiery pavement else!
2100 So am I made, "who did not make myself":¹
(How dared she rob my own lip of the word?)
Beware me in what other world may be!—
Pompilia, who have brought me to this pass!
All I know here, will I say there, and go
2105 Beyond the saying with the deed. Some use
There cannot but be for a mood like mine,
Implacable, persistent in revenge.
She maundered "All is over and at end:
I go my own road, go you where God will!
2110 Forgive you! I forget you!" There's the saint
That takes your taste, you other kind of men!

¹ See VII 1731.

- How you had loved her! Guido wanted skill
To value such a woman at her worth!
Properly the instructed criticize
2115 "What's here, you simpleton have tossed to take
Its chance i' the gutter? This a daub, indeed?
Why, 't is a Rafael that you kicked to rags!"
Perhaps so: some prefer the pure design:
Give me my gorge of colour, glut of gold
2120 In a glory round the Virgin made for me!
Titian's the man, not Monk Angelico
Who traces you some timid chalky ghost
That turns the church into a charnel:¹ ay,
Just such a pencil might depict my wife!
- 2125 She,—since she, also, would not change herself,—
Why could not she come in some heart-shaped cloud,
Rainbowed about with riches, royalty
Rimming her round, as round the tintless lawn
Guardingly runs the selvage cloth of gold?
- 2130 I would have left the faint fine gauze untouched,
Needle-worked over with its lily and rose,
Let her bleach unmolested in the midst,
Chill that selected solitary spot
Of quietude she pleased to think was life.
- 2135 Purity, pallor grace the lawn no doubt
When there's the costly bordure to unthread
And make again an ingot: but what's grace
When you want² meat and drink and clothes and fire?
A tale comes to my mind that's apposite—
- 2140 Possibly true, probably false, a truth
Such as all truths we live by, Cardinal!

¹ house where dead bodies are piled.

² lack.

- 'T is said, a certain ancestor of mine
Followed—*whoever was the potentate,*
To Paynimrie,¹ and in some battle, broke
2145 Through more than due allowance of the foe,
And, risking much his own life, saved the lord's.
Battered and bruised, the Emperor scrambles up,
Rubs his eyes and looks round and sees my sire,
Picks a furze-sprig from out his hauberk-joint,
2150 (Token how near the ground went majesty)
And says "Take this, and if thou get safe home,
Plant the same in thy garden-ground to grow:
Run thence an hour in a straight line, and stop:
Describe a circle round (for central point)
2155 The furze aforesaid, reaching every way
The length of that hour's run: I give it thee,—
The central point, to build a castle there,
The space circumjacent,² for fit demesne,³
The whole to be thy children's heritage,—
2160 Whom, for thy sake, bid thou wear furze on cap!"
Those are my arms: we turned the furze a tree
To show more, and the greyhound tied thereto,
Straining to start, means swift and greedy both;
He stands upon a triple mount of gold—
2165 By Jove, then, he's escaping from true gold
And trying to arrive at empty air!
Aha! the fancy never crossed my mind!
My father used to tell me, and subjoin
"As for the castle, that took wings and flew:
2170 The broad lands,—why, to traverse them to-day

¹ heathen land.

² surrounding.

³ estate.

- Scarce tasks my gouty feet, and in my prime
 I doubt not I could stand and spit so far:
 But for the furze, boy, fear no lack of that,
 So long as fortune leaves one field to grub!
- 2175 Wherefore, hurra for furze and loyalty!"
 What may I mean, where may the lesson lurk?
 "Do not bestow on man, by way of gift,
 Furze without land for framework,—vaunt no grace
 Of purity, no furze-sprig of a wife,
- 2180 To me, i' the thick of battle for my bread,
 Without some better dowry,—gold will do!"
 No better gift than sordid muck? Yes, Sirs!
 Many more gifts much better. Give them me!
 O those Olimpias bold, those Biancas brave,¹
- 2185 That brought a husband power worth Ormuz² wealth!
 Cried "Thou being mine, why, what but thine am I?
 Be thou to me law, right, wrong, heaven and hell!
 Let us blend souls, blent, thou in me, to bid
 Two bodies work one pleasure! What are these
- 2190 Called king, priest, father, mother, stranger, friend?
 They fret thee or they frustrate? Give the word—
 Be certain they shall frustrate nothing more!
 And who is this young florid foolishness
 That holds thy fortune in his pigmy clutch,
- 2195 —Being a prince and potency, forsooth!—
 He hesitates to let the trifle go?
 Let me but seal up eye, sing ear to sleep
 Sounder than Samson,³—pounce thou on the prize
 Shall slip from off my breast, and down couch-side,

¹ heroines of Italian romance.

² diamond market on an island at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

³ Judges 16.6–20.

- 2200 And on to floor, and far as my lord's feet—
 Where he stands in the shadow with the knife,
 Waiting to see what Delilah dares do!
 Is the youth fair? What is a man to me
 Who am thy call-bird?¹ Twist his neck—my dupe's,—
 2205 Then take the breast shall turn a breast indeed!"
 Such women are there; and they marry whom?
 Why, when a man has gone and hanged himself
 Because of what he calls a wicked wife,—
 See, if the very turpitude bemoaned
 2210 Prove not mere excellence the fool ignores!
 His monster is perfection,—Circe,² sent
 Straight from the sun, with wand the idiot blames
 As not an honest distaff³ to spin wool!
 O thou Lucrezia,⁴ is it long to wait
 2215 Yonder where all the gloom is in a glow
 With thy suspected presence?—virgin yet,
 Virtuous again, in face of what's to teach—
 Sin unimagined, unimaginable,—
 I come to claim my bride,—thy Borgia's self
 2220 Not half the burning bridegroom I shall be!
 Cardinal, take away your crucifix!
 Abate, leave my lips alone,—they bite!
 Vainly you try to change what should not change,
 And shall not. I have bared, you bathe my heart—
 2225 It grows the stonier for your saving dew!

¹ decoy bird.

² the sorceress in the *Odyssey* 10.237–396, daughter of Helios (the sun), who turned Odysseus's companions into swine with her wand.

³ (genuine) staff used by women in spinning.

⁴ Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI, formerly credited with "picturesque crimes" and sexual licentiousness but now rehabilitated by historians.

You steep the substance, you would lubricate,
In waters that but touch to petrify!

You too are petrifactions of a kind:

Move not a muscle that shows mercy. Rave

2230 Another twelve hours, every word were waste!

I thought you would not slay impenitence,

But teased, from men you slew, contrition first,—

I thought you had a conscience. Cardinal,

You know I am wronged!—wronged, say, and wronged,
maintain.

2235 Was this strict inquisition made for blood

When first you showed us scarlet on your back,

Called to the College? Your straightforward way

To your legitimate end,—I think it passed

Over a scantling¹ of heads brained, hearts broke,

2240 Lives trodden into dust! How otherwise?

Such was the way o' the world, and so you walked.

Does memory haunt your pillow? Not a whit.

God wills you never pace your garden-path,

One appetizing hour ere dinner-time,

2245 But your intrusion there treads out of life

A universe of happy innocent things:

Feel you remorse about that damsel-fly²

Which buzzed so near your mouth and flapped your face?

You blotted it from being at a blow:

2250 It was a fly, you were a man, and more,

Lord of created things, so took your course.

Manliness, mind,—these are things fit to save,

Fit to brush fly from: why, because I take

¹ beam of wood, trestle.

² dragonfly.

- My course, must needs the Pope kill me?—kill you!
- 2255 You! for this instrument, he throws away,
Is strong to serve a master, and were yours
To have and hold and get much good from out!
The Pope who dooms me needs must die next year;
I'll tell you how the chances are supposed
- 2260 For his successor: first the Chamberlain,
Old San Cesario,—Colloredo, next,—
Then, one, two, three, four, I refuse to name;
After these, comes Altieri; then come you—
Seventh on the list you come, unless ... ha, ha,
- 2265 How can a dead hand give a friend a lift?
Are you the person to despise the help
O' the head shall drop in pannier presently?
So a child seesaws on or kicks away
The fulcrum-stone that's all the sage¹ requires
- 2270 To fit his lever to and move the world.
Cardinal, I adjure you in God's name,
Save my life, fall at the Pope's feet, set forth
Things your own fashion, not in words like these
Made for a sense like yours who apprehend!
- 2275 Translate into the Court-conventional
“Count Guido must not die, is innocent!
Fair, be assured! But what an he were foul,
Blood-drenched and murder-crusted head to foot?
Spare one whose death insults the Emperor,
- 2280 Nay, outrages the Louis you so love!²

¹ Archimedes (287–212 BC), Greek mathematician and engineer.

² There is some evidence that the Holy Roman Emperor attempted to exert his influence to spare Guido's life. It is doubtful whether his death would have “outraged” Louis XIV, with whom Innocent XII had entered a rapprochement (XII 82) after an initial period of Francophobia and who opposed the Empire. See the Venetian's statement, XII 110–12.

- He has friends who will avenge him; enemies
 Who will hate God now with impunity,
 Missing the old coercive:¹ would you send
 A soul straight to perdition, dying frank
 2285 An atheist?" Go and say this, for God's sake!
 —Why, you don't think I hope you'll say one word?
 Neither shall I persuade you from your stand
 Nor you persuade me from my station: take
 Your crucifix away, I tell you twice!
- 2290 Come, I am tired of silence! Pause enough.
 You have prayed: I have gone inside my soul
 And shut its door behind me: 't is your torch
 Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone
 Grows tolerable twilight: one may grope
 2295 And get to guess at length and breadth and depth.
 What is this fact I feel persuaded of—
 This something like a foothold in the sea,
 Although Saint Peter's bark scuds, billow-borne,²
 Leaves me to founder where it flung me first?
 2300 Spite of your splashing, I am high and dry!
 God takes his own part in each thing He made;
 Made for a reason, He conserves his work,
 Gives each its proper instinct of defence.
 My lamblike wife could neither bark nor bite,
 2305 She bleated, bleated, till for pity pure
 The village roused up, ran with pole and prong
 To the rescue, and behold the wolf's at bay!
 Shall he try bleating?—or take turn or two,
 Since the wolf owns some kinship with the fox,

¹ compelling force.

² Matthew 14.24–31.

- 2310 And, failing to escape the foe by craft,
 Give up attempt, die fighting quietly?
 The last bad blow that strikes fire in at eye
 And on to brain, and so out, life and all,
 How can it but be cheated of a pang
- 2315 If, fighting quietly, the jaws enjoy
 One re-embrace in mid back-bone they break,
 After their weary work thro' the foe's flesh?
 That's the wolf-nature. Don't mistake my trope!
 A Cardinal so qualmish? Eminence,
- 2320 My fight is figurative, blows i' the air,
 Brain-war with powers and principalities,¹
 Spirit-bravado, no real fisticuffs!
 I shall not presently, when the knock comes,
 Cling to this bench nor claw the hangman's face,
- 2325 No, trust me! I conceive worse lots than mine.
 Whether it be, the old contagious fit²
 And plague o' the prison have surprised me too,
 The appropriate drunkenness of the death-hour
 Crept on my sense, kind work o' the wine and
 myrrh,—³
- 2330 I know not,—I begin to taste my strength,
 Careless, gay even. What's the worth of life?
 The Pope's dead now, my murderous old man,
 For Tozzi⁴ told me so: and you, forsooth—
 Why, you don't think, Abate, do your best,
- 2335 You'll live a year more with that hacking cough
 And blotch of crimson where the cheek's a pit?

¹ a frequent phrase in the Pauline epistles.

² sudden attack of illness, with a suggestion of madness.

³ Mark 15.23.

⁴ See note to IX 1268.

Tozzi has got you also down in book!
 Cardinal, only seventh of seventy near,¹
 Is not one called Albano² in the lot?
 2340 Go eat your heart, you'll never be a Pope!
 Inform me, is it true you left your love,
 A Pucci, for promotion in the church?
 She's more than in the church,—in the churchyard!
 Plautilla Pucci, your affianced bride,
 2345 Has dust now in the eyes that held the love,—
 And Martinez,³ suppose they make you Pope,
 Stops that with *veto*,—so, enjoy yourself!
 I see you all reel to the rock, you waves—
 Some forthright, some describe a sinuous track,
 2350 Some, crested brilliantly, with heads above,
 Some in a strangled swirl sunk who knows how,
 But all bound whither the main-current sets,
 Rockward, an end in foam for all of you!
 What if I be o'ertaken, pushed to the front
 2355 By all you crowding smoother souls behind,
 And reach, a minute sooner than was meant,
 The boundary whereon I break to mist?
 Go to! the smoothest safest of you all,
 Most perfect and compact wave in my train,
 2360 Spite of the blue tranquillity above,
 Spite of the breadth before of lapsing peace
 Where broods the halcyon⁴ and the fish leaps free,
 Will presently begin to feel the prick

¹ the number of cardinals.

² In his last hours, Guido had the voice of prophecy; see note to XII 43.

³ the Emperor's ambassador to Rome.

⁴ kingfisher.

- At lazy heart, the push at torpid brain,
2365 Will rock vertiginously¹ in turn, and reel,
And, emulative, rush to death like me.
Later or sooner by a minute then,
So much for the untimeliness of death!
And, as regards the manner that offends,
2370 The rude and rough, I count the same for gain.
Be the act harsh and quick! Undoubtedly
The soul's condensed and, twice itself, expands
To burst thro' life, by alternation due,
Into the other state whate'er it prove.
2375 You never know what life means till you die:
Even throughout life, 't is death that makes life live,
Gives it whatever the significance.
For see, on your own ground and argument,
Suppose life had no death to fear, how find
2380 A possibility of nobleness
In man, prevented daring any more?
What's love, what's faith without a worst to dread?
Lack-lustre jewelry! but faith and love
With death behind them bidding do or die—
2385 Put such a foil at back, the sparkle's born!
From out myself how the strange colours come!
Is there a new rule in another world?
Be sure I shall resign myself: as here
I recognized no law I could not see,
2390 There, what I see, I shall acknowledge too:
On earth I never took the Pope for God,
In heaven I shall scarce take God for the Pope.
Unmanned, remanned: I hold it probable—

¹ dizzily.

With something changeless at the heart of me
2395 To know me by, some nucleus that's myself:
Accretions did it wrong? Away with them—
You soon shall see the use of fire!

Till when,

All that was, is; and must forever be.
2400 Nor is it in me to unhate my hates,—
I use up my last strength to strike once more
Old Pietro in the wine-house-gossip-face,
To trample underfoot the whine and wile
Of beast Violante,—and I grow one gorge
2405 To loathingly reject Pompilia's pale
Poison my hasty hunger took for food.
A strong tree wants no wreaths about its trunk,
No cloying cups, no sickly sweet of scent,
But sustenance at root, a bucketful.
2410 How else lived that Athenian¹ who died so,
Drinking hot bull's blood, fit for men like me?
I lived and died a man, and take man's chance,
Honest and bold: right will be done to such.

Who are these² you have let descend my stair?
2415 Ha, their accursed psalm!³ Lights at the sill!
Is it "Open" they dare bid you? Treachery!
Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while
Out of the world of words I had to say?
Not one word! All was folly—I laughed and mocked!

¹ Themistocles, the Athenian statesman who was rumored to have poisoned himself.

² the "Company of Death" (I 1311).

³ See note to I 1319.

2420 Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
Is—save me notwithstanding! Life is all!
I was just stark mad,—let the madman live
Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
2425 I am the Granduke's—no, I am the Pope's!
Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, ...
Pompilia, will you let them murder me?

THE BOOK AND THE RING

- HERE were the end, had anything an end:
 Thus, lit and launched, up and up roared and soared
 A rocket, till the key¹ o' the vault was reached
 And wide heaven held, a breathless minute-space,
 5 In brilliant usurpature:² thus caught spark,
 Rushed to the height, and hung at full of fame
 Over men's upturned faces, ghastly thence,
 Our glaring Guido: now decline must be.
 In its explosion, you have seen his act,
 10 By my power—may-be, judged it by your own,—
 Or composite as good orbs prove, or crammed
 With worse ingredients than the Wormwood Star.³
 The act, over and ended, falls and fades:
 What was once seen, grows what is now described,
 15 Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less
 In every fresh transmission; till it melts,
 Trickles in silent orange or wan grey
 Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark,
 And presently we find the stars again.
 20 Follow the main streaks, meditate the mode
 Of brightness, how it hastes to blend with black!

After that February Twenty-Two,
 Since our salvation, Sixteen-Ninety-Eight,
 Of all reports that were, or may have been,

¹ keystone in an arch, therefore the zenith of the rocket's trajectory.

² illegal possession or occupation.

³ Revelation 8.10–11.

- 25 Concerning those the day killed or let live,
 Four I count only. Take the first that comes.
 A letter¹ from a stranger, man of rank,
 Venetian visitor at Rome,—who knows,
 On what pretence of busy idleness?
 30 Thus he begins on evening of that day.

“Here are we at our end of Carnival;
 Prodigious gaiety and monstrous mirth,
 And constant shift of entertaining show:
 With influx, from each quarter of the globe,
 35 Of strangers nowise wishful to be last
 I’ the struggle for a good place presently
 When that befalls fate cannot long defer.
 The old Pope totters on the verge o’ the grave:
 You see, Malpichi² understood far more
 40 Than Tozzi³ how to treat the ailments: age,
 No question, renders these inveterate.⁴
 Cardinal Spada, actual Minister,
 Is possible Pope; I wager on his head,⁵
 Since those four entertainments of his niece
 45 Which set all Rome a-stare: Pope probably—
 Though Colloredo has his backers too,
 And San Cesario makes one doubt at times:
 Altieri will be Chamberlain at most.

[———]

¹ Browning’s invention; not in the Old Yellow Book.

² See note to VII 423.

³ See note to IX 1268.

⁴ incurable.

⁵ He lost; Innocent’s successor was Cardinal Albano, a dark horse. See XI 2339.

- A week ago the sun was warm like May,
- 50 And the old man took daily exercise
Along the river-side; he loves to see
That Custom-house he built upon the bank,
For, Naples born, his tastes are maritime:
But yesterday he had to keep in-doors
- 55 Because of the outrageous rain that fell.
On such days the good soul has fainting-fits,
Or lies in stupor, scarcely makes believe
Of minding business, fumbles at his beads.
They say, the trust that keeps his heart alive
- 60 Is that, by lasting till December next,
He may hold Jubilee a second time,
And, twice in one reign, ope the Holy Doors.
By the way, somebody responsible¹
Assures me that the King of France has writ
- 65 Fresh orders: Fénelon will be condemned:
The Cardinal makes a wry face enough,
Having a love for the delinquent: still,
He's the ambassador, must press the point.
Have you a wager too, dependent here?
- 70 Now, from such matters to divert awhile,
Hear of to-day's event which crowns the week,
Casts all the other wagers into shade.
Tell Dandolo I owe him fifty drops
Of heart's blood in the shape of gold zecchines!
- 75 The Pope has done his worst: I have to pay

¹ 63–68 Cardinal Bouillon (named in l. 112), Louis XIV's representative in Rome and dean of the College of Cardinals, incurred his royal master's displeasure by failing to press for Fénelon's condemnation. See note to VI 323.

- For the execution of the Count, by Jove!
 Two days since, I reported him as safe,
 Re-echoing the conviction of all Rome:
 Who could suspect its one deaf ear—the Pope's?
- 80 But prejudices grow insuperable,
 And that old enmity to Austria, that
 Passion for France and France's pageant-king¹
 (Of which, why pause to multiply the proofs
 Now scandalously rife in Europe's mouth?)
- 85 These fairly got the better in our man
 Of justice, prudence, and *esprit de corps*,
 And he persisted in the butchery.
 Also, 't is said that in his latest walk
 To that Dogana-by-the-Bank² he built,
- 90 The crowd,—he suffers question, unrebuked,—
 Asked, 'Whether murder was a privilege
 Only reserved for nobles like the Count?'
 And he was ever mindful of the mob.
 Martinez, the Caesarian Minister,³
- 95 —Who used his best endeavours to spare blood,
 And strongly pleaded for the life 'of one,'
 Urged he, 'I may have dined at table with!—
 He will not soon forget the Pope's rebuff,
 —Feels the slight sensibly, I promise you!
- 100 And but for the dissuasion of two eyes
 That make with him foul weather or fine day,
 He had abstained, nor graced the spectacle:
 As it was, barely would he condescend

¹ See note to XI 2270–80.

² custom house.

³ the ambassador from Austria (the Holy Roman Empire, dominated by the Habsburgs).

Look forth from the *palchetto*¹ where he sat

105 Under the Pincian:² we shall hear of this.

The substituting, too, the People's Square

For the out-o'-the-way old quarter by the Bridge,

Was meant as a conciliatory sop

To the mob; it gave one holiday the more.

110 But the French Embassy might unfurl flag,—

Still the good luck of France to fling a foe!

Cardinal Bouillon triumphs properly.

Palchetti were erected in the Place,

And houses, at the edge of the Three Streets,

115 Let their front windows at six dollars each:

Anguisciola, that patron of the arts,

Hired one; our Envoy Contarini too.

Now for the thing; no sooner the decree

Gone forth,—'t is four-and-twenty hours ago,—

120 Than Acciaiuoli and Panciatichi,

Old friends, indeed compatriots of the man,

Being pitched on as the couple properst

To intimate the sentence yesternight,

Were closeted ere cock-crow with the Count.

125 They both report their efforts to dispose

The unhappy nobleman for ending well,

Despite the natural sense of injury,

Were crowned at last with a complete success.

And when the Company of Death arrived

130 At twenty-hours,—the way they reckon here,—

We say, at sunset, after dinner-time,—

The Count was led down, hoisted up on car,

¹ grandstand.

² See note to I 358.

- Last of the five, as heinousest, you know:
 Yet they allowed one whole car to each man.
- 135 His intrepidity, nay, nonchalance,
 As up he stood and down he sat himself,
 Struck admiration into those who saw.
 Then the procession started, took the way
 From the New Prisons by the Pilgrim's Street,
- 140 The street of the Governo, Pasquin's Street,¹
 (Where was stuck up, 'mid other epigrams,
 A quatrain ... but of all that, presently!)
 The Place Navona, the Pantheon's Place,
 Place of the Column, last the Corso's length,
- 145 And so debouched thence at Mannaia's foot
 I' the Place o' the People. As is evident,
 (Despite the malice,—plainly meant, I fear,
 By this abrupt change of locality,—
 The Square's no such bad place to head and hang)
- 150 We had the titillation as we sat
 Assembled, (quality in conclave, ha?)
 Of, minute after minute, some report
 How the slow show was winding on its way.
 Now did a car run over, kill a man,
- 155 Just opposite a pork-shop numbered Twelve:
 And bitter were the outcries of the mob
 Against the Pope: for, but that he forbids
 The Lottery, why, Twelve were Tern Quatern!²
 Now did a beggar by Saint Agnes, lame

¹ See note to VI 1659.

² In the lottery, bets could be staked on three out of five numbers drawn (*terno*) or on four out of the five (*quaterno*). The fact that three times four equals twelve seemed, under the circumstances, a hot tip.

- 160 From his youth up, recover use of leg,
Through prayer of Guido as he glanced that way:
So that the crowd near crammed his hat with coin.
Thus was kept up excitement to the last,
—Not an abrupt out-bolting, as of yore,
165 From Castle, over Bridge and on to block,
And so all ended ere you well could wink!

- To mount the scaffold-steps, Guido was last
Here also, as atrociousest in crime.
We hardly noticed how the peasants died,
170 They dangled somehow soon to right and left,
And we remained all ears and eyes, could give
Ourselves to Guido undividedly,
As he harangued the multitude beneath.
He begged forgiveness on the part of God,
175 And fair construction of his act from men,
Whose suffrage¹ he entreated for his soul,
Suggesting that we should forthwith repeat
A *Pater* and an *Ave*, with the hymn
Salve Regina Coeli,² for his sake.
180 Which said, he turned to the confessor, crossed
And reconciled himself, with decency,
Oft glancing at Saint Mary's opposite,
Where they possess, and showed in shrine to-day,
The blessed *Umbilicus*³ of our Lord,
185 (A relic 't is believed no other church
In Rome can boast of)—then rose up, as brisk

¹ intercessory prayer.

² Hail, Queen of Heaven.

³ navel.

Knelt down again, bent head, adapted neck,
 And, with the name of Jesus on his lips,¹
 Received the fatal blow.

190

The headsman showed
 The head to the populace. Must I avouch
 We strangers own to disappointment here?
 Report pronounced him fully six feet high,
 Youngish, considering his fifty years,
 195 And, if not handsome, dignified at least.
 Indeed, it was no face to please a wife!
 His friends say, this was caused by the costume:
 He wore the dress he did the murder in,
 That is, a *just-a-corps*² of russet serge,
 200 Black camisole,³ coarse cloak of baracan
 (So they style here the garb of goat's-hair cloth)
 White hat and cotton cap beneath, poor Count,
 Preservative against the evening dews
 During the journey from Arezzo. Well,
 205 So died the man, and so his end was peace;⁴
 Whence many a moral were to meditate.
 Spada,—you may bet Dandolo,—is Pope!
 Now for the quatrain!"

No, friend, this will do!

210 You've sputtered into sparks. What streak comes next?

¹ so died the martyred St. Stephen (Acts 7.59).

² close-fitting body coat reaching to the knees.

³ jacket.

⁴ "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace" (Psalms 37.37).

- A letter:¹ Don Giacinto Arcangeli,
 Doctor and Proctor, him I made you mark
 Buckle to business in his study late,
 The virtuous sire, the valiant for the truth,²
- 215 Acquaints his correspondent,—Florentine,
 By name Cencini, advocate as well,
*Socius*³ and brother-in-the-devil to match,—
 A friend of Franceschini, anyhow,
 And knit up with the bowels of the case,—
- 220 Acquaints him, (in this paper that I touch)
 How their joint effort to obtain reprieve
 For Guido had so nearly nicked the nine
 And ninety and one over,—folk would say
 At Tarocs,⁴—or succeeded,—in our phrase.
- 225 To this Cencini's care I owe the Book,
 The yellow thing I take and toss once more,—
 How will it be, my four-years'-intimate,
 When thou and I part company anon?—
 'T was he, the "whole position of the case,"
- 230 Pleading and summary, were put before;
 Discreetly in my Book he bound them all,
 Adding some three epistles to the point.
 Here is the first of these, part fresh as penned,
 The sand, that dried the ink, not rubbed away,
- 235 Though penned the day whereof it tells the deed:
 Part—extant just as plainly, you know where,

¹ This one, except for the postscript, is found in the Old Yellow Book; Browning has somewhat expanded and paraphrased the original.

² the name of one of Christian's companions in the second part of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

³ colleague.

⁴ See note to VI 349.

Whence came the other stuff, went, you know how,
To make the Ring that's all but round and done.

- “Late they arrived, too late, egregious¹ Sir,
240 Those same justificative points you urge
Might benefit His Blessed Memory
Count Guido Franceschini now with God:
Since the Court,—to state things succinctly,—styled
The Congregation of the Governor,
245 Having resolved on Tuesday last our cause
I’ the guilty sense, with death for punishment,
Spite of all pleas by me deducible
In favour of said Blessed Memory,—
I, with expenditure of pains enough,
250 Obtained a respite, leave to claim and prove
Exemption from the law’s award,—alleged
The power and privilege o’ the Clericate:
To which effect a courier was despatched.
But ere an answer from Arezzo came,
255 The Holiness of our Lord the Pope (prepare!)
Judging it inexpedient to postpone
The execution of such sentence passed,
Saw fit, by his particular cheiograph,²
To derogate, dispense with privilege,
260 And wink at any hurt accruing thence
To Mother Church through damage of her son:
Also, to overpass and set aside
That other plea on score of tender age,

¹ distinguished.

² a formal written document.

- Put forth by me to do Pasquini good,
 265 One of the four in trouble with our friend.
 So that all five, to-day, have suffered death
 With no distinction save in dying,—he,
 Decollate by mere due of privilege,
 The rest hanged decently and in order.¹ Thus
 270 Came the Count to his end of gallant man,
 Defunct in faith and exemplarity:²
 Nor shall the shield of his great House lose shine
 Thereby, nor its blue banner blush to red.
 This, too, should yield sustainment to our hearts—
 275 He had commiseration and respect
 In his decease from universal Rome,
Quantum est hominum venustiorum,
 The nice and cultivated everywhere:
 Though, in respect of me his advocate,
 280 Needs must I groan o'er my debility,³
 Attribute the untoward event o' the strife
 To nothing but my own crass ignorance
 Which failed to set the valid reasons forth,
 Find fit excuse: such is the fate of war!
 285 May God compensate us the direful blow
 By future blessings on his family,
 Whereof I lowly beg the next commands;
 —Whereto, as humbly, I confirm myself ...”

[———]

¹ Beheading was reserved for the nobility; “the rest” had to make do with mere hanging.

² dead, firm in the faith and the model of Christian virtue.

³ inadequacy, with a possible overtone of the astrological meaning: “a weakness or diminution of influence [of a planet] due to unfavorable position” (*OED*).

And so forth,—follow name and place and date.

290 On next leaf—

“Hactenus senioribus!”¹

There, old fox, show the clients t' other side

And keep this corner sacred, I beseech!

You and your pleas and proofs were what folk call

295 Pisan assistance, aid that comes too late,

Saves a man dead as nail in post of door.

Had I but time and space for narrative!

What was the good of twenty Clericates

When Somebody's thick headpiece once was bent

300 On seeing Guido's drop into the bag?²

How these old men like giving youth a push!

So much the better: next push goes to him,

And a new Pope begins the century.

Much good I get by my superb defence!

305 But argument is solid and subsists,

While obstinacy and ineptitude

Accompany the owner to his tomb—

What do I care how soon? Beside, folk see!

Rome will have relished heartily the show,

310 Yet understood the motives, never fear,

Which caused the indecent change o' the People's Place

To the People's Playground,—stigmatize the spite

Which in a trice precipitated things!

As oft the moribund will give a kick

315 To show they are not absolutely dead,

So feebleness i' the socket shoots its last,

A spirit of violence for energy!

[————]

¹ down to this point, for the eyes of our clients.

² Browning ekes out one more play on “Caponsacchi.”

But thou, Cencini, brother of my breast,
 O fox whose home is 'mid the tender grape,¹
 320 Whose couch in Tuscany by Themis' throne,²
 Subject to no such ... best I shut my mouth
 Or only open it again to say,
 This pother and confusion fairly laid,
 My hands are empty and my satchel lank.
 325 Now then for both the Matrimonial Cause
 And the Case of Gomez!³ Serve them hot and hot!

*Reliqua differamus in crastinum!*⁴
 The impatient estafette⁵ cracks whip outside:
 Still, though the earth should swallow him who swears
 330 And me who make the mischief, in must slip—
 My boy, your godson, fat-chaps Hyacinth,
 Enjoyed the sight while Papa plodded here.
 I promised him, the rogue, a month ago,
 The day his birthday was, of all the days,
 335 That if I failed to save Count Guido's head,
 Cinuccio should at least go see it chopped
 From trunk—'So, latinize your thanks!' quoth I.
 'That I prefer, *hoc malim*,' raps me out
 The rogue: you notice the subjunctive? Ah!
 340 Accordingly he sat there, bold in box,
 Proud as the Pope behind the peacock-fans:
 Whereon a certain lady-patroness

¹ Song of Solomon 2.15.

² Themis was the goddess of justice, and Florence, not Rome—according to the discomfited Arcangeli—her chosen seat.

³ Had it materialized, it would have again pitted Arcangeli against Bottini; but see ll. 657–63.

⁴ put off the rest till tomorrow (Cicero, *De Re Publica* 2.44.4).

⁵ courier.

- For whom I manage things (my boy in front,
 Her Marquis sat the third in evidence;
- 345 Boys have no eyes nor ears save for the show)
 'This time, Cintino,' was her sportive word,
 When whiz and thump went axe and mowed lay man,
 And folk could fall to the suspended chat,
 'This time, you see, Bottini rules the roast,
- 350 Nor can Papa with all his eloquence
 Be reckoned on to help as heretofore!'
 Whereat Cinone pouts; then, sparkishly—
 'Papa knew better than aggrieve his Pope,
 And baulk him of his grudge against our Count,
- 355 Else he'd have argued-off Bottini's' ... what?
 'His nose,'—the rogue! well parried of the boy!
 He's long since out of Caesar (eight years old)
 And as for tripping in Eutropius¹ ... well,
 Reason the more that we strain every nerve
- 360 To do him justice, mould a model-mouth,
 A Bartolus-cum-Baldo² for next age:
 For that I purse the pieces, work the brain,
 And want both Gomez and the marriage-case,
 Success with which shall plaster aught of pate
- 365 That's broken in me by Bottini's flail,
 And bruise his own, belike, that wags and brags.
- Adverti supplico humiliter*
Quod,³ don't the fungus see, the fop divine
 That one hand drives two horses, left and right?
- 370 With this rein did I rescue from the ditch
 The fortune of our Franceschini, keep

¹ Roman historian, fourth century AD.

² See note to I 224.

³ I humbly beg it may be noted that.

- Unsplashed the credit of a noble House,
And set the fashionable cause at Rome
A-prancing till bystanders shouted "ware!"
- 375 The other rein's judicious management
Suffered old Somebody to keep the pace,
Hobblingly play the roadster:¹ who but he
Had his opinion, was not led by the nose
In leash of quibbles strung to look like law!
- 380 You'll soon see,—when I go to pay devoir
And compliment him on confuting me,—
If, by a back-swing of the pendulum,
Grace be not, thick and threefold, consequent.
'I must decide as I see proper, Don!
- 385 I'm Pope, I have my inward lights for guide.
Had learning been the matter in dispute,
Could eloquence avail to gainsay fact,
Yours were the victory, be comforted!'
Cinuzzo will be gainer by it all.
- 390 Quick then with Gomez, hot and hot next case!"
- Follows, a letter,² takes the other side.
Tall blue-eyed Fisc whose head is capped with cloud,
Doctor Bottini,—to no matter who,
Writes on the Monday two days afterward.
- 395 Now shall the honest championship of right,
Crowned with success, enjoy at last, unblamed,
Moderate triumph! Now shall eloquence
Poured forth in fancied floods for virtue's sake,
(The print is sorrowfully dyked and dammed,
- 400 But shows where fain the unbridled force would flow,

¹ horse for road travel.

² Browning's invention.

Finding a channel)—now shall this refresh
 The thirsty donor with a drop or two!
 Here has been truth at issue with a lie:
 Let who gained truth the day have handsome pride
 405 In his own prowess! Eh? What ails the man?

“Well, it is over, ends as I foresaw:
 Easily proved, Pompilia’s innocence!
 Catch them entrusting Guido’s guilt to me
 Who had, as usual, the plain truth to plead.
 410 I always knew the clearness of the stream
 Would show the fish so thoroughly, child might prong
 The clumsy monster: with no mud to splash,
 Small credit to lynx-eye and lightning-spear!
 This Guido,—(much sport he contrived to make,
 415 Who at first twist, preamble of the cord,
 Turned white, told all, like the poltroon he was!)—
 Finished, as you expect, a penitent,
 Fully confessed his crime, and made amends,
 And, edifying Rome last Saturday,
 420 Died like a saint, poor devil! That’s the man
 The gods still give to my antagonist:
 Imagine how Arcangeli claps wing
 And crows!¹ ‘Such formidable facts to face,
 So naked to attack, my client here,
 425 And yet I kept a month the Fisc at bay,
 And in the end had foiled him of the prize
 By this arch-stroke, this plea of privilege,
 But that the Pope must gratify his whim,
 Put in his word, poor old man,—let it pass!
 430 —Such is the cue to which all Rome responds.

¹ Compare what Arcangeli said of Bottini, VIII 237–40.

What with the plain truth given me to uphold,
 And, should I let truth slip, the Pope at hand
 To pick up, steady her on legs again,
 My office turns a *pleasantry*¹ indeed!

- 435 Not that the burly boaster did one jot
 O' the little was to do—young Spreti's work!
 But for him,—mannikin and dandiprat,²
 Mere candle-end and inch of cleverness
 Stuck on Arcangeli's save-all,³—but for him
 440 The spruce young Spreti, what is bad were worse!

I looked that Rome should have the natural gird
 At advocate with case that proves itself;
 I knew Arcangeli would grin and brag:
 But what say you to one impertinence

- 445 Might move a stone? That monk, you are to know,
 That barefoot Augustinian whose report
 O' the dying woman's words did detriment
 To my best points it took the freshness from,
 —That meddler preached to purpose yesterday
 450 At San Lorenzo as a winding-up
 O' the show which proved a treasure to the church.
 Out comes his sermon⁴ smoking from the press:
 Its text—‘Let God be true, and every man
 A liar’⁵—and its application, this
 455 The longest-winded of the paragraphs,
 I straight unstitch, tear out and treat you with:

¹ pleasure.

² youth.

³ a device to allow a candle to burn to the very end.

⁴ Browning's invention.

⁵ Romans 3.4.

"T is piping hot and posts through Rome to-day.
Remember it, as I engage to do!"

"But if you rather be disposed to see

- 460 In the result of the long trial here,—
This dealing doom to guilt and doling praise
To innocence,—any proof that truth
May look for vindication from the world,
Much will you have misread the signs, I say.
- 465 God, who seems acquiescent in the main
With those who add 'So will he ever sleep'—
Flutters their foolishness from time to time,
Puts forth His right-hand recognizably;
Even as, to fools who deem He needs must right
- 470 Wrong on the instant, as if earth were heaven,
He wakes remonstrance—'Passive, Lord, how long?'
Because Pompilia's purity prevails,
Conclude you, all truth triumphs in the end?
So might those old inhabitants of the ark,
- 475 Witnessing haply their dove's safe return,
Pronounce there was no danger, all the while
O' the deluge, to the creature's counterparts,
Aught that beat wing i' the world, was white or soft,—
And that the lark, the thrush, the culver¹ too,
- 480 Might equally have traversed air, found earth,
And brought back olive-branch in unharmed bill.
Methinks I hear the Patriarch's warning voice—
'Though this one breast, by miracle, return,
No wave rolls by, in all the waste, but bears
- 485 Within it some dead dove-like thing as dear,

¹ dove.

Beauty made blank and harmlessness destroyed!

How many chaste and noble sister-fames

Wanted the extricating hand, so lie

Strangled, for one Pompilia proud above

490 The welter, plucked from the world's calumny,

Stupidity, simplicity,—who cares?

Romans! An elder race possessed your land

Long ago, and a false faith lingered still,

As shades do, though the morning-star be out.

495 Doubtless some pagan of the twilight-day

Has often pointed to a cavern-mouth

Obnoxious to beholders, hard by Rome,

And said,—nor he a bad man, no, nor fool,

Only a man born blind like all his mates,—

500 'Here skulk in safety, lurk, defying law,

The devotees to execrable creed,

Adoring—with what culture ... Jove, avert

Thy vengeance from us worshippers of thee! ...

What rites obscene—their idol-god, an Ass!¹

505 So went the word forth, so acceptance found,

So century re-echoed century,

Cursed the accursed,—and so, from sire to son,

You Romans cried 'The offscourings of our race

Corrupt within the depths there: fitly fiends

510 Perform a temple-service o'er the dead:

Child, gather garment round thee, pass nor pry!

Thus groaned your generations: till the time

Grew ripe, and lightning had revealed, belike,—

¹ Early Roman opponents of the Christians maintained that they worshiped the ass.

- Thro' crevice peeped into by curious fear,—
- 515 Some object even fear could recognize
I' the place of spectres; on the illumined wall,
To-wit, some nook, tradition talks about,
Narrow and short, a corpse's length, no more:
And by it, in the due receptacle,
- 520 The little rude brown lamp of earthenware,
The cruse, was meant for flowers but now held blood,
The rough-scratched palm-branch, and the legend left
Pro Christo. Then the mystery lay clear:
The abhorred one was a martyr all the time,
- 525 Heaven's saint whereof earth was not worthy.¹ What?
Do you continue in the old belief?
Where blackness bides unbroke, must devils brood?
Is it so certain not another cell
O' the myriad that make up the catacomb
- 530 Contains some saint a second flash would show?
Will you ascend into the light of day
And, having recognized a martyr's shrine,
Go join the votaries that gape around
Each vulgar god that awes the market-place?
- 535 Are these the objects of your praising? See!
In the outstretched right hand of Apollo, there,
Lies screened a scorpion: housed amid the folds
Of Juno's mantle lurks a centipede!
Each statue of a god were fitlier styled
- 540 Demon and devil. Glorify no brass
That shines like burnished gold in noonday glare,
For fools! Be otherwise instructed, you!
And preferably ponder, ere ye judge,

¹ Hebrews 11.38.

- Each incident of this strange human play
545 Privily acted on a theatre
That seemed secure from every gaze but God's,—
Till, of a sudden, earthquake laid wall low
And let the world perceive wild work inside
And how, in petrifaction of surprise,
550 The actors stood,—raised arm and planted foot,—
Mouth as it made, eye as it evidenced,
Despairing shriek, triumphant hate,—transfixed,
Both he who takes and she who yields the life.

- As ye become spectators of this scene,
555 Watch obscuration of a pearl-pure fame
By vapoury films, enwoven circumstance,
—A soul made weak by its pathetic want
Of just the first apprenticeship to sin
Which thenceforth makes the sinning soul secure
560 From all foes save itself, soul's truest foe,—
Since egg turned snake needs fear no serpentry,—
As ye behold this web of circumstance
Deepen the more for every thrill and throe,
Convulsive effort to disperse the films
565 And disenmesh the fame o' the martyr,—mark
How all those means, the unfriended one pursues,
To keep the treasure trusted to her breast,
Each struggle in the flight from death to life,
How all, by procuration of the powers
570 Of darkness, are transformed,—no single ray,
Shot forth to show and save the inmost star,
But, passed as through hell's prism, proceeding black
To the world that hates white: as ye watch, I say,
Till dusk and such defacement grow eclipse
575 By,—marvellous perversity of man!—

- The inadequacy and inaptitude
 Of that self-same machine, that very law
 Man vaunts, devised to dissipate the gloom,
 Rescue the drowning orb from calumny,
- 580 —Hear law, appointed to defend the just,
 Submit, for best defence, that wickedness
 Was bred of flesh and innate with the bone
 Borne by Pompilia's spirit for a space,
 And no mere chance fault, passionate and brief:
- 585 Finally, when ye find,—after this touch
 Of man's protection which intends to mar
 The last pin-point of light and damn the disc,—
 One wave of the hand of God amid the worlds
 Bid vapour vanish, darkness flee away,
- 590 And let the vexed star culminate in peace
 Approachable no more by earthly mist—
 What I call God's hand,—you, perhaps,—mere chance
 Of the true instinct of an old good man
 Who happens to hate darkness and love light,—
- 595 In whom too was the eye that saw, not dim,¹
 The natural force to do the thing he saw,
 Nowise abated,—both by miracle,—
 All this well pondered,—I demand assent
 To the enunciation of my text
- 600 In face of one proof more that 'God is true
 And every man a liar'—that who trusts
 To human testimony for a fact
 Gets this sole fact—himself is proved a fool;
 Man's speech being false, if but by consequence
- 605 That only strength is true: while man is weak,

¹ "his [Moses's] eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deuteronomy 34.7).

And, since truth seems reserved for heaven not earth,
Plagued here by earth's prerogative of lies,
Should learn to love and long for what, one day,
Approved by life's probation, he may speak.

- 610 For me, the weary and worn, who haply prompt
To mirth or pity, as I move the mood,—
A friar who glides unnoticed to the grave,
With these bare feet, coarse robe and rope-girt waist,—
I have long since renounced your world, ye know:
- 615 Yet what forbids I weigh the prize forgone,
The worldly worth? I dare, as I were dead,
Disinterestedly judge this and that
Good ye account good: but God tries the heart.
Still, if you question me of my content
- 620 At having put each human pleasure by,
I answer, at the urgency of truth:
As this world seems, I dare not say I know
—Apart from Christ's assurance which decides—
Whether I have not failed to taste much joy.
- 625 For many a doubt will fain perturb my choice—
Many a dream of life spent otherwise—
How human love, in varied shapes, might work
As glory, or as rapture, or as grace:
How conversancy with the books that teach,
- 630 The arts that help,—how, to grow good and great,
Rather than simply good, and bring thereby
Goodness to breathe and live, nor, born i' the brain,
Die there,—how these and many another gift
Of life are precious though abjured by me.
- 635 But, for one prize, best meed of mightiest man,
Arch-object of ambition,—earthly praise,
Repute o' the world, the flourish of loud trump,

The softer social fluting,—Oh, for these,
 —No, my friends! Fame,—that bubble which, world-wide
 640 Each blows and bids his neighbour lend a breath,
 That so he haply may behold thereon
 One more enlarged distorted false fool's-face,
 Until some glassy nothing grown as big
 Send by a touch the imperishable to suds,—
 645 No, in renouncing fame, my loss was light,
 Choosing obscurity, my chance was well!"

"Didst ever touch such ampollosity¹
 As the monk's own bubble, let alone its spite?
 What's his speech for, but just the fame² he flouts?
 650 How he dares reprehend both high and low,
 Nor stoops to turn the sentence 'God is true
 And every man a liar—save the Pope
 Happily reigning—my respects to him!'
 And so round off the period. Molinism
 655 Simple and pure! To what pitch³ get we next?
 I find that, for first pleasant consequence,
 Gomez, who had intended to appeal
 From the absurd decision of the Court,
 Declines, though plain enough his privilege,
 660 To call on help from lawyers any more—

¹ from the medieval Latin, "ampullo," possibly by way of John Florio's Italian-English dictionary (1598), where it appears as "Ampollóse"—"bubbling, puffing or windie words without substance." Browning's version, after the Italian, the only recorded instance in English, is defined by the *OED* as "swollen or pretentious inanity; turgidity of language, bombast." Another of Browning's linguistic gems.

² reputation. Compare earlier uses of the bubble imagery.

³ place.

Resolves earth's liars may possess the world
 Till God have had sufficiency of both:
 So may I whistle for my job and fee!

But, for this virulent and rabid monk,—

- 665 If law be an inadequate machine,
 And advocacy, froth and impotence,
 We shall soon see, my blatant¹ brother! That's
 Exactly what I hope to show your sort!
 For, by a veritable piece of luck,
 670 The providence, you monks round period with,
 All may be gloriously retrieved. Perpend!²

That Monastery of the Convertites

Whereto the Court consigned Pompilia first,³

—Observe, if convertite, why, sinner then,

- 675 Or what's the pertinency of award?—
 And whither she was late returned to die,⁴
 —Still in their jurisdiction, mark again!—
 That thrifty Sisterhood, for perquisite,
 Claims every piece whereof may die possessed
 680 Each sinner in the circuit of its walls.
 Now, this Pompilia seeing that, by death
 O' the couple, all their wealth devolved on her,
 Straight utilized the respite ere decease,
 By regular conveyance of the goods
 685 She thought her own, to will and to devise,—
 Gave all to friends, Tighetti and the like,

¹ noisy.

² listen.

³ For the error here, see General Note 6 (p. 772).

⁴ For the error here, see note to I 1085.

- In trust for him she held her son and heir,
 Gaetano,—trust which ends with infancy:
 So willing and devising, since assured
- 690 The justice of the Court would presently
 Confirm her in her rights and exculpate,
 Re-integrate and rehabilitate—
 Place her as, through my pleading, now she stands.
 But here's the capital mistake: the Court
- 695 Found Guido guilty,—but pronounced no word
 About the innocence of his wife:
 I grounded charge on broader base, I hope!
 No matter whether wife be true or false,
 The husband must not push aside the law,
- 700 And punish of a sudden: that's the point:
 Gather from out my speech the contrary!
 It follows that Pompilia, unrelieved
 By formal sentence from imputed fault,
 Remains unfit to have and to dispose
- 705 Of property which law provides shall lapse.
 Wherefore the Monastery claims its due:
 And whose, pray, whose the office, but the Fisc's?¹
 Who but I institute procedure next
 Against the person of dishonest life,
- 710 Pompilia whom last week I sainted so?
 I it is teach the monk what scripture means,
 And that the tongue should prove a two-edged sword,²
 No axe sharp one side, blunt the other way,
 Like what amused the town at Guido's cost!

¹ 707–17 There is no evidence that the Convertites hired Bottini to press their claim that Pompilia was a “person of dishonest life,” though he was uniquely qualified to do so.

² Hebrews 4.12 (where it is “the word of God”).

- 715 *Astraea redux!*¹ I've a second chance
 Before the self-same Court o' the Governor
 Who soon shall see volte-face and chop,² change sides.
 Accordingly, I charge you on your life,
 Send me with all despatch the judgment late
- 720 O' the Florence Rota Court, confirmative
 O' the prior judgment at Arezzo, clenched
 Again by the Granducal signature,
 Wherein Pompilia is convicted, doomed,
 And only destined to escape through flight
- 725 The proper punishment. Send me the piece,—
 I'll work it! And this foul-mouthed friar shall find
 His Noah's-dove³ that brought the olive back
 Turn into quite the other sooty scout,
 The raven, Noah first put forth the ark,
- 730 Which never came back but ate carcasses!
 No adequate machinery in law?
 No power of life and death i' the learned tongue?
 Methinks I am already at my speech,
 Startle the world with 'Thou, Pompilia, thus?'
- 735 How is the fine gold⁴ of the Temple dim?
 And so forth. But the courier bids me close,
 And clip away one joke that runs through Rome,
 Side by side with the sermon which I send.
 How like the heartlessness of the old hunks⁵
- 740 Arcangeli! His Count is hardly cold,

¹ the goddess of justice, returned to earth (title of a poem by Dryden, 1660).

² shift, change course.

³ Compare X 748–52.

⁴ Lamentations 4.1.

⁵ disagreeable man.

- The client whom his blunders sacrificed,
 When somebody must needs describe the scene—
 How the procession ended at the church
 That boasts the famous relic: quoth our brute,
 745 'Why, that's just Martial's phrase for "make an end"—
Ad umbilicum sic perventum est!'¹
 The callous dog,—let who will cut off head,
 He cuts a joke and cares no more than so!
 I think my speech shall modify his mirth.
 750 'How is the fine gold dim!'—but send the piece!"

- Alack, Bottini, what is my next word
 But death to all hope? The Instrument²
 Is plain before me, print that ends my Book
 With the definitive verdict of the Court,
 755 Dated September, six months afterward,
 (Such trouble and so long the old Pope gave!)
 "In restitution of the perfect fame
 Of dead Pompilia, *quondam*³ Guido's wife,
 And warrant to her representative
 760 Domenico Tighetti, barred hereby,
 While doing duty in his guardianship,
 From all molesting, all disquietude,
 Each perturbation and vexation brought
 Or threatened to be brought against the heir
 765 By the Most Venerable Convent called

¹ a paraphrase of Martial, *Epigrammaton* 4.89.1–2, where *umbilicum* means a knob at the end of the roller to which a manuscript was attached; hence "an end."

² document.

³ formerly.

Saint Mary Magdalen o' the Convertites
I' the Corso."

Justice done a second time!

Well judged, Marc Antony, *Locum-tenens*¹

770 O' the Governor, a Venturini too!

For which I save thy name,—last of the list!

Next year but one, completing his nine years
Of rule in Rome, died Innocent my Pope
—By some account, on his accession-day.

775 If he thought doubt would do the next age good,
'T is pity he died unapprised what birth
His reign may boast of, be remembered by—
Terrible Pope, too, of a kind,—Voltaire.²

And so an end of all i' the story. Strain

780 Never so much my eyes, I miss the mark
If lived or died that Gaetano, child
Of Guido and Pompilia: only find,
Immediately upon his father's death,
A record, in the annals of the town—

785 That Porzia, sister of our Guido, moved
The Priors of Arezzo and their head
Its Gonfalonier³ to give loyally
A public attestation of the right
O' the Franceschini to all reverence—

790 Apparently because of the incident
O' the murder,—there's no mention made o' the crime,
But what else could have caused such urgency

¹ substitute.

² born 1694.

³ supreme head of state.

- To cure the mob, just then, of greediness
 For scandal, love of lying vanity,
 795 And appetite to swallow crude reports
 That bring annoyance to their betters?—bane
 Which, here, was promptly met by antidote.
 I like and shall translate the eloquence
 Of nearly the worst Latin ever writ:
 800 "Since antique time whereof the memory
 Holds the beginning, to this present hour,
 The Franceschini ever shone, and shine
 Still i' the primary rank, supreme amid
 The lustres of Arezzo, proud to own
 805 In this great family, the flag-bearer,
 Guide of her steps and guardian against foe,—
 As in the first beginning, so to-day!"
 There, would you disbelieve the annalist,
 Go rather by the babble of a bard?
 810 I thought, Arezzo, thou hadst fitter souls,
 Petrarch,¹—nay, Buonarroti² at a pinch,
 To do thee credit as *vexillifer!*³
 Was it mere mirth the Patavinian⁴ meant,
 Making thee out, in his veracious page,
 815 Founded by Janus of the Double Face?⁵

Well, proving of such perfect parentage,
 Our Gaetano, born of love and hate,

¹ a native of Arezzo, though he left as an infant.

² Michelangelo was not born in Arezzo but in a town many miles away, though in the diocese of Arezzo.

³ flag bearer.

⁴ Livy, native of Padua (Patavium).

⁵ Nowhere does Livy allege that the god Janus founded Arezzo.

Did the babe live or die?¹ I fain would find!

What were his fancies if he grew a man?

- 820 Was he proud,—a true scion of the stock
 Which bore the blazon,² shall make bright my page—
 Shield, Azure, on a Triple Mountain, Or,
 A Palm-tree, Proper, whereunto is tied
 A Greyhound, Rampant,³ striving in the slips?⁴
 825 Or did he love his mother, the base-born,
 And fight i' the ranks, unnoticed by the world?

Such, then, the final state o' the story. So
 Did the Star Wormwood in a blazing fall
 Frighten awhile the waters and lie lost.

- 830 So did this old woe fade from memory:
 Till after, in the fulness of the days,
 I needs must find an ember yet unquenched,
 And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives,
 If precious be the soul of man to man.

- 835 So, British Public, who may like me yet,
 (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
 Of many which whatever lives should teach:
 This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 840 And human estimation words and wind.
 Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
 Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
 That Art remains the one way possible

¹ No one knows; no subsequent record of Gaetano has been found.

² coat of arms.

³ standing on left hind leg with forelegs elevated.

⁴ on the leash.

- Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.
- 845 How look a brother in the face and say
 "Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet art blind,
 Thine ears are stuffed and stopped,¹ despite their length:
 And, oh, the foolishness thou countest faith!"
 Say this as silverly as tongue can troll—
- 850 The anger of the man may be endured,
 The shrug, the disappointed eyes of him
 Are not so bad to bear—but here's the plague
 That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
 Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,
- 855 Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,
 Nor recognizable by whom it left:
 While falsehood would have done the work of truth.
 But Art,—wherein man nowise speaks to men,
 Only to mankind,—Art may tell a truth
- 860 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing² the mediate³ word.
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
- 865 Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,—
 So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.
- And save the soul! If this intent save mine,—
 If the rough ore be rounded to a ring,
 870 Render all duty which good ring should do,

¹ Psalms 115.5–6.

² either lacking or bypassing.

³ intervening or serviceable.

And, failing grace, succeed in guardianship,—¹
Might mine but lie outside thine, Lyric Love,
Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised)
Linking our England to his Italy!²

¹ "The ring preserves the truth hidden away in 'the rough ore,' but it also performs another office of a ring, that of a 'guard-ring' or 'keeper' outside a wedding ring" (Cook).

² The poet Nicolò Tommasei wrote an inscription for the tablet on the Casa Guidi in which he spoke of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as having "made of her verse a golden ring linking Italy and England" ("e fece del suo verso aureo anello fra Italia e Inghilterra").

Review Copy

This page intentionally left blank

Appendix A

General Notes

1. The Sources of the Poem

The principal source of *The Ring and the Book* is a volume composed of printed pamphlets and handwritten documents collected by a Florentine lawyer named Francesco Cencini at the time of the Franceschini murder trial in Rome, and found by Browning under the circumstances related in the poem's opening lines. It is now in the library of Balliol College, Oxford.

Fourteen of the eighteen pamphlets deal with the trial of Guido and his accomplices for the murder of Pompilia and the Comparinis. Of these fourteen, eleven concern points of law (six for Guido, five against him), and the remaining three contain evidence, mainly affidavits and letters from persons involved in the events or witnesses to them. Two further pamphlets relate to the petition, subsequent to the murder trial, to clear Pompilia's reputation and thus prevent her estate from falling into the hands of the Convertite nuns. All of these are official documents printed for circulation among those connected with the case as pleaders or judges; in Roman trial procedure, they took the place of the oral testimony and arguments usual in Anglo-Saxon courts. Finally, "the Old Yellow Book," as it is always called, contains two unofficial, so-called "anonymous" pamphlets written for popular distribution. These are the basis of the "Half-Rome" books of the poem (II and III).

The written material bound up in the volume consists of three letters written from Rome on the evening after Guido's

execution, telling of the three-day delay in favor of Guido and the Pope's rejection of his appeal—in part the basis of Book XII—and a transcript of the sentence following Pompilia's trial at Arezzo (d in the list of law cases below).

In addition to the bound collection he found in Florence, Browning used another contemporary source, a pamphlet on the trial obtained for him by a woman friend in 1862. This is known to Browning scholars as "the secondary source."

This—apart from various sources he consulted to verify particular points of background detail, such as the character of Pope Innocent XII—was the sum of information Browning possessed concerning the Franceschini case as he wrote his epic-length poetic treatment. But long after his death, a considerable body of material unknown to him came to light in several installments. In 1900 another separate account was discovered in the Royal Casanatense Library, Rome. It was printed in Hodell's edition of the Old Yellow Book (1908), and in the appendix to Griffin and Minchin's biography of Browning (1910). In 1938 William O. Raymond found a further document, concentrating on the murder and subsequent developments, in the Armstrong Browning Collection at Baylor University, Texas. Two years later Beatrice Corrigan discovered in the Biblioteca del Comune, in Cortona, a collection similar to the Old Yellow Book but twice as large. It too comprised printed pamphlets (some being copies of those already known) and a long section of manuscript relating to "the personages and events of the Comparini-Franceschini relationships," though with comparatively little bearing on the murder trial itself. Corrigan published those portions of the Cortona codex which contain hitherto unknown information in her volume, *Curious Annals* (1956). Still other documents connected with the Franceschini case have been located in various Italian libraries.

A study of the documents Browning did not know reinforces the strong impression received from the Old Yellow Book, and from his imaginative reconstruction of the Roman atmosphere at the moment of the trial and execution, of the intense excitement the Franceschini affair generated. This was no ordinary murder case, but a *cause célèbre* in the truest sense. Moreover, by virtue of the fact that they are to a substantial degree independent documents, those found since 1900 frequently support and add details to the narrative Browning drew from the Old Yellow Book: they provide extensive corroborative evidence. And most important of all, they supply many pieces of information totally unknown to Browning. The documents Corrigan found at Cortona reveal, for instance, the true circumstances of Pompilia's birth (they include a full narrative, obtained from participants and witnesses, of how Violante's deception was managed) and add many details to our previous knowledge of how Guido spent his last hours.

Although it is very satisfactory to be able to see the tangled Franceschini case from more angles, and in greater detail, than was possible for Browning, the focus of attention must remain on the poem itself. The sheer quantity of documents surviving from the "Roman murder story" attests to its importance as an event in legal history as well as in the popular annals of Rome. But the modern reader's concern is not so much with what really happened as with what the Victorian poet Robert Browning did, by way of artistic "resuscitation," with the facts as he knew them.

2. Calendar of Events

(See list of Law Cases, pp. 769–70)

1680 July 16 Pompilia born and immediately adopted by the Comparinis.

- 1693 September 6 Pompilia marries Guido. Three months later (November 30) they leave for Arezzo.
- 1694 March The Comparinis return to Rome and deny Pompilia's legitimacy.
- 1697 April 28–29* Pompilia and Caponsacchi leave Arezzo.
- May 1 Guido overtakes them at Castelnuovo and they are arrested and conveyed to Rome.
- September 24 Roman court hands down verdict in the *processus fugae*. See Law Case b, opposite.
- December 18 Pompilia bears a son, Gaetano.
- 1698 January 2 Guido and his accomplices kill the Comparinis and mortally wound Pompilia.
- January 6 Pompilia dies.
(Books II–VII are set in the period January 3–6.)
- Late January Murder trial begins (Books VIII–IX).
- February 18 Court finds Guido *et al.* guilty and condemns them to death. Guido appeals to Pope.
- February 20** Pope rejects appeal (Book X) and the news is brought to Guido (Book XI).
- February 22 Guido and accomplices executed (Book XII).

* Changed in the poem to April 23; see note to III 1065.

** See footnote to Book X in the notes.

3. The Law Cases

a. Summer 1694

The Comparinis' suit to declare Pompilia illegitimate and thereby recover her dowry from Guido. Countersuit entered (August 1695) by Pompilia and Guido to implement the dower settlement. Decisions chiefly in favor of Guido, but Pietro appealed each one. The litigation was still in the courts at the time of the murders.

b. Summer 1697

The suit Guido brought in Rome against Pompilia and Caponsacchi for flight and adultery (the "*processus fugae*"), the direct result of his overtaking them at Castelnuovo. The court's decision, handed down in September, was that Caponsacchi should be "relegated" to Cività Vecchia for three years and that Pompilia, on whom no judgment was rendered, should be placed in the care of the Scalette Convent.

c. Autumn 1697

Pompilia's suit against Guido for divorce (or, more accurately, legal separation). Not decided at the time of the murders.

d. Autumn 1697

A suit, paralleling the "*processus fugae*," brought at Arezzo against Pompilia. (Caponsacchi, as a cleric, was exempt from prosecution in a civil court.) (At this juncture, Paolo, overburdened with his brother's suits at law, tried to have the several pending cases—a, b, c, and d—transferred from their respective courts to an *ad hoc* session (*Congregatio*) appointed by the Pope. This manoeuvre, based on the claim of special privilege enjoyed by a holder of orders in the church, failed, the Pope refusing to intervene.) The decision in d, handed down by the Tuscan court in December, sentenced Pompilia

to life imprisonment. But she was then, of course, under Roman jurisdiction.

e. January-February 1698

The indictment and trial of Guido and four accomplices for the murder of Pompilia and the Comparinis. This was the occasion for all but two of the printed documents assembled in the Old Yellow Book as well as the subject of most of the documents brought to light after Browning's death. Browning's knowledge of the previous lawsuits and the circumstances surrounding them was derived from the repeated allusions to them in the murder trial pamphlets.

f. January 1698

The suit brought by the Convent of Convertites to acquire the estate of Pompilia (now deceased) on the ground that she was a "debased woman." The surviving Franceschinis entered a countersuit (Spring) claiming the property for themselves. In May the court turned the estate over to her executor and thus, in effect, to her infant son, and in September it formally and finally confirmed Pompilia's good name.

4. Molinism

In the poem there are over thirty references to "the subject of the day" in Rome, 1698: the heresy of Molinism. As is to be expected, the various speakers do not refer, except casually (and inaccurately), to the idea involved; the name itself serves rather as an all-purpose smear to arouse irrational and irrelevant responses on the part of the speakers' respective auditors. Only the Pope, of all people, refers sympathetically to Molinism and the Molinists.

Miguel de Molinos (1627-96) was a Spanish theologian, resident in Rome, whose *Spiritual Guide* (1675) had for its

fundamental principle the concept of Quietism or “the Inner Light”—the doctrine that man’s soul, maintained always in a state of perfect inaction, can and should be receptive only to the prompting of God, without the intermediation of dogma or ritual. Molinism therefore denied the efficacy of confession and, indeed, of the entire ecclesiastical system. Initially well received by the Inquisition, Molinist belief came under heavy attack from the Jesuits, who after a bitter secret trial succeeded in having Innocent XI (predecessor once removed of the Pope in the poem) condemn it as heretical in 1687. Molinos died in prison in late December 1696, but the echoes of the controversy his doctrine engendered were still loud in the Rome of January-February 1698, when the ten monologues of *The Ring and the Book* are supposed to be spoken. (On this subject, see Cook, *Commentary*, Appendix VIII, and William Coyle, in *Select Bibliography*.)

It should be made clear, however, that the Molinism of this poem is quite distinct from the Molinism described, under that name, in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. The latter is the body of doctrine taught by Luis de Molina (1535–1600), which was concerned chiefly with “the problem of free will and God’s foreknowledge, providence, predestination, probation, [and] efficacious grace.” Not that the considerable difference between the two Molinisms, in both origin and content, would have been of any moment to the characters in the poem. It was the word, not one ideology or another, to which their ignorant but vigorous prejudices responded.

5. Pompilia’s Illiteracy and the “Forged” Letters

One of the dominant issues in the Old Yellow Book, which Browning naturally has his characters make much of, was whether or not Pompilia could write, for upon this question

hinged the validity of a damaging piece of evidence against her and Caponsacchi, the love letters allegedly exchanged between the two. It was these letters which Guido claimed to have found in their possession when he confronted them at Castelnuovo and which his counsel offered as exhibits at their trial.

In her deposition of May 1697, in connection with the *processus fugae*, Pompilia denied that she could read or write. Seizing upon this avowal, earlier commentators on the poem were inclined to follow Browning's own clear prejudices in her favor and conclude that the love letters were forgeries. But the evidence in the Old Yellow Book makes it quite plain that in this respect, as in some others, she was lying. Whether or not all the letters she was asserted to have written—not only those to Caponsacchi but the earlier ones to her parents—were in fact hers, she was at least as capable of writing them as Guido was capable of forging them or of forcing her to trace them from a penciled model he provided. In addition to the evidence in the Old Yellow Book (summarized and weighed by Cook, *Commentary*, Appendix IV) there is the fact, discovered by Beatrice Corrigan in one of the Cortona documents, that Pompilia had gone to school for four years.

6. The Convertites

Frequent reference is made in the poem to a community of nuns, "those good Convertites, / Those sinners saved, those Magdalens re-made." (II 1198–99), formally called the convent of Santa Maria Maddalena della Convertites. Browning's characters uniformly assert that it was these nuns who received Pompilia, by court order, after her and Caponsacchi's trial for flight and adultery, and who cared for her until the approaching birth of her child required her to be removed to the home of the Comparinis. This is a mistake. The community which

actually cared for her in those months was not the Convertites but the Conservatorio di Santa Croce della Penitenza ("Le Scalette"). The only true part the Convertites played in the Franceschini affair was their initiating a lawsuit, immediately after Pompilia's death, to acquire her estate on the ground that she belonged to the class of "loose women" whose property was automatically forfeited to them by law. In his account of this (unsuccessful) attempt to defame Pompilia's memory, Browning is faithful to the historical record.

7. Caponsacchi's Clerical Status

Everywhere in the poem, as in pro-Guido contexts in the Old Yellow Book, Caponsacchi is referred to as "a priest." But in the other documents, including Caponsacchi's own affidavit, he is called a subdeacon, which is what he actually was: a member of the lowest of the four major orders of the clergy. Even though not a priest, however, he was bound as priests are by a vow of celibacy, so the dereliction of which he was accused was no less grave.

Appendix B

Initial Responses to the Poem

[Additional evidence of the contemporary critical evaluation of *The Ring and the Book* can be found in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (New York, 1970): 284-353.]

“Richelieu” [unidentified], *Vanity Fair* 1
(November 28, 1868): 46-47

It is deeply, intensely, human. It is nevertheless, and for that very reason, a burning protest against the atheistic belief that men and women are the creatures of circumstances. It asserts a Presence in the world, before which every lie, spoken or acted, must wither up, and possibly—nay, most certainly—bring destruction upon those who trust in it. . . . [Browning] is the spiritual athlete of poetry, descending into the arena as did the Roman gladiator of old, to grapple with terrible realities, and hold death itself in his strong grip. These are the thoughts which his new poem suggests. If people do not want the reality, with the occasional ruggedness of Nature, they had better not trouble themselves to open the book; *non cuivis* [“it is not for them”], &c., milk for babes may be got elsewhere.

[Unsigned], *Spectator* 41 (December 12, 1868): 1464-66

[Browning] overflows, as he always overflows, in intellectual point, in acute comment, in quaint illustration. He is, as he always is, semi-dramatic, with the keenest of all eyes for every qualifying circumstance which alters the point of view of each

age and each individual,—never quite dramatic, for we never lose sight of the critical eye of the poet himself, who discriminates all these different shades of thought, and tosses them off with a sharpness of outline, and sometimes an intellectual touch of caricature, often a sharp sarcasm, that could not have proceeded from the *inside* of the situation he is painting for us, that could only proceed from one outside it like himself, but who is looking (very keenly) *into* it. He paints, as he always paints, with wonderful swiftness and brilliance, but also with a certain wilful carelessness and singularity,—somewhat like the qualities in old David Cox's fine water-colour sketches,—and with a singular contempt for sweetness and finish of style. In fertility of intellectual resource there is no poetry anywhere like Mr. Browning's; in the brilliance of his descriptions of character he has no rival; but for *beauty* of form he seems to us to have, as usual, almost a contempt. We do not mean that there are not here and there one or two lines of perfect loveliness,—not only in thought, but in expression,—but that even the very finest are marred by the close proximity of crabbed English, and grammar so condensed as to be either grating or excessively obscure, and that very frequently his narrative, though lucid enough in drift, is couched in almost carefully eccentric English,—singular nouns with no article, and used in the abstract sense; plural adjectives accumulated on one substantive as the Germans only pile them; new-coined combinations of nouns like "ring-thing", the need for the coinage not being very clear; oddly interpolated ejaculations (quaint gestures of the narrator, as it were, interspersed in the narrative); and now and then a parenthesis, which is so long, striking, and interesting in itself as to break the current of the story in which it is imbedded, and give a grotesque effect to the whole, as if one gem were imbedded in the surface of another,—a curiosity, compounded

of two beauties, but so compounded as to be not beautiful, only odd. . . .

When overlooking the irregularities of style, the wilful caprices of the poet's immense and inexhaustible intellectual imagination, we come to speak of the *power* with which the subject is treated, it is almost impossible to speak too highly. Always remembering that Mr. Browning's modes of thought never change as he passes from one point of sight to another; that, while rendering each new view,—individual or local, or it may be a class or party view,—with equal force and ability, the *style* of discourse, the springy, sharp definitions, the acute discriminations, the rapier-like thrusts of logic, are all the poet's own, and used by every one of his characters in succession,—it is impossible to speak too highly of the power with which he paints one "facet" after another of the tragedy he has taken for his theme. His own argument of what he is going to give us is itself, barring the puns and such oddities, as brilliant a picture in miniature of the social and moral conditions affecting the public view of such a crime as Count Guido Franceschini's in 1698, as was ever drawn of the past.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to William Allingham
From *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl (Oxford, 1965-67): 2.679-80

December 23, 1868

How do you like *The Ring and the Book*? It is full of wonderful work, but it seems to me that whereas other poets are the more liable to get incoherent the more fanciful their starting-point happens to be, the thing that makes Browning drunk is to give him a dram of prosaic reality, and unluckily this time the "gum tickler" is less like pure Cognac than Seven Dials Gin. Whether the consequent evolutions will be bearable to

their proposed extent without the intervening walls of the station-house to tone down their exuberance may be dubious. This *entre nous*. ["Between us" indeed: compare Rossetti's letters to Browning, quoted below.]

[Robert W. Buchanan], *Athenaeum*
(December 26, 1868): 875-76

We know nothing in the writer's former poems which so completely represents his peculiarities as this instalment [Books I-IV] of *The Ring and the Book*, which is so marked by picture and characterization, so rich in pleading and debating, so full of those verbal touches in which Browning has no equal, and of those verbal involutions in which he has fortunately no rival. Everything Browningish is found here,—the legal jauntiness, the knitted argumentation, the cunning prying into detail, the suppressed tenderness, the humanity,—the salt intellectual humour,—a humour not open and social, like that of Dickens, but with a similar tendency to caricature, differing from the Dickens tendency just in so far as the intellectual differs from the emotional, with the additional distinction of the *secretive* habit of all purely intellectual faculties. Secretiveness, indeed, must be at once admitted as a prominent quality of Mr. Browning's power. Indeed, it is this quality which so fascinates the few and so repels the many. It tempts the possessor, magpie-like, to play a constant game at hiding away precious and glittering things in obscure and mysterious corners, and—still magpie-like—to search for bright and glittering things in all sorts of unpleasant and unlikely places. It involves the secretive chuckle and the secretive leer. . . .

The subject is tragic, but the treatment is not dramatic: the "monologue", even when perfectly done, can never rival the "scene"; and Mr. Browning's monologues are not perfectly

done, having so far, in spite of the subtle distinction in the writer's mind, a very marked similarity in the *manner* of thought, even where the thought itself is most distinct. Having said so much, we may fairly pause. The rest must be only wonder and notes of admiration. In exchange for the drama, we get the monologue,—in exchange for a Shakspearean exhibition, we get Mr. Browning masquing under so many disguises, never quite hiding his identity, and generally most delicious, indeed, when the disguise is most transparent. The drama is glorious, we all know, but we want this thing as well;—we must have Browning as well as Shakspeare.

[Unsigned], *Saturday Review* 26
(December 26, 1868): 832-34

...It [i.e., Books I-III] is a history of fantastic, out-of-the-way, but low and mean, vice; of vice that twists and twirls itself through odd corners, and works by unexpected devices; but still vice pure, unadulterated, and unrelieved. If there is anything morally better to come in the succeeding volumes, there is small sign of it in the present; unless it be in the character of the Pope.

Walter Bagehot, *Tinsley's Magazine* 3
(January 1869): 665-74

Mr. Browning has lived the greater part of his literary life in Italy. The colouring of his mind and the colouring of his work are alike Italian. It is Italian life that he has so skilfully analysed; it is Italian scenery and accessories which form the background for his vivid dramatic pictures. 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 now is. So different is the material on which he has chosen to expend his poetical labour from all that we see around us, that we cannot regard the result otherwise than as a mere artistic product. Behind our admiration of such a poem as [Tennyson's] the *Morte d'Arthur*, *Maud*, or *In Memoriam*, there lies the distinct consciousness that the poet who speaks to us is one of ourselves, breathing the same atmosphere of inarticulate longing and tender hope, of unrest, and indignation, and wonder over the things that are. . . . Perhaps Mr. Browning has lived in Italy and written of things Italian because they best suited the bent of his dramatic, intense, colour-loving spirit. *Pippa Passes* could never have been written in England. It is easier to believe this than that Mr. Browning has paid the heavy price of a restricted audience for the merely personal pleasure of living in a more comprehensible climate, under brighter skies, and among more picturesque and less conventional people than England offered him. . . .

[A]round and about the story hangs an atmosphere of mystery, which gives ample scope for the poet's imaginings. Who was the guilty one, the husband or the wife? What occult springs of human passion thus bubbled up through the crust of social quiet, and startled people with their colour of blood? Here, surely, is room for that play of psychical theory and suggestion which Browning loves. It is to be noted that nearly all the characterisation of Browning's most dramatic efforts is mental. There is little of the outside action with which most poets describe passion. He never deals in "body-colour." Even when glimpses of the glowing scenery of the South appear in his poems, they are only used in so far as they tint the mind of the speaker, colouring it transparently as the electric light colours a fountain. Browning's *dramatis personae* are disembodied souls that love, and quarrel, and fight in a spiritual

world over which he, as master-magician, presides. True, they tell you of their solid appearance, and of the solid appearance of the world in which they move; they describe these coloured husks and shells in bright, vivacious touches; yet all the while you know that the action, and passion, and incidents coming before you are psychical, not physical. Hence Browning is at once intensely subjective and intensely dramatic—a curious combination. He does not display the acute emotional analysis of Tennyson, but he exhibits a wonderful intellectual analysis which produces as valuable results in another way. Put before him a psychological conundrum, and he will turn you off a dozen solutions in a minute. Nothing can equal his suggestiveness in accounting for mental phenomena. No one obvious explanation of anything ever occurs to him. There is a recurrent "or" continually in his mind. He has always at command a dozen lines of rail tapering down to the same point on the horizon. . . .

Were *The Ring and the Book* to go no further than this first volume, we should be disposed to say that Mr. Browning had never written anything more powerful than the tragic story which is there conceived and developed. Doubtless its extreme severity will repel many readers. There is in it not a trace of that lyrical joyousness which runs through the varied scenes of *Pippa Passes* like a thread of silver. The air around Pompilia Comparini is too heavy for singing. Over the unhappy young wife's head there is no clear blue to which she may turn and listen for the song of a lark, but a lurid atmosphere of wrong, and hate, and suspicion. There is no room for music in the book. The harsh throat of "Half-Rome" can only croak lies; the other half of Rome is struck with awe over the fate of the young wife, and wonders where the angels were to permit it. Here and there we find a touch of humour—it were not a poem of Browning's else—but it is that bitter humour which

loves to gibe reflectively in a churchyard. There is not even in the poem the sad sweetness of unhappy love. There is no love in it. Pompilia had never a voice in her choice of a husband; and his regards were fixed upon her dowry. There was not even a young cavalier in the question, to suggest what *might* have been to the sad and weary wife. She accepted the services of the priest with gratitude, as she would have received the aid of a toothless peasant; and as for him—no hint of love is present to blot the white escutcheon of his noble self-sacrifice. So tragic is the tragedy that even the customary clown's scenes can find no place in it. But, on the other hand, no writer so carefully avoids *ad captandum* appeals to the emotions as Mr. Browning does. He does not pile up sorrow upon sorrow, and beseech you to weep. On the contrary, here, as elsewhere, the tragedy is related in an off-hand matter-of-fact way by men who do not perceive the drift of what they are saying. The narrators are too near, are too much taken up with minute points of detail, to see or comprehend the majesty of suffering they are unconsciously revealing. They are like the stone-cutters who, with auger, measure, and chisel, mechanically cut out of the block of marble the figure that the artist has modelled in clay. They are themselves only instruments, and are not supposed to have, like a Greek chorus, a divine knowledge of the emotional aspects of everything that is going on. They are never self-conscious. It is not their business to spin theories; they are too much alive and busy for that.

John Addington Symonds, *Macmillan's Magazine* 19
(January 1869): 258-62

The poem is written uniformly in blank verse. It contains but few of those "lyrical interbreathings" which relieved the monotony of this metre in the works of our dramatists; and the

frequent perplexities and involutions of language which impede the easy progress of the reader seem to have arisen from the constant effort to elude the prosiness into which blank verse is apt to fall, rather than to have been forced upon the poet by the intricacy of his thoughts or the sublimity of his imagination. Mr. Browning has so amply proved his power of pouring forth the most exquisite strains of lyrical music, and of photographing subtle and obscure phases of mental activity and emotion in condensed and artistic pictures, that we cannot but regret the absence of short pieces from his volume. . . .

It may perhaps be wondered whether the majority of minds will find much pleasure in this piecemeal presentation of a bygone tragedy: this minute analysis of facts and motives,—this many-sided exhibition of a single problem. For those, however, who have the patience and the intellect to follow the elaborate and subtle working of the most profound of living artists, who are capable of delighting in the gradual unfolding of an intricate plot, and of weighing and comparing conflicting evidence, this poem offers attractions of the very highest order. As in a novel of Balzac's, their patience will be rewarded by the final effect of the accumulated details grouped together by the artist, and their intellect will be refreshed with the exhibition of prodigious power carefully exerted and marvellously sustained. It is certain that, as the chain of incident and comment gradually uncurls, each link will add some fresh sensation, until, when its huge length has been unwound, our minds will retain an ineffaceable and irresistible impression of the whole as conceived in the wonder-working brain of Mr. Browning. We are contented to peruse the facts and pleadings of a modern law-case; why should we not bring the same freshness of interest to bear upon this tragedy, not stripped, as happens in the newspapers, of its poetry, but invested with all the splendours of a powerful imagination, while retaining

the reality of incidents and details that bear a crime of yesterday home to the hearts of every one?

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's letters to Robert Browning
From Rosalie Glynn Grylls, "Rossetti and Browning,"
Princeton University Library Chronicle 33 (1972): 232-50.

19 Jan. 1869

My dear Browning,

I have had my third reading of "Caponsacchi" and have not yet thanked you! Surely this is the very greatest thing you have ever yet done. The way in which the ideal element is at last infused into the book without sacrificing one tittle of its supreme reality, is a triumph of Art such as no Englishman but yourself could venture to hope for. How the exquisite glimpses of Pompilia make one long for the personal utterance of

"The snowwhite soul that angels fear to take
Untenderly"!

No doubt she will open the third volume, and so form with Caponsacchi the pure central heart of the book.

Count Guido is just as great in his own fitting way. You have made him assume so far the impulsive tone of self-belief as really to awaken sympathy for the issues of such a case as he feigns, and so make the mind recoil upon him with double abhorrence when the truth already known recurs to it, and rejoice all the more to follow him by Caponsacchi's guidance to the side of "Judas made monstrous by much solitude." This line is a glorious antithesis to the noble isolation of Dante's Virgil, "Chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco" [who through long silence seems hoarse].

But were one to follow in detail all the heartfelt beauties of Caponsacchi's narrative (perhaps most entralling of all in

the disembodied interval of thought—that “immortal nakedness” of the soul—which precedes the flight,) there would be no end to my letter—only to your patience. I can but feel myself more gratefully than ever yours,

D. G. Rossetti

22 Feb. 1869

My dear Browning,

I have been reading and re-reading “Pompilia,” and so has every one I talk with. Not one but thinks it is as noble and lovely as Caponsacchi, and what more can be said? Exquisite indeed is every page of it, whether viewed as character or expression. How you have brought one to the right point now! and how one stands astonished at the gradual revelation of inmost truth, so new everywhere in spite of your having boldly given a complete glimpse of the story and the relation of its personages at the outset! How, above all, one thirsts for the almost incredible moment (to come next I judge) when Guido will actually have to tell the truth! The surprises of the book are infinite, where, by its plan, surprise seemed almost excluded. Your lawyers are both admirable and astoundingly individual. And how intensely Italian is the humanity of Dominus Hyacinthus! It quite recalls the domestic life of my childhood, passed wholly among Italians though in England. Are the wonderful Latin scraps (one wonders) really parts of the original *plaideyer*? But I suppose not.* There is much everywhere in the detail of the book which is in fact too right to be real; though the life of the whole, one sees plainly, is sucked from the very heart, as it verily was, of everyone concerned.

And now for Vol. IV!

Ever yours affectionately,
D. Gabriel Rossetti

* He supposed wrongly; both lawyers quote liberally from the actual documents.

13 March 1869

My dear Browning,

I feel as if we were in communication now even before I put pen to paper: for is not your completed thought now filling me?—in how many ways, at what strange junctures, to recur to me for ever? Such function I have long acknowledged as yours; but now most strongly, by this confirmed and controlling impression of your greatness at a time when judgment should be mature in me.

How you have summed up the whole drama of your book in that supreme master-stroke at the end of the second “Guido”!—where the wretch, in his one terror-stricken flash of truth, winds up his shriek to the Saving Powers with the name of his wife. This leaves her crowned of unrighteousness itself. When you wrote that line, you must have felt that you owed your Muse a votive wreath; as the world, reading it, awards one to you.

The serene splendour of the Pope’s section comes most nobly between the fluctuating contest of the actors and audience, and the final consummation. In itself I suppose it must be admitted as the grandest piece of sustained work in the whole cycle of your writings. The passage from the Friar’s Sermon worthily “repeats the colour” in the winding-up.

And highest of all is the fact that it is to the inmost centre of the emotion that the mind reverts on closing the book; and finds itself still gazing with Caponsacchi on the “lady, tall, pale, beautiful, strange & sad,” and still thrilling to those all-expressive words of his,—

“You see, we are
So very pitiable, she and I,
Who had conceivably been other-wise.”

I quote from memory, and perhaps not quite correctly, as Vol 2 is still among the borrowers.

For this great work of yours now let me thank you, as for a fullness which I have lived to see; and believe me ever

Yours in grateful love,
D. G. Rossetti

[Frederick Greenwood], *Cornhill Magazine* 19
(February 1869): 249-56

That faculty of Shakspeare's which justifies the epithet "divine" so freely applied to him—the faculty of looking all passions through and through with perfectly dispassionate eyes, and of dealing them here and there, each strictly after its kind, without an emotion—something of that supreme gift we discern in the intellectual candour displayed by Browning as he speaks with the mouth and mind of Guido, of Caponsacchi, of one half-Rome, the other half-Rome, and the gentleman of quality who expounds the *tertium quid*. It is noticeable, however, that we have a generally better *workmanship* when the poet speaks for those who are on the right side than when he speaks for those who are in the wrong. In mere ingenuity of reflection, inference, and argument he is splendidly impartial; but still there is enough of sympathy for one side to give a little extra warmth and colour to the verse whenever he is speaking for it. This, however, detracts but little from the poet's claims to a share of the Shakspearian quality aforesaid. . . . But that the poem is faultless we by no means say. Though its greatness is almost wholly dramatic, there is an error in its construction which the dramatist last of all should make. It is not that the poet's own sentiments about the story and his sympathy with certain of its personages are to be detected in the workmanship, whereas they should never show at all, but that he begins by an open declaration of them; says, to start with, that this is a villain and a liar whatever may appear in the course of the story,

and that this other is at no moment to be mistaken for anything else than a suffering angel. She may run away with a young priest, and he may go off with her in the garb of a gay cavalier; but we shall find that it is all nothing. Surely this is not good art? The dramatist should have no more judgment about the character he displays and the passion he depicts than nature herself who first created them. He should never play the commentator; still less should he take sides and explain his reasons for doing so before the play begins.

[Robert W. Buchanan], *Athenaeum*
(March 20, 1869): 399-400

At last, the *opus magnum* of our generation lies before the world—the “ring is rounded”; and we are left in doubt which to admire most, the supremely precious gold of the material or the wondrous beauty of the workmanship. The fascination of the work is still so strong upon us, our eyes are still so spell-bound by the immortal features of Pompilia (which shine through the troubled mists of the story with almost insufferable beauty), that 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 Shakspeare. Its intellectual greatness is as nothing compared with its transcendent spiritual teaching. Day after day it grows into the soul of the reader, until all the outlines of thought are brightened and every mystery of the world becomes more and more softened into human emotion. Once and for ever must critics dismiss the old stale charge that Browning is a mere intellectual giant, difficult of comprehension, hard of assimilation. This great

book *is* difficult of comprehension, *is* hard of assimilation; not because it is obscure—every fibre of the thought is clear as day; not because it is intellectual,—and it is intellectual in the highest sense,—but because the capacity to comprehend such a book must be spiritual; because, although a child's brain might grasp the general features of the picture, only a purified nature could absorb and feel its profoundest meanings. The man who tosses it aside because it is “difficult” is simply adopting a subterfuge to hide his moral littleness, not his mental incapacity. It would be unsafe to predict anything concerning a production so many-sided; but we quite believe that its true public lies outside the literary circle, that men of inferior capacity will grow by the aid of it, and that feeble women, once fairly initiated into the mystery, will cling to it as a succour passing all succour save that which is purely religious.

Thomas Carlyle's Ambivalence

From David Alec Wilson and David Wilson MacArthur,
Carlyle in Old Age (1865-1881) (London, 1934): 175-76

When by and by Carlyle had finished reading it, he thus answered queries of [Edward] FitzGerald for a candid opinion [FitzGerald had also queried Alfred Tennyson, as will appear below]: “I have read—insisted on reading—Browning's Book. It is full of talent, energy, and effort: but actually without *Back-bone* or Basis of Common-Sense. I think it among the absurd-est books ever written by a gifted man.”

Anne Gilchrist, in a letter to a friend, mentions a story, which Gabriel Rossetti told her, and which it seems Carlyle had related of himself,—“how he met Browning and *meant* to say something to please about *The Ring and the Book*, but somehow ultimately found himself landed in the reverse of a compliment: ‘It is a wonderful book, one of the most

wonderful poems ever written. I re-read it all through—all made out of an Old Bailey [London criminal court] story, that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting!' G. R. seemed himself to lean to this view, and to think there was perversity in the choice of the subject, though of course redeemed by superb treatment."

On another occasion Carlyle declared that he had read the whole poem, in four volumes, "from beginning to end, without omitting a word, and a most extraordinary production it is;—a work of great ingenuity and full of very striking sentences. I met Browning, indeed, in Piccadilly the other day, and I told him I'd read his poem from the first word thereof to the last, and he said to me, quickly, 'Well! Well?' and I replied that I thought it a book of prodigious talent and unparalleled ingenuity; but then, I suppose trusting to the sincerity of my own thoughts, I went on to say that of all the strange books produced on this distracted earth, by any of the sons of Adam, this one was altogether the strangest and the most preposterous in its construction; and where, said I, do ye think to find the eternal harmonies in it? Browning did not seem to be pleased with my speech, and he bade me good morning."

[John Rickards Mozley], *Quarterly Review* 126
(April 1869): 328-59

[I]t is decidedly too long. It is a weariness of the flesh to read so many arguments pro and con—so many varying shades of the same argument—on a critical case with so many ignoble elements in it, so little that is indisputably noble, as is that of Count Guido Franceschini. The subject is too slight for the mass of ability and thought that Mr. Browning has put into it; while this ability and thought have not in themselves been subjected long enough to the crucible; the pure golden ore is

presented in crude entanglement with earth and common pebbles. The poem might have been a fifth of the length, and have been improved by the omissions.

Yet we are far from wishing to undervalue it. Like all that Mr. Browning writes, it bears the stamp of a rare sincerity; nothing in it is put forward to take the popular ear, nothing without the manifest search after truth, and the conviction that the sentiments put forward are needful to be known and weighed. A distinct moral purpose runs through the poem; not a moral, not an obtrusive excrescence, not anything that can be expressed in a few neatly compacted sentences at the end; but a course of deep meditation on human action and the problems of life. Few poets have been able to deliver arguments and judgments without being didactic. And with all Mr. Browning's carelessness of popularity, he feels deeply with the men of his own generation. A resolute keeping to the reality which he knows, a resolute abandonment of all the customary fictitious ornaments and appendages of poetry, everywhere mark his verse.

[John R. deC. Wise], *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* 91 (April 1869): 577

The expectations which were raised by the first volume have not been fulfilled. Mr. Browning has returned to his old faults, or as his extreme admirers would say, beauties. He evidently has done so from pure wilfulness. His first volume proves beyond doubt that if he chooses he can write page after page in a way which captivates the minds and touches the hearts of ordinary people. He has therefore chosen his style with a set purpose. We have no quarrel with Mr. Browning on this score. The Darians have full right to be as Doric as they please. We can only, however, express our opinion upon the poem by

saying that the Ring has too much alloy, and the Book too much verbiage. We know quite well that some alloy is necessary for artistic purposes. Even a sovereign [coin] requires to be alloyed to take a clear impression. We know, too, that there must be some verbiage, or, in other words, that there must be shade as well as light—that there must be some foil to relieve and throw up the brighter passages. What, however, we say is, that the alloy is in disproportion to the gold, and that the verbiage overshadows the thought. To make this clear we should have to quote the whole of "Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis," and "Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius." Nothing but actually reading these two divisions of the poem would prove our case. To say that there are some beauties in them, is to say nothing at all. We expect something more than this from Mr. Browning.

Edward FitzGerald, letter to Alfred Tennyson
From *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*,
ed. A. McKinley Terhune and Annabelle Terhune
(Princeton, 1980): 3.138-39

April 1869

My dear old Alfred,

I have been thinking of you so much for the last two or three days, while the first volume of Browning's *Poem* has been on my table, and I have been trying in vain to read it, and yet the *Athenaeum* tells me it is wonderfully fine. . . . I want to know what you yourself think of this poem; you, who are the one man able to judge of it, and magnanimous enough to think me capable of seeing what is fine in it. I never could read Browning. If Browning only gave a few pence for the book he drew from, what will posterity give for his version of it, if posterity ever find it on a stall? If Shakespeare, Milton,

Dryden, Pope and Tennyson survive, what *could* their readers make out of this Browning a hundred years hence? Anything so utterly unlike the *Ring* too which he considers he has wrought out of the old gold—this shapeless thing? “You are unjust, Fitz”—that is what you will say or think, I fancy.

[Tennyson’s reply to this letter has not survived, but in a subsequent letter to another correspondent printed in the same volume (page 148) FitzGerald, saying further of the poem that “It seems to me an audacious piece of defiance to the Public whom he [Browning] has found so long blind to his Merits—‘Now you have at last come to accept me, I’ll ride over you rough-shod,’” reported that “A T tells me he ‘finds greatness’ in the work, call it Poem or what you will.”]

[Unsigned], *Saturday Review* 27 (April 3, 1869): 460-61

The picture which Mr. Browning presents to us is on a large scale; it is comparable to the gigantic productions of the Venetian painters. And while the main elements of Mr. Browning’s work have to the full extent the unity and massiveness of these great men, there is, perhaps, in his subordinate parts, a failure to depict minute and commonplace events with that grace and exquisite perfection which Veronese threw even over his trivialities. Few of his readers will not feel a little resentment at Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, and Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius. These characters ought to have acted (and are intended to act) as a foil to the deep tragedy of the piece; there should have been a relaxation after the severe problems which Guido and Caponsacchi present to us, they should have represented the grace of a more commonplace and ordinary life in contrast to the struggles of ambition and passion. They are, however, too irredeemably silly, and that not with a humorous but with a wearisome silliness; it is an

effort to take any interest in them at all; and the length of their lucubrations does not add to the easiness of perusing them. And their arguments for and against Guido are of the most indifferent, where some real light was needed to be thrown on the curious circumstances of the case. Indeed, Mr. Browning throughout, in his treatment of the question which he sets forth, shows much more of the subtlety of the psychologist than of the lawyer. While analysing with the greatest skill the turns and windings of thought and impulse in his imagined characters, he hardly pays sufficient attention to the material parts of the case—to the actual question of evidence, of what did or did not happen; he assumes rather than conclusively demonstrates the portentous guilt of Guido Franceschini. . . .

How superior is Guido to Count Cenci, in Shelley's play! Cenci is a motiveless monster; he has a fiendish delight in cruelty and lust, but we recognise in him no community of nature with ourselves; the possibility of becoming like him does not occur to us in our wildest imaginations. But Guido is, every inch of him, a man of passions, reasonings, volitions, the like of which may be seen (though not in the same combination) in many of those whom we meet in our daily life. The union of his cold sceptical nature with the heat of his fierce revenge might have seemed contradictory if portrayed by an inferior master; but in Mr. Browning's hands the apparent inconsistency proves to be one of nature's contrasts, the more veritable because so unexpected. And again, it is true of him, what is true perhaps of every real human being, but what is not found in the exaggerated villains of novelists, that in spite of all his degradation we may admire somewhat in him—namely, the courage and coolness with which he conducts his defence. He has not indeed the physical courage to face immediate death, and at the very last he breaks down in

laments and supplications; but on no occasion on which forethought and prudence can be of any value to him does he flinch.

[Unsigned], *The Times*, June 11, 1869: 4

Without attempting any comparison, favourable or otherwise, it might still be observed in illustration that if Tennyson is sometimes homely, Browning is occasionally commonplace. There is a lack of character as well as quality about some of his lines; the delicate gold thread of idealism is lost in the uncouth ruggedness of his words. But it might be argued, with some show of truth,—these prose passages, these colloquial terms and familiar expressions, are necessary to bring out the finer parts. Just as the Greeks employed the lyrical contrast of the chorus to set off the lofty sweep of the iambic verse—just as the Elizabethan poets so effectively interlaced prose with blank verse in their plays, these lower passages give value and power to the more passionate and dramatic portions. This argument we would be willing to allow, were it not that in the finer and higher parts Mr. Browning still fails to make that use of rhythm and accent which would show that he understood its power or could wield its swing. There is little or no alternation in the measure of his verse: the same halt line or unrhythymical abruptness may meet you at any turn: there is, too, side by side with his abruptness occasional verbosity: there are sometimes long passages which, instead of suggesting more than they say, hardly convey what they are intended to mean. In short Mr. Browning's writing is eminently *realistic*, realistic to a degree that this age has not yet seen, and finds difficult to digest. . . . The crudity, the jolting violence of some of his lines, is such as has never yet been exhibited by a poet of Mr. Browning's rank and power. This defect follows from the

same constitution of mind that gives the realistic character to his writings. But unless we set it down to positive effrontery, to a barefaced intention to see how much a British public will stand, it must be acknowledged that this harshness proceeds from a deficiency in that sense of harmony and feeling for beauty which go for so much in the making of a poet. . . .

A trial for murder, especially an Italian story, does not seem a very poetical or manageable subject; a "*cause célèbre*," the culmination of former trials and including two lesser lawsuits would be enough to repel all but a lawyer, one would suppose; nor does this half epic form seem the most inviting to adopt for such an undertaking, nor would an issue of four volumes, each containing 4,000 or 5,000 lines, seem the most compendious or attractive mode for readers. But here Mr. Browning's strong sense of humanity has stood him in good stead. By dividing the work into a series of what we have ventured to call idyllic sections, each presenting the view taken by the chief actors in the tragedy or those immediately interested in it, he has so evolved the intricacies of the case, so held suspended the verdict of the reader, and the conclusion of his story, that at the last the execution seems to have been the result of mere infirmity on the part of the Pope, who could not, as he desired, reprieve the execution for fear of the Roman mob. Mr. Browning, moreover, has elected to take for his subject a tragedy not to be surpassed in horrors by the catastrophe of a Greek play; and by his successful treatment of it he has done something to dispel the fashionable fancy that tragedy is out of date.

With the natural insight of genius for its own capacity, our author has evolved and developed for himself the form and style of this poem—epic in appearance, idyllic in intention and character, with a strong undercurrent of subjective power, all contained and displayed by his own colloquial manner. His

genius is not thoroughly dramatic, as such a fragment as his *Strafford* demonstrates, nor yet purely lyrical as the perverse deficiencies in his *dramatis personae* show, and yet such an outburst of lyric fervour as closes the end of the first idyllic division,—“Oh, lyric love, half angel and half bird,” now already sufficiently quoted and popularized, proves that the spirit is willing even if the flesh be weak.

[Unsigned], *Chambers's Journal* 4th ser. 46
(July 24, 1869): 473-76

If we except Scott, and still more Coleridge in England, and Goethe in Germany, we have since the beginning of the century been in the hands of the subjective school of poets. Poets, that is, who view the universe of men and things through a medium supplied by their own idiosyncrasies, and whose poetry comes to us savouring strongly of the mind and heart of the individual poet. Against this style of poetry Mr. Browning's works supply a welcome and long desired reaction. . . . Henceforth, his place in the very first rank of English poets must be conceded without a murmur or a doubt. He has added a new lustre to English literature, and enriched our language with a possession for ever. . . . In Count Guido, Caponsacchi, and especially in Pompilia, we have distinct creations, characters which stand forth in clearness and completeness like Macbeth, Hamlet, or Cordelia. Pompilia is exquisite in her beauty, her unconscious grandeur and nobility of soul, her simplicity, and withal her dignity, maintained alike amid great sufferings and petty persecutions more lowering than sublime trials. We cannot point to a creation worthy of being compared with her in the whole range of English literature. For the choice of subject we have nothing but condemnation. It is Mr. Browning's luck. But granting this, there is no mark of

great and lofty poetry wanting in the elaboration of this noble masterpiece. There is no departure from the true concrete artistic treatment in any line of the whole poem; no putting aside the poet for the didactic teacher; no thrusting forward of the author's individuality to speak for the characters, or to interpret them to his readers.

[J. H. C. Fane], *Edinburgh Review* 130
(July 1869): 164-86

The study of morbid anatomy, whether moral or physical, is not to be prosecuted without contact with the unclean; but what we object to is that the processes of the dissecting-room should be conducted in the public street. It is quite possible to employ in art the valuable results of scientific mental analysis, without making the loathsome details of knowledge the vehicle of its communication. . . . We confess that this manifestation of an intellectual capacity to pirouette on a pin-head without falling into circumjacent filth, and the execution of similar literary gymnastics, betray a vanity altogether alien from Mr. Browning, but he rivals his illustrious contemporary [Victor Hugo] in the essentially French quality of "audace." In the present work he ventures with Pompilia upon ground of perilous lubricity—we freely admit without lapse; but there is both lapse and collapse of all that preserves the self-respect of art in the occasional outrages of thought and language—in one instance, the mental and verbal garbage—which he assigns to male characters in the drama. No reader who is familiar with Mr. Browning's works can for a moment doubt the essential purity of his mind. Indeed the whole conception of *The Ring and the Book* bears the impress of a mind pre-eminently pure, and we apprehend that Mr. Browning's temerity is inspired solely by the desire to be true to Nature.

But to hold that, because human beings of a given temperament will, under given circumstances, say a given thing, therefore the artist is justified in putting the same thing into the mouth of corresponding personages in his drama, is to commit the radical mistake of assigning to art a reflective instead of a representative function.

“Shirley” [Sir John Skelton], *Fraser’s Magazine* 80
(November 1869): 670-77

It is quite true that there is to many minds, even of a high order, a unique fascination about Mr. Browning’s poetry. The explanation is obvious. His poetry has, in the first place, an altogether distinctive flavour and aroma of its own, a distinctiveness which the very greatest poetry perhaps does not possess. . . . And secondly, we require to grapple strenuously with this poetry, as Jacob grappled with his angel, before we learn how rich and wonderful it is; and the struggle itself is a delight, a keen excitement to the intellect, as well as a pleasant gratification of the sense. What is thus dearly bought is doubly valued.

For it must be admitted that, as a rule, Browning’s writings make what is called hard reading. He is a metaphysician, and psychology, the science of mind, is his favourite study. All of us, more or less (except the political men who need it most), desire to obtain some authentic information about this strange existence in which we so unaccountably find ourselves—external and internal—nature and human nature. The analysis of human nature by the metaphysicians who are schoolmen only—of the soul on its formal or technical side—has always seemed to me to be barren. But an analysis by a metaphysician who is also a poet or *seer* (to take the old word) is a far different matter. In this relation it is to be specially

noted of Mr. Browning that he has ever shown a resolute determination, at whatever sacrifice of skin-deep grace, polish, or music, to make his speech the absolutely accurate reflex of his thought. He avoids—slurs over—no difficulty. “The Lord of show and Prince o’ the power o’ the air” is not his master. To him he owes no allegiance. And thus it is that since Shakespeare there has not been written in the English tongue, so far as I am aware, any such relentless analysis of the human conscience, of some of the darkest moods of the human soul, as this *Ring and Book*. . . .

Still the poem is too long, and I venture to think that a considerable portion of the introductory section, and the whole of the sections entitled “Half Rome,” “The Other Half Rome,” “Tertium Quid” might without much injury be omitted. Had we nothing else from Mr. Browning about this Guido Franceschini trial we should be sorry to part with any of these—all of them being extremely clever; but they form the least essential portion of the poem, and anything essential to the narrative which they contain might be included in the introduction. *The Ring and the Book* is in one aspect a tragic drama, but we don’t get to the actors till far on in the second volume. The first speakers are simply critics,—hitting the mark more or less closely; their talk may be likened to the conversation of the subordinate characters with which the historical plays of Shakespeare open, and in which the heroes and heroines who are to figure later on are described for the benefit of the audience. This, I think, is a mistake, and Mr. Browning himself appears to feel that it is so; for not till we reach Caponsacchi does he put forth his whole strength, and throw himself heart and hand, into the conflict.

Appendix C

Textual Notes and Commentary

Primary Materials for *The Ring and the Book*

- (a) The autograph manuscript sent to the printers for the first edition, now in the British Library.
- (b) The first edition, four volumes, 1868-69.
- (c) The second edition, four volumes, 1872 and 1882-83. This edition presents an interesting and complicated set of editorial problems. See Michael Meredith's "A Botched Job: Publication of *The Ring and the Book*" cited in the Select Bibliography, and also the *Oxford Browning* "Introduction," xlvi.
- (d) Volumes eight, nine, and ten of the 1888-89 *Poetical Works*.
- (e) Revisions and corrections indicated in Browning's hand in the Dykes Campbell volumes and the Brown University lists.

Emendations to the Copy-text

This edition does not list textual variants (the *Ohio Browning* and the *Oxford Browning* both do so), but it does attempt to achieve textual accuracy and integrity. Our approach to textual emendation, beyond the 93 revisions indicated by Browning himself, has been conservative, but there are, nonetheless, an additional 77 alterations to the basic 1888-89 copy-text. The total of 170 emendations fall into five categories, as follows:

<i>Category and number</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
A (93)	Browning's revisions as recorded in the Dykes Campbell volumes and/or the Brown University lists. In the few instances where the lists differ, our choice of emendation is indicated.
B (56)	Typographical errors not recorded in either the Dykes Campbell volumes or the Brown University lists. These are visually obvious typographical errors in the copy-text and/or readings clearly at odds with earlier editions or the printer's manuscript.
C (12)	Broken type, visually obvious in the copy-text.
D (7)	Revisions based on earlier editions or the printer's manuscript which make more logical sense than readings printed in the 1888–89 copy-text.
E (2)	Browning's misplacement of quotation/question marks.

A square bracket on the left margin indicates the type of emendation to the copy-text, as described above, and revisions are indicated by one pointed bracket. Thus, in Book I the first revision is a typographical error [B] in line 53 in which Mongst in the copy-text is emended to read 'Mongst.

Book I

[B] l. 53 Mongst > 'Mongst

There are, finally, two additional types of emendations.

- (1) Browning indicated verse paragraph breaks in the printer's manuscript and the first edition with spacing. Over time, with new editions, some verse paragraph breaks occurred at the bottom of the pages of text and were consequently lost. Verse paragraphs have been restored, following the lines noted in the following lists. Verse paragraph breaks at the bottom of pages in this text have been indicated by [——] in the middle of the page.
- (2) A small number (eight) of quotation marks have been added or adjusted in Book XII for purposes of clarity, as explained on the appropriate list which follows.

Book I

- [B] l. 53 Mongst > 'Mongst
- [C] l. 611 were wolves > were-wolves
- [A] l. 816 Which > Which—
- [B] l. 1058 subterfuge > subterfuge:
- [B] l. 1190 faithful " > faithful!"
- [A] l. 1306 there. > there: (corrected only in Dykes Campbell as there plus a period, but clearly broken type : in 1888–89.)
- [B] l. 1366 now shrouds, nor shows > now shrouds, now shows
- [C] l. 1378 names > names.

Restored paragraphs: 30, 240, 1161

Book II

- [A] l. 88 dusk, > dusk
- [D] l. 252 Send > Lend
- [A] l. 541 offence > offence,
- [A] l. 633 ware > 'ware
- [A] l. 844 overheard > overhead
- [B] l. 1153 own. > own,

- [B] l. 1235 he- > he—
- [A] l. 1373 wound > wound:
- [A] l. 1374 say > say,

Restored paragraphs: 343, 1536

Book III

- [B] l. 238 surmount > surmounts
- [A] l. 317 ear drum > ear-drum
- [B] l. 1077 room > room,
- [A] l. 1368 night, > night

Restored paragraphs: 468, 838, 1375, 1463

Book IV

- [A] l. 268 friend > friend,
- [D] l. 289 Paradise > Paradise wall
- [A] l. 363 comb > comb:
- [A] l. 379 Sir! > Sir?"
- [D] l. 516 charms.— > charms."—
- [A] l. 577 came > fell
- [A] l. 676 cake, > cake
- [A] l. 906 unlikely from > unlikely, from
- [C] l. 1048 fault > fault:
- [A] l. 1383 brake > brake,
- [B] l. 1387 mouth- > mouth—
- [A] l. 1423 him, bound > him bound
- [A] l. 1427 simply, > simply,— (corrected only in Dykes Campbell.)
- [A] l. 1428 saved— > saved
- [C] l. 1453 good > good,
- [E] l. 1536 time?" > time"?

Restored paragraphs: 69, 423, 902

Book V

- [B] l. 69 wedding-grown > wedding-gown
- [B] l. 308 from > from,
- [B] l. 471 bid > bid,

- [B] l. 953 bone > bone,
- [B] l. 991 thoat > throat
- [C] l. 1041 eaeh > each
- [B] l. 1094 Only > Only,
- [C] l. 1111 seat > seat,
- [B] l. 1529 town talk > town-talk
- [B] l. 1642 pang perhaps > pang, perhaps,
- [A] l. 1732 Send, only > Sends only
- [A] l. 2038 Utopia > Eutopia

Restored paragraphs: 108, 367, 1036, 1239

Book VI

- [B] l. 24 stretch! > stretch!"
- [A] l. 101 place, > place
- [B] l. 136 law > law!
- [A] l. 161 come, > come
- [B] l. 602 elsewhere," > elsewhere."
- [B] l. 1149 that > that,
- [A] l. 1343 last > last:
- [A] l. 1488 wife > wife,
- [B] l. 1525 a flame > a-flame
- [A] l. 1549 lay > lay.
- [B] l. 1897 dsimiss > dismiss
- [D] l. 2001 shirks > slinks

Restored paragraphs: 219, 596, 617, 1123, 1248, 1396, 1471,
1880

Book VII

- [C] l. 312 plainly wrong > plainly wrong!
- [A] l. 339 pain, > pain
- [A] l. 395 myself > myself,
- [B] l. 527 innocent! > innocent!"
- [A] l. 651 ill, > ill
- [B] l. 966 again > again,
- [B] l. 1047 Moreover > Moreover,

- [B] l. 1069 friend > friend,
- [B] l. 1134 out > out!
- [A] l. 1229 too > too.
- [A] l. 1255 fruit, > fruit
- [A] l. 1733 soul > soul:
- [C] l. 1734 body.— > body,—

Restored paragraphs: 158, 219, 471, 711, 873, 946, 1043,
1140, 1189, 1477, 1527, 1706

Book VIII

- [D] l. 7 *me* > me
- [D] l. 303 hound's > hounds'
- [A] l. 573 large > large;
- [A] l. 592 quietude > quietude,
- [A] l. 603 touched, > touched
- [B] l. 640 Text > Text:
- [A] l. 746 that > what
- [A] l. 746 Rome, > Rome
- [A] l. 784 assert, > assert
- [A] l. 850 play, > play
- [B] l. 901 Shame!— > Shame!—
- [B] l. 1048 foe. > foe,
- [A] l. 1515 holiday, > holiday
- [A] l. 1568 friends, > friends
- [A] l. 1586 Fisc, > Fisc
- [D] l. 1791 scapegrace > scapegrace

Restored paragraphs: 74, 138, 420, 472, 1030, 1056, 1156,
1207, 1337, 1635

Book IX

- [B] l. 16 two— > two—
- [A] l. 21 And > To
- [B] l. 429 gave. > gave."
- [B] l. 439 Yea > Yet
- [C] l. 666 over pensive > over-pensive

- [A] l. 716 what,— > what—
- [A] l. 717 end,— > end—
- [A] l. 723 view > review
- [A] l. 742 to coach > to couch
- [A] l. 841 end > end,
- [A] l. 841 that, > that
- [C] l. 960 foot ' > foot!'
- [A] l. 1108 dream > dream.
- [A] l. 1287 push > push,
- [B] l. 1521 years: > years:'

Restored paragraphs: 212, 238, 642, 719, 1327, 1505

Book X

- [C] l. 139 Formos > Formosus
- [B] l. 231 evoluble > evolvable
- [A] l. 360 forewent > forwent
- [B] l. 372 lie! > lie!"
- [A] l. 385 studied > studiedst
- [A] l. 669 old, > old
- [A] l. 695 Guido, > Guido
- [A] l. 698 cowardice! > cowardice:
- [A] l. 701 these! > these.
- [A] l. 728 the fragments > its fragments
- [A] l. 737 root > root,
- [B] l. 737 beside. > beside
- [A] l. 741 proved, > proved
- [A] l. 832 at home > at-home
- [B] l. 949 birthright badge > birthright-badge
- [A] l. 977 couple's Comparini's cry > couple's cry
- [B] l. 987 under, > under me,
- [A] l. 1041 sown, > sown
- [A] l. 1041 seed, > seed
- [A] l. 1100 scapegrace > 'scapegrace
- [A] l. 1159 long, > long

- [A] l. 1205 world, > world
- [A] l. 1507 rich > rich.
- [B] l. 1883 fact that > fact than
- [B] l. 2080 make > made

Restored paragraphs: 964, 1429, 1790, 1954

Book XI

- [A] l. 22 trick, > trick
- [A] l. 211 hoped > hoped,
- [A] l. 217 month, > month
- [A] l. 236 kneeling place > kneeling-place
- [A] l. 279 lost > lose
- [A] l. 456 creature,— life > creature,—life,
- [B] l. 602 disbelieve > disbelieve?
- [B] l. 622 made > make
- [B] l. 830 wolf s > wolf's
- [B] l. 1074 first > first,
- [E] l. 1219 face?" > face"?
- [A] l. 1390 true. > true?
- [B] l. 1410 soprano, > soprano
- [B] l. 1417 both! > both!"
- [A] l. 1432 her > her.
- [A] l. 1437 one > one,
- [A] l. 1440 nature Try > nature! Try
- [A] l. 1497 afterward > afterward! [Brown]
> afterward. [Dykes Campbell]
Brown adopted in 1889
- [A] l. 1610 damned > damned.
- [B] l. 1618 escape > escape?
- [A] l. 1824 askance > askance,
- [A] l. 1836 before! > before!"
- [A] l. 1864 not? > not.
- [B] l. 2013 life. > life:
- [A] l. 2071 birth > birth,

- [A] l. 2072 the streamlet > not streamlet
- [A] l. 2194 ortune > fortune
- [A] l. 2276 Count > “Count
- [A] l. 2361 peace, > peace

Book XII

- [A] l. 3 reached, > reached
- [B] l. 141 mid > 'mid
- [A] l. 153 way > way. [Brown]
 > way? [Dykes Campbell]
 Brown adopted in 1889
- [C] l. 202 Count > Count,
- [B] l. 337 thanks! > thanks!'
- [B] l. 368 *Quod* > *Quod*,
- [B] l. 405 Eh! > Eh?
- [B] l. 494 do > do,
- [B] l. 560 souls' > soul's
- [A] l. 661 world, > world
- [A] l. 819 ancies > fancies

Restored paragraphs: 117, 317, 491, 671, 867

Quotation marks adjusted for clarity:

- l. 458 " added to indicate a break in Bottini's letter
- l. 459 " added to indicate a new speaker (the monk's sermon which ends at l. 646)
- l. 647 " added to indicate that Bottini's letter resumes
- l. 750 " added to indicate that Bottini's letter ends

Quotations within quotations adjusted double to single:

- ll. 651–53
- ll. 734–35
- ll. 745–46
- l. 750

**Browning and His Text; or,
"Friend, did you need an optic glass...?"¹**

There is a substantial body of evidence to support the conclusion reached by many Browning scholars that the poet took considerable pains, over time, to ensure the accuracy of his text as it progressed from manuscript to publication, and also from edition to edition. But in editing *The Ring and the Book*, using the 1888-89 *Poetical Works* as copy-text, we have concluded that, while there is no doubt that the poet attempted to exercise strict editorial control over his work, he was not always successful. The evidence in the 1888-89 text indicates that, for a variety of possible reasons, Browning failed to notice many deficiencies in his text as it was prepared for publication as well as for subsequent reissue.

A recent observation concerning Browning's care with his text is instructive:

He [Browning] gave extensive, minute attention to every detail of his individual and collected editions, often requiring multiple stages of proof....[A]nd in his last years he carefully prepared the printer's copy and closely scrutinized the proofs for every page of the massive *Poetical Works* of 1888-89.²

This view is substantiated by letters that Browning wrote to his publishers at various stages of his career. As early as October 31, 1855, in a letter to his then publisher George Chapman,

¹ "Prologue" to *Asolando*, 11.

² Allan C. Dooley, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville, 1992): 2. See also his "Browning's *Poetical Works* of 1888-1889," *SBHC* 7 (1979): 43-58.

Browning commented on the two volumes of *Men and Women* to be published on November 17:

In looking over the book, I find a few errors, and a passage or two susceptible of improvement—but I avoid calling attention to them by making a list of *errata* My wife is not of my opinion about the undesirableness of appending the *errata*. Of course, I should prefer by a great deal that they were adopted. What do you say? I attach importance to mere stops. . . .³

As Michael Meredith has demonstrated,⁴ Browning paid close attention to revisions and corrections for the 1868 edition of the *Poetical Works*, as well as to new editions of that text in 1870 and 1875. In December 1867 he wrote to George Smith: "I will begin whenever you like,—and give the edition so thorough a looking-to, if your printers will mind me, that it shall be the ultimate thing, and all revisions cease afterwards" (98). Meredith's meticulous examination of the corrections and revisions required for the two subsequent editions moves him to comment somewhat wryly that "[s]uch words were... marked more by their enthusiasm and good intentions than by

³ *New Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (New Haven, 1950): 82–83. The final sentence in the above quotation is perhaps the most frequently cited evidence provided by Browning about his interest in textual minutiae. But the rest of the sentence, and his postscript, suggest, at least, that he is not compulsive about details: "but there are a few blunders that affect the sense, and not all of them my fault, neither. I subjoin the list; do what you think best." The postscript provides an even more flexible afterthought: "No I won't send the list of minor blunders, for if one is altered, all should be, but just mention two that affect the sense and are the printers" (83–84).

⁴ "Learning's Crabbed Text: A Reconsideration of the 1868 Edition of Browning's *Poetical Works*," *SBHC* 13 (1985): 97–107.

fulfillment" (98). But he nonetheless concludes, on the basis of his analysis, that "[t]he care and patience [Browning] spent over each revision are remarkable, but characteristic of the man who stated that he attached importance to the mere stops" (107).

Additional evidence, particularly concerning the 1888-89 *Poetical Works*, is provided by Michael Hancher in letters from Browning, again to his publisher George Smith.⁵ On November 12, 1887 he wrote, by way of explaining his decision not to include biographical and explanatory notes to the poems, "I am correcting them carefully, and *that* must suffice." A month and a half later, on December 31, he seemed satisfied that he was making progress:

Let us be content with making the edition as correct—in the printing at least—as possible. Indeed I have gone over them [i.e., the texts of those poems previously collected in the 1868 *Poetical Works*] so often that I see little or nothing to amend in the poems, except in the punctuation. (25)

By January 13, 1888, he offered Smith further assurance: "I have thoroughly corrected the six volumes of the Works, and can let you have them at once: the corrections of the rest will give me even less trouble" (26). Hancher also addresses the issue of Browning's attention to his text by citing letters related to individual volumes:

Browning evidently kept a sharp eye on the production of all sixteen of the volumes. . . . For example, Browning returned proof for Volume 3 on 6 May 1888, commenting, "I have had, as usual, to congratulate myself on the scrupulous accuracy of the Printers"; on 31 December he returned

⁵ "Browning and the *Poetical Works* of 1888-89," *The Browning Newsletter* 6 (1971): 25-27.

proofs of Volume 11, corrected carefully; and he returned “the corrected Proofs of Vol. XV” on 1 May 1889. (26)

In light of all this evidence, especially that related to the 1888-89 *Poetical Works*, one must wonder how and why it happened that, in careful preparation for his final collected edition,⁶ and *also* in his review of volumes one to ten of the 1888-89 text for the planned 1889 reissue, Browning failed to observe the large number of instances in his text that, according to his previous practice, required revision and/or correction. As noted in the Textual Preface (xvii), before departing England for Italy Browning reviewed the 1888-89 *Poetical Works* and left a record of emendations necessary for a planned second impression: for the three volumes (eight to ten) containing *The Ring and the Book*, he identified ninety-three such corrections. In addition to those he noted in his review, we have identified seventy-seven instances which require emendation,⁷ and, as well, we have restored sixty-one lost verse paragraphs (see above, p. 802).

Even granting that *The Ring and the Book* is an enormously difficult poem to proofread, the number of emendations necessary to the text as Browning left it—two hundred and thirty-one—seems inordinately high.⁸ Moreover the list of emendations included in the Textual Notes to this edition indicates that, for the most part, the errors that Browning himself caught in preparation for the reissue, and those he missed, are not difficult to identify.⁹ Many are visually identifiable ty-

⁶ Which he must have proofread at least twice. See Dooley, *Author and Printer*, 23-53.

⁷ Not including seven cases in which we have silently emended the text where lines of verse are indented incorrectly by one or more spaces.

⁸ Despite the fact that some (a relatively small number) of the emendations are the result of transmission problems in earlier stages of the text.

pographical errors, some are evident cases of broken type, and others are more substantive, though not quite as obvious.

There is no definitive evidence, biographical or textual, that would explain Browning's failure to notice so many textual deficiencies either in the preparation of the 1888-89 *Poetical Works*, or in his work on the first ten volumes of that text for the anticipated 1889 reissue. But we can offer some speculations, based on circumstantial evidence, beyond the tempting conclusion that Browning was simply careless.

The poet apparently worked steadily on the revisions and corrections for the intended reprint of the 1888-89 text (as he had on the edition itself; see also Kelley and Peterson, 90-99)¹⁰ until the day before he departed for Italy on August 29. Although seemingly in robust health, Browning had suffered through some of the maladies of the aged, "colds, rheumatism and asthma," two years earlier at the age of seventy-five. Indeed, by 1889 "[n]umerous people in London as a matter of fact had begun to notice unmistakable signs of decline in Robert Browning."¹¹ Since he died less than three and a half months after leaving England, it is quite possible that ill-health and fatigue had diminished his powers of concentration by the time he began working on his revisions and corrections. Related to this, detailed work such as proofing and revising

⁹ A number of examples of the corrections beyond the ninety-three noted by Browning are reproduced, from the 1888-89 copy-text, on p. 817 of this edition. A few brief explanatory comments on some of these examples will suffice, given their self-evident nature: in the first, the text leaves a full space between "faithful" and the closing quotation marks. The exclamation mark (as printed in 1868) is clearly missing. A misspelling occurs in example four, a typographical error in example five, and broken type in numbers six, eight, and nine.

¹⁰ See xvii, note 2.

¹¹ William Irvine and Park Honan, *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet* (New York, 1974): 511, 513.

minute and sometimes insignificant textual details is, even when one is in the best of health, mind-numbing work. And, of course, Browning was dealing with material so thoroughly familiar to him that his mind might easily have wandered. It was, perhaps, one go-through too many. Ill health, compounded by these other conditions, would not be conducive to accuracy. Nor would a disability that may well have severely compromised his proofreading abilities: myopia.

Several photographs taken after 1870 of Browning writing and reading are extant.¹² They are posed, and show the poet's eyes at some distance from the paper on which he is purportedly writing and the book which he is purportedly reading. The only candid (it appears) images of Browning reading are sketches of him perusing a book, drawn by W.W. Story in 1869 (see p. 816). An eye specialist whom we have consulted has expressed the firm opinion that both drawings clearly indicate myopia.

The only available piece of biographical evidence concerning Browning's eyesight, that provided by Mrs. Sutherland Orr in her comments on Browning's final decade, supports this observation:

His eyesight defied all obstacles of bad paper and ancient type, and there was anxiety as well as pleasure to those about him in his unfailing confidence in its powers. He never wore spectacles, nor had the least consciousness of requiring them. He would read an old closely printed volume by the waning light of a winter afternoon, positively refusing to use a lamp. Indeed his preference of the faintest natu-

¹² See, for example, those on pp. 84–85 of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (vol. 32), *Victorian Poets Before 1850*, ed. William E. Fredeman and Ira B. Nadel (Detroit, 1984).

ral light to the best that could be artificially produced was perhaps the one suggestion of coming change. He used for all purposes a single eye; for the two did not combine in their action, the right serving exclusively for near, the left for distant objects. This was why in walking he often closed the right eye; while it was indispensable to his comfort in reading, not only that the light should come from the right side, but that the left should be shielded from any luminous object, like the fire, which even at the distance of half the length of a room would strike on his field of vision and confuse the near sight.¹³

After reading this passage our consultant was even more convinced. Indeed, he expressed the view that, if the above description is accurate, someone with this degree of visual impairment would surely have benefited from corrective lenses.

Although, as Mrs. Orr reports, Browning did not wear eye-glasses (a touch of vanity, perhaps, as she implies?) there is no question that he was familiar with spectacles and their uses.¹⁴ There are eleven references to “optics,” “optic glass,” and “spectacles” in his work, all but two of them post-1870. One wonders if the question posed in the “Prologue” to *Asolando*, published on December 12, 1889, the day of the poet’s death, “Friend, did you need an optic glass...?,” was not perhaps self-referential. In any case, it is likely that myopia, possibly severe, together with the other factors mentioned above, may explain Browning’s apparent inability to perceive the numerous deficiencies in his final text.

¹³ *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (London, 1908): 363.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of spectacles and related matters in Victorian England see “The Philosophy of the Eye: Spectacles, Cameras and the New Vision,” in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Chicago, 1989): 103–141.



W. W. Story, **Robert Browning Reading - Double Portrait**. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1954.5.

**Reproduction of examples of emendations
to the 1888-89 copy-text, actual size.**

Book and line

! ”

“ Well done, thou good and faithful ” she approves :

I 1190

--

But for Count Guido Franceschini, he-

II 1235

♪

Comments the old Religious—“ So much good

IV 1453

↑

Fumes in my brain, fire in my throat, my wife

V 991

C

Fire, and each limb as languid . . . ah, sweet lords,

V 1041

|

Wrong, wrong and always wrong ! how plainly wrong :

VII 312

--

Shame ! — and so ends my period prettily.

VIII 901

|

“ ‘ I saved my head nor sacrificed my foot : ’

IX 960

us

“ ‘ Had been, no lack, before Formosa long,

X 139

” ?

My old name turned henceforth to . . . shall I say

“ ‘ He that received the ordure in his face ? ’ ”

XI 1219

Select Bibliography

Editions

The three editions with textual significance are the first (4 volumes, 1868-69), the second (4 volumes, 1872 and 1882-83—see Textual Notes and Commentary, “Primary Materials” [c]), and that included in volumes 8-10 of the 16-volume *Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, 1888-89. *The Ring and the Book* volumes in the latter are dated 1888 (vol. 8) and 1889 (vols. 9-10). See Textual Preface. Most of the subsequent editions of Browning’s poetry, such as the “Florentine edition” by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (12 volumes, 1898), and the “Centenary edition” by F. G. Kenyon (10 volumes, 1912) print the revised text of 1889, also as described in the Textual Preface.

Richard D. Altick’s Penguin edition of *The Ring and the Book* (1971, rpt. 1981, 1990, now out of print) uses the text of the first edition and provides generous notes, which are included, in a modified and updated form, and added to, in this edition.

Several major multi-volume editions of Browning’s collected works are currently in progress. *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Roma A. King Jr. *et al.*, occupies volumes 7, 8, and 9 of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning* (13 volumes published as of 2001). This edition, published by Ohio University Press and Baylor University (the *Ohio Browning*), prints the 1889 text and records all variants. The Clarendon Press has published 8 volumes to date of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Ian Jack, Margaret Smith, Michael Meredith, *et al.* (the *Oxford Browning*). It prints the text of 1888-89 and records all variants, accidental and substantive. Volume 7 contains Books I-

IV of *The Ring and the Book and Volume 8 Books V–VIII*. Finally, John Woolford and Daniel Karlin are editing *The Poems of Browning* in the Longman Annotated English Poets series, with 2 volumes published by 2001. This edition prints from first editions, and records substantive variants.

Reference Works and Bibliographies

Cook, A.K. *A Commentary upon Browning's "The Ring and the Book."* Oxford, 1920.

De Vane, William Clyde. *A Browning Handbook.* 2nd ed. New York, 1955.

Shroyer, Richard J. and Collins, Thomas J. *A Concordance to the Poems and Plays of Robert Browning.* 7 vols. New York, 1996.

See also the informative “Introduction” and “Appendices” to the *Oxford Browning* cited above.

The standard bibliography is Leslie N. Broughton, Clark S. Northup, and Robert Pearsall, *Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1830–1950*, Ithaca, 1953. It is continued by William S. Peterson in *Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: An Annotated Bibliography, 1951–1970*, The Browning Institute, 1974. Annual bibliographies of studies in Victorian literature are published in the *MLA International Bibliography* and in the summer issues of *Victorian Studies*, which also contain notices of book reviews. Also useful are the annual “Guide(s) to the Year’s Work in Victorian Poetry” published in *Victorian Poetry*.

Biography and Criticism

Abbreviations of journal titles cited more than once:

BIS: Browning Institute Studies

PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America

PQ: Philological Quarterly

SBHC: Studies in Browning and His Circle

SP: Studies in Philology

UTQ: University of Toronto Quarterly

VP: Victorian Poetry

Altick, Richard D. and Loucks, James F. II. *Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book."* Chicago, 1968.

Armstrong, Isobel. "The Problem of Representation in *The Ring and the Book*: Politics, Aesthetics, Language." *Browning e Venezia*. Ed. S. Perosa. Florence, 1991.

—. "The *Ring and the Book*: The Uses of Prolixity." In *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*. London, 1969. Ch. 8.

Austin, Kay. "Pompilia: 'Saint and Martyr Both.'" *VP* 17 (1979): 287–301.

Bailey, Suzanne. "Somatic Wisdom: Refiguring Bodies in *The Ring and the Book*." *Victorian Studies* 41 (1998): 61–70.

Brady, Anne P. *Pompilia: A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book."* Athens, Ohio, 1988.

Brown, Susan. "Pompilia: The Woman (in) Question." *VP* 34 (1996): 15–37.

Buckler, William E. *Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book."* New York, 1985.

Columbus, Claudette K. "The *Ring and the Book*: A Masque for the Making of Meaning." *PQ* 57 (1974): 237–55.

- Corrigan, Beatrice. *Curious Annals: New Documents Relating to Browning's Roman Murder Story*. Toronto, 1956.
- Coyle, William. "Molinos: 'The Subject of the Day' in *The Ring and the Book*." *PMLA* 68 (1952): 308-14.
- Cramer, Maurice B. "The *Ring and the Book*: 'Underthought.'" *Directions in Literary Criticism*. Ed. S. Weintraub and P. Young. University Park, Pa., 1973.
- Cundiff, Paul. *Browning's Ring Metaphor and Truth*. Metuchen, N.J., 1972.
- De Vane, William Clyde. "The Virgin and the Dragon." *Yale Review* ns 37 (1947): 33-46.
- Doane, Margaret S. "Guido Is Saved: Interior and Exterior Monologues in Book XI of *The Ring and the Book*." *SBHC* 5 (1977): 53-64.
- Findlay, Linda M. "Taking the Measure of *Différence*: Deconstruction and *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 29 (1991): 401-14.
- Gest, John Marshall. *The Old Yellow Book, Source of Browning's The Ring and the Book: A New Translation with Explanatory Notes and Critical Chapters Upon the Poem and Its Source*. Philadelphia, 1927.
- Gibson, Mary Ellis. "The Criminal Body in Victorian Britain: The Case of *The Ring and the Book*." *BIS* 18 (1990): 73-93.
- Griffin, W. Hall and Minchin, Harry C. *The Life of Robert Browning*. 3rd ed. London, 1938.
- Gridley, Roy E. "Browning's Pompilia." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968): 64-83.
- _____. "Browning's Two Guidos." *UTQ* 37 (1967): 51-68.
- Hair, Donald S. *Browning's Experiments With Genre*. Toronto, 1972.
- _____. *Robert Browning's Language*. Toronto, 1999.
- Hassett, Constance W. "Browning's Caponsacchi: Convert and Apocalyptic." *PQ* 60 (1981): 487-500.

- Hiemstra, Anne. "Browning and History: Synecdoche and Symbolism in *The Ring and the Book*." *SBHC* 13 (1985): 47–58.
- Hodell, Charles W. *The Old Yellow Book, Source of Browning's The Ring and the Book, in Complete Photo-Reproduction, with Translation, Essay, and Notes*. 2nd ed. Washington, 1916.
- Honan, Park. *Browning's Characters*. New Haven, 1961.
- Irvine, William and Honan, Park. *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet: A Biography of Robert Browning*. New York, 1974.
- James, Henry. "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*." *Quarterly Review* 217 (1912): 68–87. Reprinted in his *Notes on Novelists*, 1914.
- Johnson, E.D.H. "Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of *The Ring and the Book*." *UTQ* 31 (1961): 20–41.
- Joyce, John. "Music's Ternary Form as Organizing Principle for Monologues II–XI of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 18 (1980): 301–08.
- Killham, John. "Browning's 'Modernity': *The Ring and the Book* and Relativism." *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*. Ed. I. Armstrong. London, 1969. Ch. 7.
- King, Roma A., ed. Double number commemorating the centennial of *The Ring and the Book*. *VP* 7, Parts 3/4 (Autumn–Winter, 1968).
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience*. New York, 1957.
- . "Is Guido Saved? The Meaning of Browning's Conclusion to *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 10 (1972): 289–305.
- McElderry, Bruce R. Jr. "The Narrative Structure of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*." *Research Studies of the State College of Washington* 11 (1943): 193–233.
- . "Victorian Evaluation of *The Ring and the Book*." *Research Studies of the State College of Washington* 7 (1939): 75–89.

- McGhee, Richard D. "The luck that lies beyond the man': Guido's Salvation in *The Ring and the Book*." *BIS* 5 (1977): 87-104.
- Mattheisen, Paul F. "Uproar in the Echo: the Existential Aesthetic of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*." *Literary Monographs* (University of Wisconsin) 3 (1970): 125-84.
- Meredith, Michael. "A Botched Job: Publication of *The Ring and the Book*." *SBHC* 15 (1988): 41-50.
- Petch, Simon. "Equity and Natural Law in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 35 (1997): 105-11.
- _____. "Law, Narrative, and Anonymity in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (1992): 311-33.
- Petit, Alexander. "Place, Time, and Parody in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 31 (1993): 95-106.
- Phipps, Charles T. "Adaptation from the Past, Creation for the Present: A Study of Browning's 'The Pope'." *SP* 65 (1968): 702-22.
- _____. "Browning's Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi: Warrior-Priest, Dantean Lover, Critic of Society." *English Literary History* 36 (1969): 696-718.
- Plotinsky, Melvin L. "The Kingdom of Infinite Space." *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 11 (1969): 837-49.
- Potkay, Adam. "The Problem of Identity and the Grounds for Judgment in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 25 (1987): 143-57.
- Rigg, Patricia D. *Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in "The Ring and the Book"*. Madison, N.J., 1999.
- Raymond, William O. *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning*. 2nd ed. Toronto, 1965.
- Rundle, Vivienne J. "'Will you let them murder me?': Guido and the Reader in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 27 (1989): 99-114.

- Shaw, W. David. "Browning's Murder Mystery: *The Ring and the Book* and Modern Theory." *VP* 27 (1989): 79–98.
- . *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning*. Ithaca, 1968.
- Slinn, E. Warwick. "Language and Truth in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 27, Parts 3/4 (Autumn–Winter 1989): 115–33.
- Sullivan, Mary Rose. *Browning's Voices in "The Ring and the Book": A Study of Method and Meaning*. Toronto, 1969.
- Thompson, Gordon W. "Authorial Detachment and Imagery in *The Ring and the Book*." *Studies in English Literature* 10 (1970): 669–86.
- Tucker, Herbert F. Jr. "Representation and Repristination: Virginity in *The Ring and the Book*." *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*. Ed. L. Davis. Albany, N.Y., 1993.
- Walker, William. "Pompilia and Pompilia." *VP* 22 (1984): 47–63.
- Ward, Candace. "Damning Herself Praiseworthy: Nullifying Women in *The Ring and the Book*." *VP* 34 (1996): 1–14.
- Wasserman, George R. "The Meaning of Browning's Ring-Figure." *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 420–26.
- Wilt, Judith. "The Laughter of Caponsacchi." *VP* 18 (1980): 337–58.
- Yarrill, Eric H. "Browning's 'Roman Murder Story' as Recorded in a Hitherto Unknown Italian Contemporary Manuscript." *Baylor Bulletin* 42 (1939): no. 4.
- Yetman, Michael. "Count Guido Franceschini: The Villain as Artist in *The Ring and the Book*." *PMLA* 87 (1972): 1093–1102.
- Zietlow, Paul. "The Ascending Concerns of *The Ring and the Book*: Reality, Moral Vision, and Salvation." *SP* 84 (1987): 194–218.