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## Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

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## TEMPORAL HYBRIDITY IN THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

You know the tale already.

—Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* (1.372)

Whereas the previous chapter argued that *Aurora Leigh* juxtaposes discrete fragments of lyric and narrative to have the two modes comment on each other, this chapter contends that Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* achieves a seamless blend of the two modes. Browning's poem is, nonetheless, a complex, changeable work, and numerous genres may have influenced it. One study claims that the poem has links to the epic, the novel, narrative poetry, novels in verse, romance, the morality play, the medieval story cycle, and the novella.<sup>1</sup> I do not think it follows, however, that "possessing attributes of several literary genres, the poem belongs to none."<sup>2</sup> Critics agree that most, if not all, of the ten internal books are dramatic monologues,<sup>3</sup> and the dramatic monologue

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1. Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, II, *Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of The Ring and the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 7–8.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. Many critics label the Pope's speech as a soliloquy rather than a dramatic mono-

is the essential genre of *The Ring and the Book*. The form itself seamlessly blends lyric and narrative in a very particular way, and all ten monologues share this modal blending. Within these parameters, however, the contents of individual monologues vary in their lyricism or narrativity. The poem as a whole exhibits a similar blend of lyric and narrative temporality peculiar to the individual dramatic monologues; the temporal movement across monologues, from the occasion of one to that of the next, mimics on a larger scale the moving time of discourse within a single dramatic monologue. And in *The Ring and the Book* as a whole, the repetition of the story in some respects mimics the features of epic, creating a similar audience response. The story's retellings diminish its narrative interest, however, and refocus attention on static character traits, and on the importance of discourse—key elements of lyric and of the dramatic monologue. Repetition on the smaller scale of alliteration also emphasizes the level of discourse and characterization, and readers see this pervasive technique as the author's, rather than any individual character's. Browning narrativizes the moment of discourse, but does so in part to serve the static interests of lyric. Yet these static interests are also placed in the service of narrative's rhetorical project: engaging the reader's judgment.

## THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE'S RHETORICAL RELATION TO LYRIC AND NARRATIVE

We cannot understand the mixture of lyric and narrative in *The Ring and the Book* without first understanding the conventional relationship of lyric and narrative within the dramatic monologue in general. Critical discussions of the dramatic monologue have often placed it in an intermediate position between lyric and drama, or between lyric and narrative, primarily based on rhetorical considerations. Some of the narrower definitions of the form are prescriptive about the fictional rhetorical situation, focusing on the relationship between the speaker and the fictional

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logue. The framing books 1 and 12 are written in Browning's own voice, and hence are not dramatic monologues in any conventional sense. Morse Peckham, however, claims that "Book I is a dramatic monologue uttered by Robert Browning" because "the Robert Browning of Book I is to be conceived as interpreting the documents according to his own interests—necessarily and ineluctably." More broadly, Peckham argues that Browning, influenced by nineteenth-century historiography, recognizes the author's bias in each of his historical documents, and recognizes his own bias as historiographer. "Historiography and *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Poetry* 6.3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1968), 245, 246.

addressee.<sup>4</sup> Several influential studies instead emphasize the rhetorical effects on the reader. Isobel Armstrong, for instance, stresses the dual audience responses in what she calls “double poems”—a category which includes dramatic monologues. A double poem is simultaneously “not only the *subject's* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique. It is, as it were, reclassified as drama in the act of being literal lyric expression. To re-order lyric expression as drama is to give it a new content and to introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique.”<sup>5</sup> In his foundational study, Robert Langbaum emphasizes the “tension between sympathy and moral judgment” in the reader’s response to the dramatic monologue.<sup>6</sup> The audience is able to sympathize with an immoral or emotionally unstable speaker because the poet has established a model for such identification, by seeming to project his own vital consciousness into his creation.<sup>7</sup> While this identification takes place, readers “remai[n] aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of under-

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4. Ina Beth Sessions suggests an elaborate scheme for labeling dramatic monologues based on the presence or absence of seven formal characteristics: “A Perfect dramatic monologue . . . has the definite characteristics of speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present.” “The Dramatic Monologue,” *PMLA* 62.2 (June 1947), 508. More recently, W. David Shaw has emphasized the play of vocatives and apostrophes in the speaker-auditor relationship: “If pressed to offer a one-sentence definition of the genre, I should be tempted to say that a dramatic monologue is a poem of one-sided conversation in which the swerve of lyric apostrophe away from rhetoric often deflects the speaker from his ostensible purpose of persuading or manipulating a silent auditor.” “Lyric Displacement in the Victorian Monologue: Naturalizing the Vocative,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52.3 (December 1997): 303. While Shaw draws on Jonathan Culler’s analysis of apostrophe, Shaw’s discussion runs counter to Culler’s thoughts on the relationship between apostrophe and the dramatic monologue: “Apostrophes trouble attempts to read poems as dramatic monologues.” Jonathan Culler, “Changes in the Study of the Lyric,” in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 40. Ivan Kreilkamp also focuses on the role of voice in the dramatic monologue, claiming it is “like the lyric, a form of print culture defined by its mimicry of voice; yet, unlike the lyric, it complicates this mimicry by calling attention to the difference between author and speaker,” creating a tension between voice and print that he associates with the Victorian novel. Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157.

5. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12. Armstrong’s position seems consistent with Herbert Tucker’s earlier claim that in a dramatic monologue “the business of articulation, of putting oneself into words, compromises the self it would justify; it disintegrates the implicit claim of self-presence in the lyric into a rhetorical fabric of self-presentation” and turns the speaker into “an object of interpretation.” Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., “From Monomania to Monologue: ‘St. Simeon Stylites’ and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue,” *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (Summer 1984): 125, 126.

6. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1957), 85.

7. *Ibid.*, 94.

standing,"<sup>8</sup> and the greater the speaker's immorality, the greater the tension created by our suspension of judgment.

More recently, James Phelan has offered alternative rhetorical definitions of dramatic monologue, lyric, and narrative, and sympathy and judgment again play crucial roles. For Phelan, narrative invites judgment, while lyric invites sympathetic identification with the speaker. He claims that "in narrative internal judgments of characters (and narrators) are required, while in lyric such judgments are suspended until we take the step of evaluation."<sup>9</sup> A lyric poem instead "allows readers to project themselves into the poem," but for Phelan a necessary precondition for such identification is that either "the distinction between speaker and author does not exist," or if there is a distinction, the speaker is not very individualized.<sup>10</sup> Phelan disagrees with Langbaum by claiming that the dramatic monologue does not evoke the reader's sympathetic identification with the speaker; rather, since "the implied author and the speaker are distinct figures . . . the authorial audience remains in the observer role."<sup>11</sup> Although reading a dramatic monologue "typically involves judging the character" this judgment is not necessary in Phelan's view, and when present is subordinated to "our coming to know the character."<sup>12</sup> Phelan's emphasis on the revelation of character as the purpose of the dramatic monologue is the one crucial point on which he and Langbaum agree. For despite the predominance of sympathy and judgment in his discussion of the form, Langbaum does explicitly relegate those audience responses as subsidiary effects of character revelation: "To present in their original concreteness, to *evoke*, as we say, a person, idea, or historical period, is the whole purpose of the dramatic

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8. *Ibid.*, 96. Some critics have since questioned the universality of such reader responses. Glennis Byron finds Langbaum's emphasis on sympathy misleading, especially in dramatic monologues by women, and she recommends we focus instead on the social critiques launched through monologues by both male and female authors. Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, *The New Critical Idiom*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 2003), 59. Cynthia Scheinberg claims that she finds it impossible to suspend her judgment of the Duke in "My Last Duchess" and sympathize with him, and that more generally "a reader's capacity for sympathy is almost always linked to a reader's cultural, political, and gendered identity" rather than being a universal constant. Cynthia Scheinberg, "Recasting 'sympathy and judgment': Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 35.2 (Summer 1997): 178, 176.

9. James Phelan, "Character and Judgment in Narrative and in Lyric: Toward an Understanding of Audience Engagement in *The Waves*," in *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1996), 33.

10. *Ibid.*, 34, 32.

11. James Phelan, "Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's 'Home Burial,'" *Poetics Today* 25.4 (Winter 2004): 636.

12. *Ibid.*

monologue—of which purpose the particular perspective is the condition, and the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment the consequence.”<sup>13</sup> Phelan and Langbaum may disagree about the cognitive faculties involved, but both see the reader’s vital and tangible comprehension of the speaker as the *raison d’être*, and the defining feature, of the form.<sup>14</sup>

I agree that the revelation of character is the primary rhetorical purpose of the dramatic monologue, and is central to any definition of the genre. In the following pages, I shift attention away from character *per se*, however, and focus instead on the temporal dynamics through which a dramatic monologue communicates character to its reader. I do so not because character is unimportant, but rather because previous critics have already firmly established the importance of character, while they have given less sustained attention to the temporal features I discuss. In addition, a focus on the temporality of discourse allows me to reframe the dramatic monologue’s relation to lyric and narrative.

Phelan argues that the dramatic monologue is distinct from lyric and narrative and falls into a third category (which he calls *portraiture*). Langbaum, in contrast, uses rhetorical considerations to identify the dramatic monologue as a mixture of lyric and dramatic, or narrative, elements.<sup>15</sup> Dramatic monologues call attention to the speaker’s discourse, since they contain a “superabundance of expression, more words, ingenuity and argument than seem necessary for the purpose.”<sup>16</sup> This “superfluity and unaccountability of the dramatic monologue are antithetical to the structure of drama and narrative, where the point is precisely to achieve economy and accountability,” and such a superabundance must be attributed to the lyrical elements of the form.<sup>17</sup> This perceived antagonism between lyric and narrative in the dramatic monologue—their antithetical interests and the related tension between

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13. Langbaum, 140.

14. Isobel Armstrong is a noteworthy voice of dissent on this topic. She claims that “Browning’s monologues are not studies of character but studies of evolving states of feeling, psychological processes. . . . [T]he monologues . . . are never written for the primary purpose of exploring the ‘character’ or ‘motivation’ of particular speakers and this holds also for *The Ring and the Book*.” “A Note on the Conversion of Caponsacchi,” *Victorian Poetry* 6.3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1968): 271.

15. For the purposes of my study, drama has been implicitly conflated with narrative. I consider dramatic works as primarily narrative forms, presented in a different medium than works meant to be silently, privately read. Given the temporal basis for my definitions of lyric and narrative, the essential temporality of drama should clearly align it with narrative.

16. Langbaum, 182.

17. *Ibid.*, 188.

sympathy and judgment—has been a common feature in discussions of the form. Herbert Tucker articulates this modal antagonism in his claim that “character in the Browningsque dramatic monologue emerges as an interference effect between opposed yet mutually informative discourses: between an historical, narrative, metonymic text and a symbolic, lyrical, metaphoric text that adjoins it and jockeys with it for authority.”<sup>18</sup> I would like to question the necessity of this antipathy and competition between the two modes. If we instead focus on the *temporal* features of lyric and narrative, we find that the dramatic monologue seamlessly blends the two modes, creating a true hybrid, rather than a violent grafting, of lyric and narrative.

## THE TEMPORAL STRUCTURE OF DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES

The seamless blend of lyric and narrative temporalities in the dramatic monologue lies, as we shall see, in the method through which the poet communicates to the reader. The content of the communication, however, can be quite variable in its relation to lyric or narrative. All dramatic monologues will express the speaker’s character as the key part of their content (though it may be expressed indirectly). In most cases, the speaker’s character is static, rather than dynamic. Robert Langbaum suggests that the monologue’s subject matter is “habitual action,” which implies a sense of stasis, an unchanging or repetitive quality more typically associated with lyric than with narrative.<sup>19</sup> In this view, actions in dramatic monologues are interesting because they are emblems of an entire life, of a person’s basic character; the actions themselves are not the focus of the work.<sup>20</sup> James Phelan agrees: “In portraiture, events typically are present, but not because they are essential to the progression of a story of change but because they are an effective means to reveal character. Change is not present, because portraiture is focused on depicting a character at a particular moment or a particular phase of life that we understand as ongoing.”<sup>21</sup> While this is usually true, there

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18. Herbert F. Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 229–30.

19. Langbaum, 157.

20. According to Langbaum, character is victorious over action in the dramatic monologue. Langbaum, 182.

21. James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 153.

are some important exceptions—monologues that depict a speaker who has undergone (or is undergoing) a marked change in character. In *The Ring and the Book*, Caponsacchi's monologue discusses a past moment at which his sense of religious duty and his interactions with women underwent a dramatic change. In "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician" Karshish's letter enacts his present struggle between a newfound sense of wonder and faith and his long-held rationality and doubt. Thus, while character itself is frequently static in dramatic monologues, it need not be.

Similarly, the overt content of the speaker's utterance in any given dramatic monologue does not necessarily need to fit the lyric mode or the narrative mode. In this I agree with James Phelan, who argues that the dramatic monologue "is neutral on both change and stasis, since its point is neither event nor thought, belief, or situation but character."<sup>22</sup> The speaker may describe a related series of events, which constitutes a narrative. Such is the case in "Porphyria's Lover," whose speaker recounts the evening's shocking events in a fairly straightforward, chronological fashion: Porphyria came through a storm to his cottage (lines 1–7), stoked the fire and removed her dripping outer garments (8–13), and embraced him, declaring her love (14–21). After a brief allusion to their backstory (lines 22–29 hint she is unwilling to give up her family and their wealth to marry her less prosperous lover), we're told that the speaker decided to preserve her adoration of him by strangling her (31–41), and then propped her corpse against his body, where it has remained all evening (43–59). In other dramatic monologues, the

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22. Phelan, "Rhetorical," 635–36. Although he argues that "the opposition between sequence and stasis does not adequately pinpoint the difference between lyric and narrative," this opposition features prominently in his descriptions of the modes. Phelan, "Character," 31. While "narrative involves a sequence of related events during which the characters and/or their situations undergo some *change*," a lyric speaker describes a static situation or "his or her meditations on something." Phelan, "Rhetorical," 634, 635. In arguing that dramatic monologues can describe either static lyric states or dynamic narrative events, Phelan and I thus disagree with Elisabeth Howe, who locates a narrative element characteristic of dramatic monologues solely within the stories they tell: "One feature that relates the dramatic monologue to the novel—and differentiates it from the lyric—is its characteristic narrative element. Like the protagonists of a novel, Browning's personae have a past, and as in a novel we attend to the gradual unfolding of their story . . . or of a particularly significant incident in their lives." Elisabeth A. Howe, *The Dramatic Monologue, Studies in Literary Themes and Genres*, ed. Ronald Gottesman, no. 10 (New York: Twayne, 1996), 10. In contrast, Alan Sinfield suggests that the "dramatic monologue has very little plot." Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue, The New Critical Idiom*, ed. John D. Jump, no. 36 (London: Methuen, 1977), 3. I depart from all three critics in that I am about to argue that the narrative element constant to all dramatic monologues occurs at the level of *discourse*, not story.

speaker may instead describe a state of mind, or set of meditations, which form the atemporal subject matter of lyric. As the title suggests, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" is an example. The only narrative in the poem (if it can be called a narrative) is a cosmic one: "Ere stars were thundergirt, or piled / The heavens, God thought on me his child; / Ordained a life for me . . ." (14–16).<sup>23</sup> The reader does not focus on the "plot" of how God predestined Johannes for heaven, however, but rather on Johannes's twisted logic, and the pride and complacency it reveals. In contrast to other Browning poems taken as most exemplary of the dramatic monologue form, this speaker's dramatic situation is left almost entirely unspecified.<sup>24</sup> This vagueness of spatial and temporal setting enhances the poem's sense of a suspended moment, detached from the flow of time.<sup>25</sup> In "Johannes Agricola" we are drawn to lyric discourse, rather than narrative story.

Complex combinations of narrative and lyric subject matter are also possible, as in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." The first three stanzas focus on Roland's discovery of the path supposed to lead to the Dark Tower, events which seem to be in the recent past. The next four stanzas briefly and subjectively narrate the more distant past of Roland's long quest; later in stanzas XV–XVII he remembers two of his predecessors in the quest, and their eventual disgrace. Surrounding that reverie are stanzas VIII–XIV and XVIII–XXVIII, which describe in detail a landscape made lyrical by the almost hallucinatory affiliation of the surroundings with Roland's mental state:<sup>26</sup> nature is "starved [and] ignoble" (56), a horse embodies "grotesqueness" and "woe" (82), and

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23. This and all subsequent quotations from Robert Browning's works (including *The Ring and the Book*) are taken from *The Complete Works of Robert Browning with Variant Readings and Annotations*, eds. Roma A. King, Jr. et al., 16 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969–). Line numbers will be provided in parenthetical citations.

24. The poem's first lines—"There's heaven above, and night by night / I look right through its gorgeous roof"—do suggest Johannes is staring at the night sky while speaking, but even this scanty information is rendered less specific by the repetition of this activity "night by night" and by the possibility, supported by the context of his religious musings, that "heaven" here refers at least as much to an abstract eternal paradise as to the visible sky.

25. Herbert Tucker notes a similar atemporality: "Johannes makes past, present, and future not only continuous but simultaneous." *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 173.

26. Samuel L. Chell notes of the poem, "Barren, sterile nature . . . is consonant with the speaker's own lost hope and arrested energy." *The Dynamic Self: Browning's Poetry of Duration*. English Literary Studies, gen. ed. Samuel L. Macey, no. 32 (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1984), 19. Donald S. Hair says of Childe Roland, "What he meets in the wasteland are the horrors within his own soul." *Browning's Experiments with Genre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 85.

the willows are "suicidal" (118). And yet these sections describing the landscape have distinctively narrative elements. Roland repeatedly questions how the landscape came to such a condition, asking for explanatory narratives which are never provided: "What made those holes and rents" (69), "Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank / Soil to a splash?" (130–31), "What bad use was that engine for" (140). Roland also provides explicit cues to the temporal sequence of his motion through this landscape: "Back . . . again" (104), "A sudden" (109), "while" (121), "Then" (145), and "Now" (151). The epiphany of the last six stanzas, in which Roland realizes he has arrived at the tower and announces his success through song, is a lyrically intense moment, and yet it serves as the climax of Roland's protracted narrative, conferring retrospective meaning on his past. And while the poem is in the past tense, the vivid and unmediated experiences described convey a present-tense immediacy.<sup>27</sup> Lyric and narrative elements are interwoven, inseparable, and seemingly contradictory throughout "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Still other monologues feature neither lyric nor narrative as their predominant content. In "Bishop Blougram's Apology," the Bishop self-consciously structures his speech as an artful rhetorical argument, and draws attention to its logical steps through such phrases as: "Thus much conceded, still the first fact stays—" (49), "I mean to prove it in due time" (164), and "I mean to meet you on your own premise" (171). While there is a clear progression in his speech, the emphasis falls on the logical progression of rhetoric rather than the temporal progression of narrative.<sup>28</sup>

While a focus on the temporal content of a story (for those dramatic monologues in which the speaker recounts a narrative), or on the atemporal content of static conditions (for those in which the speaker provides lyric meditations), usefully illustrates the variety of subjects across dramatic monologues, it can obscure the temporal structuring common to all dramatic monologues. This common structure emerges only if we instead focus on the temporality of discourse. The dramatic monologue differs from many pure narratives in that it emphasizes the act of storytelling at least as much as the story events, drawing more of the reader's attention to the time of discourse. The dramatic monologue differs from pure lyric, however, in that the discourse noticeably *unfolds over time*, giving a prominence to temporal progression that is absent in

27. Chell also notes that "the poem has an unmistakably present-tense effect despite the past-tense form." Chell, 22.

28. Herbert Tucker finds similar sequentiality in "Cleon" based on the steps in the letter's argument. Tucker, however, places greater emphasis than I on the temporal aspect of this sequentiality. Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, 212.

lyric. Whereas the story content of dramatic monologues is quite variable, the crucial and unvarying feature of the form is the temporal progression within the discourse. There are, however, two ways of viewing the discourse of a dramatic monologue: it is a speech event which occurs both between the speaker and the fictional addressee, and between the poet and the reader.<sup>29</sup> This, of course, allows for the frequent disjunction between what the speaker consciously reveals to the addressee, and what he unwittingly reveals to the reader (hence creating the judgment which the reader uneasily suspends while sympathizing with the speaker). It also allows for temporal developments within the communication to the reader, and within the relationship between speaker and addressee.

All dramatic monologues reveal the speaker's character to the reader gradually, in stages. Rather than accumulating additional evidence for a character trait apparent at the start of the poem, a dramatic monologue intermittently unveils new aspects of the speaker's character, or later makes a previously unveiled trait so extreme that it seems to differ in kind (rather than merely in degree) from our previous conception of it. The reader's understanding of the speaker at the beginning of the poem and her understanding at its end markedly (sometimes shockingly) differ. A dramatic monologue will convey such character revelations in decisive moments, surprising turning points that alter the reader's assessment of the speaker and the poem.

To return to my previous examples, "Porphyria's Lover" contains two particularly shocking and abrupt moments of character revelation. The first occurs in line 41, when the speaker calmly narrates how he strangled Porphyria, transforming him in the reader's mind from a self-pitying suitor to a pathologically possessive murderer.<sup>30</sup> Many readers, myself included, would agree with U. C. Knoepfelmacher's claim that "[t]he last two lines of 'Porphyria's Lover' jar the reader almost as much as the strangling acknowledged in line 41."<sup>31</sup> Those last two lines

29. Ralph Rader makes a similar point, using "My Last Duchess" as his example, when he notes that "we imaginatively hear the words of the poem as spoken by the Duke" yet at the same time we attribute the poem's rhymes to the poet's craft, not to the Duke's speech act. "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (Autumn 1976): 133.

30. Ralph Rader also notes Browning's "need to prevent the reader from too early inferring the Lover's murderous insanity while at the same time clearly developing its probability," and he thinks that both the murder and his insanity are revealed in lines 37-41. "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic 'I' Poems and Their Theoretical Implications," *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (Summer 1984): 111.

31. U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Projection and the Female Other: Romanticism, Browning, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (Summer 1984): 153.

reveal another layer of the lover's insanity, and suggest that the entire poem may have been addressed to God: "And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (59–60)<sup>32</sup> That final exclamation could be read as an act of defiance and self-assertion, daring God to respond to the murder, and revealing unexpected depths of the speaker's egotism. More likely, though, the lines register mild surprise that God has not spoken (to scold him, or for some other, less obvious, purpose), and hence expose a delusional state previously unsuspected by the reader.<sup>33</sup> Few dramatic monologues contain moments of character revelation quite as shocking and melodramatic as those in "Porphyria's Lover," yet they do contain concentrated and well-defined moments at which the reader's understanding shifts, noticeably progressing over time. In "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," one such concentrated section is lines 13–20, which reveal the speaker's narcissism in thinking that God ordained every detail of his life before creating the heavens. His Antinomianism is later unveiled in especially vivid and macabre terms:

I have God's warrant, could I blend  
All hideous sins, as in a cup,  
To drink the mingled venoms up;  
Secure my nature will convert  
The draught to blossoming gladness fast:  
(33–37)

In the case of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," Roland quite consciously reveals his despair when he admits he is "not fit to cope / With that obstreperous joy success would bring" (21–22). Yet Roland is likely unaware of the self-loathing he indirectly but vividly reveals when he describes a gaunt horse: "Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe; / I never saw a brute I hated so; / He must be wicked to deserve such pain" (82–84). For as Donald Hair observes, "[H]is instinctive hatred for the horse's purported guilt is actually revulsion from his own guilt."<sup>34</sup> The poem ends soon after Roland realizes in an instant

32. John Maynard suggests that the dead Porphyria and God are "proto-listeners in the poem," and claims that God's silence spurs the reader's ethical response to the poem. "Reading the Reader in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues," in *Critical Essays on Robert Browning*, ed. Mary Ellis Gibson (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992): 74.

33. Herbert Tucker suggests "the Browningsque 'giveaway' of the final line . . . leaves us in doubt whether it is God's approval or reproof that is awaited." Tucker, "Monomania," 126.

34. Hair, *Browning's Experiments*, 85.

that he has found the Dark Tower. He compares the moment of insight to “a click / As when a trap shuts” (173–74), and says “Burningly it came on me all at once” (175). The same could be said for the reader’s insight into aspects of his character, or the character of any dramatic monologue’s speaker.

In some cases, dramatic monologues create additional temporal progression in the discourse viewed as an exchange between the speaker and a fictional interlocutor. To do so, they can imply developing responses from the interlocutor at different points in time, or emphasize the monologue’s relationship to the implied events that preceded or will follow the monologue itself.<sup>35</sup> “Andrea del Sarto,” for example, frequently implies Lucrezia’s responses to Andrea’s speech, suggesting both her physical movements—“You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?” (4), “Come from the window, love” (211)—and the questions and statements she directs to Andrea—“(What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo? / Do you forget already words like those?)” (199–200), “Must you go? / That Cousin here again? he waits outside?” (219–20). The poem’s opening suggests that an argument immediately preceded the monologue itself: “But do not let us quarrel any more” (1). And the final line—“Again the Cousin’s whistle! Go, my Love” (267)—implies Lucrezia’s imminent departure for her rendezvous with her “cousin.”

Some dramatic monologues blend together these sources of temporal progression (plot development within the speech’s story content, gradual revelation of the speaker’s character, development in the relationship with the addressee, and implied events before and after the discourse itself)—to create even more complex rhetorical effects and a heightened awareness of time’s passing. “The Laboratory” contains some narration of past events, but the poem’s narrative force derives from the dramatic situation, and what will likely happen soon after the monologue ends. The speaker “plots” in the sense of laying plans for future action—she is buying poison which she intends to administer to

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35. Loy D. Martin analyzes techniques through which Browning “signif[ies] an immediately contiguous past out of which the poem’s moment grows” and uses “Andrea del Sarto” as an example. He suggests that Browning can indicate the temporal continuity of the present with the past for a particular speaker in a particular setting through progressive verbs, temporal adverbs, and deictics and determiners. Loy D. Martin, *Browning’s Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 90, 84–95. Herbert Tucker, however, claims that in many Browning poems the opening lines “share the property of being aggressively first: they are lines that defy, interrupt, plead, yearn, or somehow intend a beginning. They register discontinuities that are no less striking for the fact that a reader is totally uninformed what they are discontinuous with.” Tucker, *Browning’s Beginnings*, 149.

her husband's mistress, most likely that very evening. The revelation of these future events is accompanied by a revelation of the speaker's character, and not just through the intended actions themselves. Rather, the bluntness of her question to the apothecary, "Which is the poison to poison her, prithce?" (4), shows how casually, and with how little shame or guilt, she can plan a murder. The poem closes with her blithe exclamation "next moment I dance at the King's!" (48), where she has imagined killing her rival; the gleeful tone exacerbates the reader's revulsion. Perhaps the most effective dramatic monologues are ones that enlist temporal developments in both the dramatized occasion for the speech and in the past events recounted in the speech, to enhance the reader's changing apprehension of the speaker over time. "My Last Duchess" does both, which may partly explain its popularity as an exemplary dramatic monologue. The first of the poem's shocking revelations occurs during the Duke's recounting of past events, in which he implies he ordered the murder of his late wife (45–46). The poem's second shock is the late revelation of the addressee's identity: we belatedly realize the Duke has been speaking all along to a representative negotiating the terms of the duke's next marriage (49–53).

The dramatic monologue, then, shares with lyric a focus on the time of discourse, but gives the discourse the developing temporality of narrative, rather than aspiring to the seemingly simultaneous meaning of lyric. This claim about the dynamism of Browning's discourse complements previous critical discussions of time in Browning's aesthetics and thematics.<sup>36</sup> It also explains why such temporally dynamic terms

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36. Loy D. Martin has suggested, "As the Romantic lyric perpetuates the illusion of discretely boundaried discourse, the dramatic monologue instantiates an open-ended discourse that only invokes traditional poetic devices of symmetry and closure ironically, in order to deny their traditional effects. The monologue is always, among other things, a deictic gesture toward the fading and uncertain vistas of a linear dimension of time and speech." Martin, 25. While Martin briefly discusses the Romantic lyric, he is not interested in the relationship of the dramatic monologue to lyric, drama, and narrative, relegating the topic to an endnote. Martin, 268. Instead, Martin is interested in temporal continuity as one of several ways in which dramatic monologues unsettle and fragment Romantic subjectivity. In his study of the significance of anticipation, beginning, and revision in Browning, Herbert Tucker argues that "meaning for Browning is always processional, current, eventual. Meaning occurs *by the way*, not because it is only incidental to Browning's work, but because it is an incident, something that happens in poetic time." Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, 12–13. W. David Shaw claims, "The distinctive feature of Browning's rhetoric is not its exposition of a philosophic, religious, or aesthetic 'system,' but its dialectical temper, its habit of imitating and rejecting different attitudes and beliefs, which forces the reader to discover the astonishing (and often disturbing) life of the ideas." W. David Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 3. And Samuel L. Chell builds on Henri Bergson's discussion of time to argue that "Browning's poetry discloses a world of undivided continuity and ceaseless becoming, a

as “surprise” or “revelation” are used so frequently in discussions of Browning’s monologues.<sup>37</sup> And since the surprising revelations which highlight the passing time of discourse tend to be the moments of greatest tension between the reader’s sympathy and judgment, my analysis is consistent with Langbaum’s.

Thus far, I have been making an argument about the dramatic monologue using a small number of Robert Browning’s poems as examples. Because my present purpose is to establish a foundation for analyzing Browning’s expansion of the genre in *The Ring and the Book*, it would be beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt a definitive argument about the dramatic monologue in general, as it has been employed by a variety of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century authors. While I am currently arguing that an emphasis on discourse that noticeably unfolds over time—a specific combination of lyric and narrative temporality—is a constant feature in Browning’s dramatic monologues, I can only hypothesize that it is a constant feature of the genre as used by other practitioners. As a brief gesture toward expanding this argument beyond Browning, I now turn to two works contemporary with Browning’s productions which may initially seem resistant to my claim: Augusta Webster’s “Circe” (1870) and Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (1842).<sup>38</sup>

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world of duration in which the individual retains continuity with the past and has power to shape the future.” Chell, 11.

37. Herbert Tucker claims “attention and surprise” are “exemplary for [Browning’s] readers.” Tucker, *Browning’s Beginnings*, 19. Roma A. King, Jr. notes “the intense moment of revelation” and the “gradual self-revelation” in a number of Browning monologues. *The Bow & the Lyre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 11, 128. W. David Shaw describes Browning as “a master of compressed insight and sudden illumination,” and he suggests the Duke deliberately unleashes “a breath-taking progression of dramatic shocks.” Shaw, *Dialectical*, 127–28, 100. Loy Martin discusses the “sequential and fragmentary revelation of character” in “My Last Duchess.” Martin, 96. James Phelan describes the revelation that the Duke has been speaking to an envoy to arrange his next marriage as a “delayed disclosure” which provides the “climactic strokes in the portrait of the character.” *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7. Samuel Chell briefly discusses the reader’s awareness of the “dynamic moment of actual experiencing” in dramatic monologues. Chell, 63. And John Maynard describes the dynamic experience of reading a dramatic monologue through the analogy of a boxing match between the speaker and reader, “a wonderful violence of shove and response.” Maynard, 77.

38. Cynthia Scheinberg has lamented the exclusion of dramatic monologues by women from most discussions of the genre: “The genre’s relation to other literary forms—the Romantic lyric, the Victorian novel, modernist poetry—has been a central defining feature of much critical work. . . . My hypothesis is that each time dramatic monologues by men have been theorized as the “other” kind of poetic utterance, the “Others” of our literary tradition (in this case, women), have been written out of the theory.” Scheinberg, 175–76. Because the central focus of this chapter is Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, I have drawn most of my examples of dramatic monologues from his works. Though my discussion of a single monologue by a woman cannot redress the larger critical gender imbalance, I do

In both poems, the eponymous speakers express dissatisfaction with their static lives and crave change and adventure.<sup>39</sup> To an extent, the discourse matches the subject matter, and is less dynamic than many of Browning's dramatic monologues.

Webster's Circe laments the cloying sameness of her privileged existence in long, languorous sentences of iambic pentameter:

What fate is mine, who, far apart from pains  
And fears and turmoils of the cross-grained world,  
Dwell like a lonely god in a charmed isle  
Where I am first and only, and, like one  
Who should love poisonous savours more than mead,  
Long for a tempest on me and grow sick  
Of rest and of divine free carelessness!  
Oh me, I am a woman, not a god;<sup>40</sup>

Circe not only complains about the lack of change and excitement in her life, but in so doing also functions as a metaphor for the position of Victorian women. As Glennis Byron aptly notes, "In focusing upon Circe's boredom, her longing for something to break 'the sickly sweet monotony' (32) of her restricted life on the island, for example, Webster can be seen to be obliquely commenting upon middle-class Victorian woman's existence."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, when Circe sighs, "I am a woman, not a god," she indirectly voices the complaint of idolized but restricted Victorian women who were treated as, in Coventry Patmore's famous formulation, an *Angel in the House*. Dorothy Mermin has suggested that when writing dramatic monologues, "women seem usually to sympathize with their protagonists" and "the poet and the dramatized speaker . . . blur together."<sup>42</sup> Despite the reader's inclination to follow the

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hope it will show that criticism can apply concepts of lyric and narrative to monologues by women.

39. As Robert Langbaum notes, "Most characteristic of Tennyson is a certain life-weariness, a longing for rest through oblivion," but in the case of "Ulysses" that ennui is "couched in the contrasting language of adventure." Langbaum, 89, 90. Glennis Byron connects "Ulysses" and "Circe" on the same grounds; she suggests Webster presents Circe "as being just as bored by the monotony of life on her island as Tennyson's Ulysses is on Ithaca." Byron, 81.

40. Augusta Webster, "Circe," in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, eds. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle, 1010–13 (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1999), lines 58–65. All subsequent citations will be from this edition. Line numbers will be provided in parenthetical citations.

41. Byron, 58.

42. Dorothy Mermin, "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet," *Critical Inquiry* 13.1 (Autumn 1986): 75, 76. The immediate context is a discussion of Elizabeth

poet in sympathizing with Circe, and by extension, with the plight of Victorian middle-class women, there are shocking moments that reveal less savory aspects of her character. As Circe joyously anticipates that a rising storm might wreck a distant ship on her island, she imagines how she would welcome the shipwrecked men and how “one will sluggishly besot himself, / And one be lewd, and one be gluttonous; / And I shall sickly look and loathe them all” (166–68). These lines and others jar the reader into recognizing Circe’s misanthropy and cruelty, and such moments, when the reader’s understanding of her abruptly changes, in turn produce a sense of passing time.

Given the existing criticism on “Ulysses,” we may not expect to find shocking moments which abruptly reveal the speaker’s character and make the reader aware of the passing time of discourse. A number of critics have argued that Tennyson’s dramatic monologues, compared to Browning’s, are more lyrical, and create more sympathy for (and less judgment of) the speaker. Ralph Rader goes so far as to claim “Ulysses” is not a dramatic monologue at all, but rather a “mask lyric” that indirectly expresses Tennyson’s own feelings.<sup>43</sup> And yet some readers don’t sympathize with Ulysses when he complains:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,<sup>44</sup>

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Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. Webster’s “Circe” would, by Mermin’s account, distance the poet from the speaker somewhat by “using [a character] with an independent literary existence” as Tennyson does. Mermin, 75. Glennis Byron modifies Mermin’s position by suggesting that “even if the women *are* said to sympathise more with their speakers, this does not mean that they do not objectify them or frame them with irony. What it *does* mean is that their ultimate target is more the systems which produce the speakers than the speakers themselves.” Byron, 59.

43. Rader, “Dramatic Monologue,” 140. Elisabeth Howe suggests that “Tennyson’s impulse is toward lyricism,” and that “judgments of Tennyson’s protagonists are harder to make because he is less inclined to choose reprehensible characters, or indeed to endow his speakers with recognizable personality at all.” Howe, 53, 51–52. Alan Sinfield claims Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and some of his other dramatic monologues are “close in manner to lyric poems in his own person.” Sinfield, 19. Herbert Tucker says of Tennyson’s use of the dramatic monologue, “With such memorable ventures as ‘Ulysses’ and ‘Tithonus’ he in effect relyricized the genre, running its contextualizing devices in reverse and stripping his speakers of personality in order to facilitate a lyric drive.” Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue,” 229. Yet Tucker elsewhere cautions that Ulysses inspires in him terror rather than sympathy, and that Tennyson produces a self so stripped of context that it is “nearly naked aggression, an identity that is all but unrecognizable to the human eye.” Tucker, “Monomania,” 136, 137.

44. Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses,” in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher

Certainly the poem's opening establishes the sense of stasis against which the speaker rebels. But the reader may experience a "shock of mild surprise"<sup>45</sup> at the derision with which Ulysses speaks of his people. And even some Victorian ears, though accustomed to the growing discourse of separate spheres, may have detected a dissonant note in Ulysses's callous dismissal of the ever-faithful Penelope.<sup>46</sup>

A second moment that may create distance between the speaker and the reader, and that may make the reader aware that the poem and its character revelation is unfolding over time, occurs during Ulysses's description of his son Telemachus:

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  
Of common duties, decent not to fail  
In offices of tenderness, and pay  
Meet adoration to my household gods,  
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.  
(39–43)

This praise is half-hearted at best, since Ulysses has been scornful of such household duties and considered himself "idle" when engaged in the same work. In addition, the division of separate work between father and son is fallacious; Ulysses mentions "my" household gods, and so expects Telemachus to do Ulysses's work for him. And as W. David Shaw aptly observes of line 43 ("He works his work, I mine"), "If we disturb the natural iambic stress by giving weight to the pronominal adjective 'his,' the speaker's tongue may start to curl: we may detect a sneer or slight hint of contempt in his voice."<sup>47</sup> Certainly there are some

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Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), lines 1–4. All subsequent citations are from this edition. Line numbers will be provided parenthetically within the text.

45. The phrase, of course, is Wordsworth's, used in a very different context in *The Prelude* (1850 5.384).

46. Glennis Byron discusses one late-Victorian reader who expressed his dismay through a dramatic monologue of his own: "Stephen Phillips's cross-gendered 'Penelope to Ulysses' (1897) takes particular issue with the snarling impatience of Tennyson's Ulysses at being stuck on Ithaca, 'matched with an aging wife' (3). . . . Phillips's Penelope, while professing great love for her husband, seems to be putting Tennyson's Ulysses in his place as she makes it quite clear that, after so many nights spent anticipating and imagining his return, she finds him falling short of the fantasy she has entertained in his absence." Byron, 81.

47. W. David Shaw, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: The Poet in an Age of Theory* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 138. Shaw also raises the interesting question, "What must Telemachus and the long suffering Penelope be thinking of Ulysses?" Shaw, *Alfred*, 71. Christopher Ricks, however, evaluates this passage differently. Ricks notes, "There is a recurring argument as to how much Ulysses himself is admired or endorsed by the poem. But this uncertainty

readers who don't detect a sneer of contempt here, but those who do hear a note of hauteur and derision in these lines will likely feel that their understanding of Ulysses's character has shifted. In addition, virtually every first-time reader of the poem will be surprised by the belated revelation in line 45 that Ulysses is speaking to a group of mariners.<sup>48</sup> Even in as lyricized a monologue as "Ulysses" there is at least one mild shock, and potentially several shocks, that could make the reader aware of the passing time of discourse.

How strong these shocks are, and consequently how noticeable the temporal progression is, depends upon whether a given reader treats "Ulysses" as a dramatic monologue or as a mask lyric. A reader who senses a distance between the title character and the implied author will focus on discovering (and likely judging) the type of person who would utter those thoughts, rather than wholly (if temporarily) sympathizing with the character and adopting his thoughts as her own. If a poem has a strong tension between speaker and author, focuses on revealing the speaker's character, and in addition gradually discloses that character in discrete revelations, then the discourse will have the noticeable temporal movement I have been discussing. I take these features to be the central dynamics of dramatic monologues. Mask lyrics lack these dynamics, even though they share many formal features with dramatic monologues: the entire poem is the speech of a single person who is not the poet, uttered in a specific situation, to one or more implied auditors. Conversely, the rhetorical and temporal features of dramatic monologues may also be found in texts that do not fit the genre. Recently James Phelan has found similar dynamics in two short stories that share an emphasis on revealing character, an interplay between sympathy and judgment or observation in the reader, and crucial delayed disclosures that alter the reader's understanding of the character (and, I would add, make the reader aware of the discourse unfolding in time). Yet Phelan finds these dynamics in prose stories narrated in the third person, told wholly or partly in the past tense—characteristics that separate them from dramatic monologues.<sup>49</sup> As a final example of the dynamics of

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seems less a matter of a valuable contrariety than of a weakness." He believes Tennyson had a lapse in his poetic powers here, and "the Telemachus lines are faultily wooden rather than dramatically revealing," and "the apparent lordliness of 'He works his work, I mine' . . . seems therefore more the poet's lapse into misjudgment than Ulysses' lapse into an unattractive and significant hauteur." Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 126.

48. Loy D. Martin says of this disclosure, "Such a late revelation of what kind of poem we are reading is closely related to the delay of crucial information that characterizes so many of Browning's strategies." Martin, 206.

49. Phelan, *Experiencing*, 178–98.

a dramatic monologue found in another genre, I would offer the lyrics to The Hold Steady's "You Can Make Him Like You." The song is a second-person address with no discernible dramatic context for the utterance, and no detail about the speaker's identity or character. Yet the song's primary rhetorical purpose is gradually (and at times, shockingly) to reveal the character of the female addressee, rather than the male speaker, and it induces a mixture of sympathy with and judgment of her.<sup>50</sup>

This blend of lyric and narrative temporalities in the progression of the discourse is also present in the dramatic monologues that comprise *The Ring and the Book*. The following sections will analyze three examples—the monologues of Arcangeli, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia. All three monologues draw attention to the changing time of discourse in some way and at several moments, but they otherwise show different balances between an emphasis on story events and sequentiality, or on static states of mind and the act of describing them. They thus display both the variation possible within the dramatic monologue, and the stable and defining temporal feature of the form.

## ARCANGELI

Arcangeli's monologue gradually reveals his character and abruptly introduces new traits in the manner we expect from Browning's dramatic monologues. One of the first jolts to the reader occurs early, when Arcangeli reveals his greed and callousness by hoping his son will inherit money from his "hale grandsire,—such are just the sort / To go off suddenly" (8.26–27). He later shows his utter disregard for the truth and his ambition to win the case when he rhapsodizes that if Guido had not confessed, he would have tried to blame Caponsacchi for the murders (8.360–73). The reader's understanding of his character quickly and noticeably shifts, and this creates the temporal progression in the discourse typical of dramatic monologues.

The most obvious temporal feature of Arcangeli's monologue, however, is its constant anticipation. His consistent orientation toward the future becomes clear within the first twenty lines. The chief object of his

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50. Popular music also contains examples of true dramatic monologues (in generic form as well as rhetorical and temporal dynamics), such as Talking Heads' "Don't Worry about the Government," Radiohead's "Creep," The Smiths' "Girlfriend in a Coma," Neko Case's "I Wish I Was the Moon," and The Decemberists' "On the Bus Mall." Eminem's "Stan" is a mixture of dramatic monologue and narrative, with lyric interludes provided by a Dido sample. My thanks to Derek Nystrom for suggesting The Decemberists.

fixation is his son's birthday feast, scheduled to happen later the same day as Arcangeli's monologue:

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!  
(8.14–17)

The lawyer repeatedly represents his defense of Guido as a necessary but dull task which must be completed before he can enjoy the evening's celebration. He gets much more pleasure from contemplating this future reward than he does from his present task. His son's birthday dinner is not the only focus of his anticipation, however. Arcangeli also looks forward to his son's progress in Latin: Hyacinth "Verges on Virgil, reaches the right age" (8.76). When Arcangeli's concentration *is* on his present task, Guido's defense, the lawyer is motivated primarily by the chance to embarrass the opposing counselor by predicting and undercutting his arguments. Arcangeli confidently asserts, "Oh, I quite expect his case" (8.1215), and anticipates, "Will not I be beforehand with my Fisc, / Cut away phrase by phrase from underfoot!" (8.200–201)

This emphasis on anticipation has two important results for the mode of this monologue, for its balance of lyric and narrative elements. The first effect derives from Arcangeli's acute awareness of the narrowing gap in time between his current activities and the night's festivities. When the monologue begins, it is noon (8.15), and Arcangeli is looking forward to evening and "supper-time" (8.16). Later in the monologue, most of the afternoon has elapsed, and the lawyer is only an hour away from the evening's feast. He motivates himself to complete his work by anticipating his favorite dish: ". . . See nothing else, / Or I shall scarce see lamb's fry in an hour!" (8.1085–86) By the end of the monologue, the day is behind him, and dinner is at hand: "Now, what an evening have I earned to-day!" (8.1737). Through such overt references to specific times, Browning deliberately draws the reader's attention to the discrete unit of fictional time spanned by Arcangeli's monologue. The progression of the time of discourse, that specific blend of lyric and narrative common to all dramatic monologues, is given particular emphasis in this one.

Second, Arcangeli's consistent orientation toward future events diverts attention away from the past events of the poem, the primary narrative of Guido's marriage and murders. A few elements of narrative remain prominent, however. There is a strong sense of temporal progres-

sion, and there are identifiable events; Arcangeli's workday will be followed by the birthday celebration, and the document he produces will be a part of the upcoming trial. But these events are only anticipated, and hence their descriptions are hypothetical and fragmented. As parts of a narrative, they are unsatisfying: they may produce a cohesive picture of Arcangeli's character, but they do not form a complete chain of events.

By the afternoon's end, the monologue may be over, but Arcangeli's work on Guido's defense is not. He has finished a rough draft, but he plans tomorrow's work of revision:

To-morrow stick in this, and throw out that,  
 And, having first ecclesiasticized,  
 Regularize the whole, next emphasize,  
 Then latinize, and lastly Cicero-ize,  
 Giving my Fisc his finish. There's my speech!  
 (8.1729–33)

This continues Arcangeli's pattern of anticipation, providing a detailed agenda for the next day's work. This passage is also representative of the monologue's emphasis on acts of composition: book 8 constantly draws the reader's attention to the production of discourse, rather than the content of the story. Perhaps the most acutely self-reflexive passage occurs when Arcangeli begins to pen his defense of Guido:

. . . —with fresh-cut quill we ink the white,—  
*P-r-o-pro Guidone et Sociis*. There!

Count Guido married—or, in Latin due,  
 What? *Duxit in uxorem?*—commonplace!  
*Tædas jugales iniit, subiit*,—ha!  
 He underwent the matrimonial torch?  
*Connubio stabili sibi junxit*,—hum!  
 In stable bond of marriage bound his own?  
 That's clear of any modern taint: and yet . . .

Virgil is little help to who writes prose.  
 (8.124–33)

Arcangeli makes the act of writing tangible and concrete by describing the material implements he uses—knife, quill, ink, and paper. The

spelling of the first word is called to our attention by the dashes between the letters. The passage gives not only different ways to phrase the idea that Guido was married, but also Latin and English versions of each phrase, and Arcangeli's commentary on each phrase's connotations.

Such an emphasis on the time of discourse rather than the time of story usually indicates the lyric mode. Indeed, Arcangeli's specific combination of anticipating hypothetical future events, and self-reflexively commenting on his act of composition, resembles the lyrical features of *Don Juan*, discussed in chapter 1. There are, however, some important differences between the two texts, which minimize the potential lyricity of Arcangeli's monologue. In *Don Juan*, when multiple alternatives are given, they have a sense of simultaneity. Byron lets all the possible vehicles for a simile stand as equal alternatives, making no final selection among them. They are simultaneously present for the reader, and the reader is left to make a selection, or more likely, keep them all in mind. In Arcangeli's monologue, different choices of phrasing are presented consecutively, not concurrently. He considers a phrase, rejects it, considers another, and eventually chooses one version to be included in his legal argument. Even this choice is provisional, and today's process of composition is put in the larger temporal sequence of revision: "But the version afterward! / Curb we this ardour! Notes alone, to-day, / The speech to-morrow and the Latin last" (8.142–44). The process of translation also clearly unfolds in time; as Donald Hair notes, "The layering of English and Latin has a temporal sequence."<sup>51</sup> Browning presents the writing process as unfolding in time, rather than suspended in time. Even the communication of a single word requires the passage of time, as is indicated by the labored spelling, letter by letter, of the first word of Arcangeli's document (8.125). Such an acute awareness of development in time precludes the sense of timelessness necessary for purely lyrical effects.

There are also important differences between Byron's and Browning's presentations of hypothetical future scenarios. When *Don Juan's* narrator describes hypothetical plot paths, he seems to control whether or not his fiction will actually follow that path, and the emphasis is on the author's choice among many simultaneous options. Arcangeli certainly has some influence over the evening's festivities and the progress of the court case, but he does not have complete control, because he is simply one person interacting among many others within his (fictional-

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51. Donald Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 203.

ized to us, but real to him) world. Arcangeli occupies the same level of existence as the story's other characters, but Byron's narrator operates on a different level of existence than the other characters.<sup>52</sup> Arcangeli does not share the poet's complete artistic control over the story's progress, and hence his musings on hypothetical plot paths do not carry the same valence of artistic composition, and the same lyrical focus on the moment of discourse, as the hypothetical plots of *Don Juan*.

The most important difference between the self-reflexivity of *Don Juan*, and that of Arcangeli's monologue, is that Byron's narrator reflects upon his composition of the very document we are reading, whereas Arcangeli reflects upon a legal document separate from the text in front of the reader. In book 8 of Browning's poem, two texts overlap, but they are not identical: Arcangeli's monologue contains only fragments of his draft of Guido's defense, and the monologue contains much material that is not in the legal document, and is wholly unrelated to Guido's defense. For instance, Arcangeli muses on the preparations for tonight's dinner:

(There is a porcupine to barbacue;  
Gigia 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?  
(8.1368–72)

This parenthetical aside certainly would not be written down by Arcangeli. Rather, the passage represents either what he mutters to himself, or his silent thought process. In this respect, book 8 is "an interior monologue which borders on true stream-of-consciousness."<sup>53</sup> As a consequence of the disjunction between the text in front of us as readers, and the text Arcangeli composes, we have only limited access to the product

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52. In narratological terms, Arcangeli is a homodiegetic narrator, and Byron's narrator is predominantly heterodiegetic. (The narrator of *Don Juan* does sometimes describe himself as inhabiting the same world as the characters, and occasionally claims to have interacted with them, but more dominant are the narrator's references to himself as an artist in control over the fictional story he is penning. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see pages 38–41 of chapter 1.) Succinct definitions of "homodiegetic" and "heterodiegetic" narrators can be found in the glossaries of: James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1996), and Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman, eds., *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

53. Altick and Loucks, 62.

of his composition, and we are more aware of the gap between Arcangeli's composition of his argument, and the composition (by Browning) of Arcangeli's monologue. This gap, which is not present in *Don Juan*, disrupts the lyrical immediacy that might otherwise have been created by the emphasis on Arcangeli's process of composition. Since Arcangeli's document is written in the nonfictional mode of legal argument, we have a further barrier to treating its composition as a lyric outpouring. Browning's stream-of-consciousness technique, however, creates its own sense of immediacy, of being in the room to overhear Arcangeli, or in his mind to think with him. But again, this lyric immediacy is blended with a narrative sense of progressing through a specific interval of time. The two modes are inextricably blended.

## CAPONSACCHI

Caponsacchi's speech also clearly shows the temporal progression in the discourse which marks dramatic monologues. The occasion of Caponsacchi's deposition is explicitly positioned in relation to important story events, providing specificity to the time of discourse. He begins by directly addressing the judges, and expresses his disbelief that he must:

Tell over twice what I, the first time, told  
Six months ago: 'twas here, I do believe,  
Fronting you same three in this very room,  
I stood and told you . . .  
(6.6–9)

He thus not only calls attention to the specific location of the interview and the presence of three auditors, but also locates this interview in time, six months after his attempted escape with Pompilia and the subsequent legal proceedings. Caponsacchi provides an even more specific temporal context through other comments: he says that Guido's attack on Pompilia and the Comparini occurred two days prior to this statement to the judges (6.1606–7), and he is painfully aware that "Pompilia is . . . dying while [he] speak[s]" (6.47).<sup>54</sup>

54. As Ross Posnock notes, "The terrible fact that 'Pompilia is bleeding out her life . . . ' is the agonizing reality that exerts a continuous pressure and intensity upon Caponsacchi's monologue." "'The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*': Henry James's Energetic 'Appropriation' of Browning," *The Centennial Review* 25.3 (Summer 1981): 289.

Pompilia's waning life goads Caponsacchi into an acute awareness of the passage of time as he speaks, and his auditors (and Browning's readers) share this awareness due to periodic comments on the progress of his narrative. Almost two hundred lines into his monologue, Caponsacchi notes that his tale is just beginning, and not beginning well: "This is a foolish outset" (6.180). He collects himself and then marks a more official start to his story: "I begin" (6.216).<sup>55</sup> He also clearly marks the point at which he ended his story during his first recitation to the judges:

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?  
(6.1611–13)

Caponsacchi wishes to go on with his story, to discuss the time between his first interview and this one, in order to diminish the judges' chances of misapprehending Pompilia. His remark reminds us of the place of this interview in the sequence of events comprised by the ten monologues, and their connection to the previous events described within the monologues—the marriage and murders. It also draws attention to the sequencing, the ordering in time, of this particular piece of discourse.<sup>56</sup>

His audience, both within and outside the poem, is also aware of the passage of time during his monologue due to changes in their emotional and intellectual reactions to Caponsacchi. At least one of his interlocutors experiences a change of heart during Caponsacchi's speech, since the latter remarks, "Why, there's a Judge weeping!" (6.1855). And relatively late in the monologue, we as readers are given an important and surprising insight into Caponsacchi's personal motive for speaking—he wants the judges' permission to see Pompilia (6.1594–96). This late revelation forces readers to readjust their understanding of Caponsacchi

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55. This is a later instance of the "false starts" Herbert Tucker frequently finds in Browning's early poetry. Tucker suggests, "No matter how assuredly they may trumpet their opening announcements, Browning's speakers soon begin to regret or qualify them. The need for repentant, secondary beginning is Browning's *dramatic* lyric inspiration. It leads him to imagine speakers for whom the commanding lyric power of interpretation is most revealing when exerted over their own previous utterances." Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, 109, 153.

56. Similar effects result from two other pauses in the middle of his story: "You of the Court! / When I stood question here and reached this point / O' the narrative . . ." (6.649–51), and, "Here is another point / I bid you pause at. When I told thus far, / Someone said, subtly, . . ." (6.882–84).

and his monologue long after it has begun, and makes them aware of the progression through time of their reading experience. In these ways, Caponsacchi's monologue fits the temporal characteristics of a dramatic monologue, lyrically calling attention to the time of discourse, but giving it a sense of narrative progression.

Moving to a consideration of the particular balance of lyric and narrative elements within this monologue, we can rightly infer, from Caponsacchi's description of his speech as a "tale" with a beginning and an end, that its content is often narrative in mode. His description of the exchange of letters, in particular, is best labeled as a narrative. When Caponsacchi declares, ". . . Each incident / Proves, I maintain, that action of the flight / For the true thing it was" (6.1147–49), his language of "incident" and "action" reinforces his speech's status as narrative. But when Caponsacchi describes his meeting and flight with Pompilia, the nature of his experience and language radically change. In the words of Isobel Armstrong, he "sees his experience in terms of climactic breaks, sharp changes, and definitive ends and beginnings," and "describe[s] his experiences in terms of sudden, apocalyptic, revelatory events."<sup>57</sup> He also describes Pompilia as desirous of a sudden change: Pompilia tells him that life with Guido is a bad dream, "And the way to end dreams is to break them, stand, / Walk, go: then help me to stand, walk and go!" (6.807–8) During their flight, however, she fears another abrupt change:

No more o' the journey: if it might but last!  
 Always, my life-long, thus to journey still!  
 It is the interruption that I dread,—  
 (6.1290–92)

Pompilia hopes to prolong her current state indefinitely, to suspend this moment and free herself from the changes of time. She wishes to continue in the atemporality which characterizes her flight, and Browning's lyric description of it. Although Caponsacchi's monologue begins as a narrative, Caponsacchi's meeting with Pompilia is revelatory of a different mode of experience, and he describes his interactions with her in explicitly lyrical terms, as experiences out of, and above, time.

The shift to a more lyrical mode occurs when Caponsacchi sees Pompilia appear at the terrace, and he stands "as still as stone, all eye,

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57. Armstrong, "Note," 273, 274. Armstrong argues that the experience itself is much more gradual, and hence mismatched to his language (274). I believe that the change in Caponsacchi's character and behavior may be more gradual than he represents, but the change in his perception of experience as more lyrical is quite sudden.

all ear" (6.711). This stillness and receptivity indicates his detachment from time, since between being asked to rescue her and actually doing so, Caponsacchi "sat stone-still, let time run over [him]" (6.1008).<sup>58</sup> He reiterates his oblivion to temporal progression when he claims, "I know not how the night passed: morning broke" (6.1090). The content of these lines indicates a shift away from narrative and toward lyric, and in this monologue, as Armstrong notes, "the lulled, quiet rhythms of the lines . . . indicate a tender, lyrical sympathy which is always sustained by Browning."<sup>59</sup> Both the shift away from the constraints of time, and the lulled rhythms of Caponsacchi's lines, are manifest in his description of the day before the flight:

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.  
 (6.1107–10)

These lines feature the gentle assonance of "old," "growth," and "go," and the consonance of "right" and "fit." The rhythm is generally lilting because there are only four polysyllabic words, and the lines can be read as perfectly iambic. But to do so, three of the polysyllables ("familiar," "steadily," and "barrier") require an elision of the two ending unstressed syllables. The last line is free from such elision and completely monosyllabic—the "barrier" to smooth scansion has been removed. By the end of this passage, time has let go of Caponsacchi. In his subsequent description of their flight, both time and place seem lost or irrelevant to this lyric interlude; he feels as though years have passed since their journey started (6.1186–87), and he "forget[s] the names" of locations along the way (6.1188).

Caponsacchi feels that his lyric revelation *should* be clear to his auditors, that Pompilia's character should be intuitively obvious, but that the judges may be incapable of such a direct apprehension of the case. Caponsacchi attempts to translate his experience into a less exalted medium for the judges:

But you may want it lower set 'i the scale,—  
 Too vast, too close it clangs in the ear, perhaps;

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58. Samuel Chell reads this line differently; he thinks Caponsacchi becomes "a helpless victim of chronological time." Chell, 110.

59. Armstrong, "Note," 274.

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.  
 (6.69–74)

Caponsacchi later implies what is involved in such a translation of the vast and intangible into the small and hollow, when he metaphorically describes how he records the attempted escape:

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.  
 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,  
 Recorded motion, breath or look of hers,  
 Which poured forth would present you one pure glass,  
 Mirror you plain,—as God's sea, glassed in gold,  
 His saints,—the perfect soul Pompilia?  
 (6.1134–44)

Caponsacchi can, in broad terms, tell the number of days and nights spent on their journey, but that is not where its meaning lies. Rather, meaning has condensed and intensified into “minutes with a memory in each.” Caponsacchi’s mind is “drench[ed]” with the memories; the minutes are not distinct from each other but coalesce and suffuse his thoughts. In order for his audience to understand properly his experience and Pompilia’s character, he must externalize those memories and present the “drench of minutes” as a “glass” of pure liquid. They, too, must see the moments as fused into one whole. But the process of communication requires Caponsacchi to “wring” the moments “drop by drop,” to convey them discretely and consecutively. The metaphor suggests that Caponsacchi must resort to narrative and its temporal sequencing as a means to convey lyric fullness and simultaneity of meaning. The effort is likely to fail, at least in communicating to the judges, if not to Browning’s readers, because Caponsacchi’s revelation “cannot be adequately expressed in temporal terms,” as Altick and Loucks have rightly noted.<sup>60</sup> Since he thinks the judges require their communication

60. Altick and Loucks, 54.

"lower set 'i the scale," Caponsacchi's monologue may imply that narrative is a more debased medium than lyric.

## POMPILIA

Pompilia's monologue largely recapitulates Caponsacchi's in its use of narrative and lyric, but some features of Pompilia's speech are even more heavily weighted toward lyric. As does Caponsacchi, Pompilia begins in the narrative mode; she describes the events prior to her marriage, and her story is simple, direct, and sincere.<sup>61</sup> She lists her age, where she was born, and her full name, quickly mentions that she was married, and asks that when she dies the church register will say that two weeks ago she gave birth to a son named Gaetano. She thus encapsulates her life story through birth, marriage, giving birth, and death. Pompilia then goes on to narrate her life with her parents, up to the point of her marriage.

Just as Caponsacchi does, Pompilia shifts to the lyrical mode when describing their flight together, and some of the details of their descriptions bear striking resemblances. She, too, forgets the names of locations along their journey: "Each place must have a name, though I forget" (7.1515). And she loses track of time:

. . . he caught me, and, you say,  
 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,—  
 (7.1563–68)

Whereas Caponsacchi felt time to be distended (days seemed like years to him), Pompilia feels time compressed. The night she sleeps, dusk and dawn seem blended to her, and even now recounting the story, she

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61. In fact, it seems so unrealistically simple, direct, and sincere that Alison Case has called it "a fantasy of linguistic transparency, an imagined escape from the difficulties involved in the project of constructing powerful fictions in order to tell 'the truth.'" *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 187. Ivan Kreilkamp agrees that Pompilia's speech is represented "as entirely full and transparent communication," but he describes it as a "lyric poem," which is more in keeping with my reading of the monologue. Kreilkamp, 169, 167.

feels that time had been annihilated. In general, she feels time to be insignificant when in Caponsacchi's company. During her first meeting with him, she associates him with timelessness:

The first word I ever heard from his lips,  
 All himself in it,—an eternity  
 Of speech, to match the immeasurable depth  
 O' the soul that then broke silence—"I am yours."  
 (7.1430–33)

Caponsacchi embodies eternity, and instantly conveys a fullness of meaning; his speech is the ideal toward which lyric utterances strive. Pompilia also describes Caponsacchi's devotion to her as eternal; she declares, "He was mine, he is mine, he will be mine" (7.1443). She experiences her interactions with Caponsacchi as unchanging and timeless, and her description of these experiences is appropriately lyrical.<sup>62</sup>

Pompilia's motivation in speaking also resembles Caponsacchi's. Just as the priest wishes to show Pompilia's purity, she wishes to clear his name. She tells her rapt audience, "I will remember once more for his sake / The sorrow: for he lives and is belied" (7.937–38). Pompilia also struggles, like Caponsacchi, to find a suitable medium to convey her meaning. She asks, "Is all told? There's the journey: and where's time / To tell you how that heart burst out in shine?" (7.1512–23). Narrative would seem to be an impossible vehicle for displaying her rescuer's heart, since narrative unfolds in time, but there is not time enough to tell. Caponsacchi may struggle to distill his picture of Pompilia into drops, to relate his experience in the consecutive events of narrative, but Pompilia cannot divide her experience of the journey into discrete events. Instead, the experience blurs together but becomes even more meaningful:

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,

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62. This assessment of the journey as lyrical is in tension with Matthew Campbell's rather surprising assertion that Pompilia's grasping of Guido's sword to fend him off is the only adequate, heroic action in the whole of the poem. Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, ed. Gillian Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120–22. If we do give such emphasis to Pompilia's action at the end of the journey, then perhaps we can attribute her shift from lyrical stasis to narrative action to Guido's threatening and unwelcome interruption of her idyllic flight with Caponsacchi.

And fill all gaps 'i the glory, and grow him—  
 Him I now see make the shine everywhere.  
 (7.1550–54)

Caponsacchi sees the journey as a drench of minutes which he must pour into a glass; Pompilia sees it as “one milky way” with “all gaps 'i the glory” filled. The experience has become one unified, seamless whole. For Pompilia its meaning—Caponsacchi’s goodness—shines forth, and she makes no mention of trying to translate the experience into a less exalted medium.<sup>63</sup> For her, the flight with her rescuer can be conveyed only by a lyric utterance; she believes its meaning is instantaneously grasped, and the vividness of her recollection elides the gap between her experience and her discourse. Through the act of remembering Caponsacchi “new stars bud . . . and grow him.”

There are two important differences between the balance of lyric and narrative in Pompilia’s monologue and in Caponsacchi’s. First, Pompilia’s speech includes what could be labeled as a perversion of lyric: her oblique discussion of her marriage to Guido. She says remarkably little about the four years she spent with him. Her only disclosures about the marriage are that she initially refused to sleep with Guido until the Archbishop advised her otherwise, and that Guido’s brother Girolamo made sexual advances toward her. She says virtually nothing about Guido himself, because she does not want to incriminate him further: “I leave my husband out! / It is not to do him more hurt, I speak.” (7.1125–26).<sup>64</sup> When Pompilia reaches the point in her narrative when Violante led her to her new husband, she stops abruptly:

And so an end! Because a blank begins  
 From when, at the word, she kissed me hard and hot,

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63. Pompilia has an implicit faith that her auditors are “Listening, and understanding, I am sure!” (7.901) But she does not self-consciously make an effort to force her audience to understand. In this rhetorical unselfconsciousness, Sue Lonoff finds a sign of Pompilia’s goodness: “One way of assessing the moral worth or worthlessness of Browning’s speakers is to weigh the effect of public opinion upon their words and actions. The saintly Pompilia is unconcerned with the impression she makes on the world.” “Multiple Narratives and Relative Truths: A Study of *The Ring and the Book*, *The Woman in White*, and *The Moonstone*,” *Browning Institute Studies* 10 (1982): 157. If we agree, then Caponsacchi is less saintly, because he consciously struggles to find a verbal medium the judges will understand.

64. As Melissa Valiska Gregory observes, “Instead of writing Pompilia’s testimony as a chronicle of the individual wrongs against her, Browning fills her monologue with metaphors and ellipses, blank spaces, and oblique references where the reader must imagine violence rather than (as in so much of Browning’s early work) experience its painfully intimate details.” “Robert Browning and the Lure of the Violent Lyric Voice: Domestic Violence and the Dramatic Monologue,” *Victorian Poetry* 38.4 (Winter 2000): 503.

And took me back to where my father leaned  
 Opposite Guido . . .  
 (7.570–73)

For Pompilia, her marriage is unnarratable.<sup>65</sup> She reiterates this when she says that since moving to Guido's home, "All since is one blank, / Over and ended; a terrific dream" (7.579–80). If the marriage was a terrible dream, an unmarked blank, then time would have no meaning, and we may be tempted to call her description of this period lyric in its timelessness.<sup>66</sup> But Pompilia makes an important distinction when she exclaims, "Blank, I say! / This is the note of evil: for good lasts" (7.589–90). Her time with Guido has been annihilated and is devoid of meaning; her time with Caponsacchi has expanded into the eternal and is suffused with meaning. Pompilia does not explicitly condemn Guido, but instead implies he is evil by describing him in terms opposite to those used for Caponsacchi. Hence, her marriage to Guido is presented as a horrific inversion of lyric, as a timeless void instead of an intensified, suspended moment.

A second difference in Pompilia's balance of lyric and narrative separates her monologue from the other nine. She does not call as much attention to the passage of time as she speaks, compared to the other narrators. She very rarely comments on the progress she makes through her story, or specifically locates the time of her speech in relation to the time of events,<sup>67</sup> and the only events she anticipates are ones too distant for her to live to see. As a result, the temporal feature characteristic of dramatic monologues—the noticeable forward motion of the time of discourse—is so muted as to be almost unnoticeable. Instead, the moment of discourse seems to be suspended out of time, and hence Pompilia's monologue is given a more purely lyrical framework than the others.

This lyricism is largely the result of Pompilia's confused sense of

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65. I mean that it is "unnarratable" due to the trauma Pompilia experienced, not "non-narratable" in D. A. Miller's sense of textual elements that "serve to supply the specified narrative lack, or to answer the specified narrative question," and hence end the need for narrative. D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 5.

66. Samuel Chell also notes Pompilia's sense of timelessness during her marriage: "Pompilia is threatened because she has lost all sense of the past. She lives completely out of time, and she cannot awaken from her 'terrific dream' (585) until she has been placed back in time." Chell, 113.

67. The one exception is her providing her exact age, and her son's exact age (both to the day), in her opening remarks (7.1–2, 13–14).

time. Much of her experience seems to recede away from her, and grow so distant in time that it no longer seems real. She says of her newborn son:

. . . I hope he will regard  
 The history of me as what someone dreamed,  
 And get to disbelieve it at the last:  
 Since to myself it dwindles fast to that,  
 Sheer dreaming and impossibility,—  
 (7.107–11)

She reiterates her sense of unreality and her distortion of time when she recalls being separated from her son:

. . . I thought, when he was born,  
 Something began for once that would not end,  
 Nor change into a laugh at me, but stay  
 For evermore, eternally quite mine.  
 Well, so he is,—but yet they bore him off,  
 . . .  
 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.  
 (7.199–210)

Both her own life and her son's have begun to seem like dreams, with the sense of temporal dislocation that often accompanies dreams. She once again claims that recent events have receded so that they seem long ago, but here she also claims that the distant future seems imminent. Past and future have merged into a "confusion of what was / With what will be." Pompilia has lost her grasp on time, and hence she cannot reliably mark the passage of time in her discourse. We can infer that the reason for her confusion is her nearness to death, and that she is already making the transition out of time and into eternity. Indeed, the only strong marker of temporal change in her discourse is her last line: "And I rise" (7.1828). This quiet suggestion of her ascension to heaven brings her already immanent death even nearer, reminding the reader of how little time Pompilia had left and how quickly it passed. Ironically, although this line is the monologue's most explicit sign of the peculiar temporality of the dramatic monologue, it is the moment at

which Pompilia achieves true lyric timelessness, and it hence marks the unbridgeable distance between the reader and the sanctified heroine.

## LARGER STRUCTURES IN *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

Because Pompilia's character is so highly valued by Browning, it becomes tempting to read other prominent elements of her monologue as positively valued as well, including her monologue's lyricism. Indeed, the overall structure and framing of *The Ring and the Book* reinforces this interpretation of Browning as idealizing the lyric. Caponsacchi and Pompilia's monologues are placed as the central two books of the text,<sup>68</sup> and report the speech of two of the three sympathetic and morally upright characters (the Pope being the third). These two monologues are also the most lyrical in content, suggesting the centrality of lyric in Browning's enterprise. Narrative repetition and alliteration also make some typically lyric qualities more prominent, but before turning to an extended discussion of these features, I will first address previous commentaries on the large structuring principles of Browning's poem.

The first and final books of *The Ring and the Book* are written in Browning's own voice, with no discernible distinction between the poet and the speaker. Between these are ten books spoken (or written) by participants in the events, some historical, some composite figures imagined by Browning. As I have suggested, each of these ten dramatic monologues has its own distinct character, and its own balance of lyric and narrative modes. Many attempts have been made to find organizational patterns within the books. The most influential has been Richard Altick and James Louck's division of books 2–10 into three triads. (Browning's two frame monologues in books 1 and 12, as well as Guido's second monologue in book 11, are outside of the triadic structure.) According to their scheme, the first triad (books 2–4) is focused on events, the second (books 5–7) on character, and the third (books 8–10) on theme, and in each triad the third speaker has more social or moral authority than the other two.<sup>69</sup> Boyd Litzinger appropriates this general scheme, but

68. Boyd Litzinger notes that these two books, plus Guido's monologue in book 5, constitute the poem's section of direct testimony, and "these three books, organically central, are also as nearly physically central as is possible in a twelve-part arrangement." "The Structural Logic of *The Ring and the Book*," in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson*, ed. Clyde de L. Ryals (Durham: Duke University Press, 1974), 110.

69. Altick and Loucks, 39–40.

applies new labels to the triads, and argues for even greater dynamism within and among them: he sees each triad functioning as a dialectic, and the three triads themselves forming a larger dialectic.<sup>70</sup> David Bedell revisits *The Ring and the Book's* triadic structure, and I agree with him that the first triad concerns "the superficialities of time and appearance, chronicling of events" and is transparently in a narrative mode.<sup>71</sup> The speakers present events in a clear sequence, and argue for a specific set of causal relationships connecting these events.<sup>72</sup> According to Bedell, in the second triad Caponsacchi and Pompilia "partak[e] of both narrative and philosophy" and "transition between time and eternity," but I argue that they do so by incorporating lyric, rather than philosophy. Caponsacchi and Pompilia each make a transition from the narrative mode to the lyric mode when shifting from a description of their earlier lives to their meeting each other. The third triad is neither dominantly lyric nor dominantly narrative in content,<sup>73</sup> but instead emphasizes nonfictional modes.

At least as important as the distinctions among different triads, however, are the features common to all twelve books. One key element of continuity is the repetition of the same basic narrative material in each of the twelve monologues, and this repetition has important consequences for the reader's experience of plot within the poem, and for generic affinities between the poem and other literary forms. *The Ring and the Book* does not create much, if any, readerly interest through narrative suspense. Indeed, "Browning divulges the outcome of his case in the first 364 lines of a poem that runs to more than 21,000 lines."<sup>74</sup> The chief events of the story are all revealed in book 1, and then retold ten more times in the monologues that follow. There are, of course, variations

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70. Litzinger, 113. He calls the divisions the "Triad of Rumor," the "Triad of Testimony," and the "Triad of Judgment."

71. David D. Bedell, "Paring *The Ring and the Book*: A Note on the Poem's Narrative Organization," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 11.1 (Spring, 1983): 63. Bedell chooses the layers of an apple, the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, as emblematic of the triads' organization.

72. Tertium Quid differs from the two halves of Rome in that he seems to present more than one plausible cause for any given event. But as Altick and Loucks have demonstrated in detail, Tertium Quid only feigns neutrality and clearly sides with Guido. See Altick and Loucks, 130-50.

73. In this respect, I agree with Bedell that "the final triad of books (VIII, IX, X) nearly abandons narrative altogether except for literary allusions, 'instant stories.'" Bedell, 65. But Bedell associates this triad with "the convictions of faith and philosophy." Bedell, 63. Only the Pope, in my view, is consistently philosophical in his meditations. Philosophy is absent in the speeches of the two lawyers, who engage in the rhetorical conventions of legal argument.

74. Lonoff, 144.

in what is omitted and what is emphasized by the different speakers. And there are subsidiary plot points which are first revealed in the later books.<sup>75</sup> But for the most part, the suspense is eliminated by the end of book 1, and books 2–11 repeat the same basic narrative material, cycling and recycling through the same events.

One of the overall effects of the multiple retellings is to emphasize the particular context of each narrator, since the context is always an obvious difference among the various versions of the story. This draws attention to the creation of discourse, but throughout Browning's poem, the moment of composition is not purely lyrical, because it is not a static, suspended moment. As Altick and Loucks note, *The Ring and the Book* has "two narrative sequences—the events leading up to the murder (the past) and the events subsequent to it (the occasion of the poem)."<sup>76</sup> The occasion of the poem, the time of discourse, is itself part of a narrative progression moving in time. Indeed, the poem's structure is suffused by "the subtle impressions given of the passage of time."<sup>77</sup> Just as there is temporal progression within each monologue's occasion, there is also temporal progression between the end of one monologue and the beginning of the next. The first three monologues begin the day after the attacks and present variants on the Roman populace's gossip about the case. The next three monologues are told by key participants, in the days following the attacks. The murderer Guido is interrogated first, and we are given frequent reminders of what has occurred between the assault and Guido's speech—he has been tortured. The day after Guido's monologue, judges depose the priest Caponsacchi. Next, Pompilia gives her version of events just before dying of the wounds inflicted four days earlier. Then follow three monologues by representatives of the legal process. Guido's lawyer uses the preexisting statements made in the three previous monologues, as well as various legal precedents, to write a rough draft of his case. We then hear Pompilia's lawyer further along in the judicial process; he reads a final, polished version of his argument, ready for submission to the court. Later, after the court has ruled and Guido has appealed to the Pope, we overhear the Pope's meditations

75. For example, the judgment against Pompilia by the Arezzo court is first mentioned in book 4 (4.1501–9). The coachman's report, given after weeks of imprisonment, that he saw Pompilia and Caponsacchi kissing during their journey, is first mentioned in book 6 (6.1668–72). Rumors of Guido's affair with the maid, Margherita, are first reported in book 7 (7.1044–45). The existence of a letter in which Pompilia claims she learned to write is revealed in book 9 (9.455–61). The convent's suit for Pompilia's property is revealed in book 10 (10.1506–13).

76. Altick and Loucks, 8. They later claim that a third layer of action is provided by the allusions, metaphors, and parables that the speakers use. *Ibid.*, 33.

77. Litzinger, 114.

just before he pronounces Guido's guilt. The final monologue consists of Guido's bitter vituperations to two priests in the hours just before his execution—the final key story event.

Clearly, the occasion of the poem, the time of discourse, changes from monologue to monologue, and is itself part of a narrative progression moving in time. The temporal movement across monologues, from the composition of one to the next, mimics on a larger scale the motion of the time of discourse within a single dramatic monologue. The dynamism of the poem as a whole derives in part from the story events that happen between monologues. Often the poem implies events happened just before or just after an individual monologue, as sometimes happens in stand-alone dramatic monologues like "Andrea del Sarto." The technique of weaving story events between distinct bouts of discourse, which Gerald Prince labels "intercalated narration," also appears in epistolary novels and in *Aurora Leigh*.<sup>78</sup> In *The Ring and the Book*, however, story and discourse not only alternate but also blur together.<sup>79</sup> In Browning's poem, pieces of discourse both report prior events and themselves become story events. Pompilia's speech is her dying confession, Caponsacchi gives testimony in the trial that condemns Guido, and the lawyers' monologues become the substance of the trial. Browning also puts intercalated narration to a different use than in most epistolary novels. He does not create narrative suspense or surprise about the story events that occur between bouts of discourse, since those events are revealed in book 1 of the poem. Rather, Browning draws attention to the placement in time, and the progression through time, of each section of discourse. *The Ring and the Book* as a whole, then, creates a peculiar mixture of lyric and narrative temporality similar to that of the dramatic monologue.

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78. Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 27.

79. Vivienne J. Rundle says of poem, "the traditional separation of story and discourse is replaced by an unsettling dissolution of categories." "Will you let them murder me?: Guido and the Reader in *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Poetry* 27.3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1989): 99. While I suggest that layers of discourse become story events, Rundle claims the inverse is true: "Repeatedly, the 'story' component of the narrative turns out to be itself a layer of 'discourse,' as the originating events recede farther and farther away from the reader's experience of *The Ring and the Book*." Rundle, 100. Rundle does seem to acknowledge the movement of discourse to event in Guido's case; she argues that Guido's life depends on his convincing the judges of the merit of his version of the events, and "to accomplish this, he substitutes 'discourse' for 'story'—making his narrative about the events the 'story,' the action by which the reader will judge him." Rundle, 104. I agree with this assessment of the reader's judgment of Guido, but I fail to see how it differs from a reader's response to any other dramatic monologue.

## EPIC REPETITION

The poem's repetitive presentation of the same basic story events has other important consequences. The multiple retellings diminish the suspense we expect from many narrative forms, but the retellings also mimic the audience experience of a specific narrative form: epic myth.<sup>80</sup> As we saw in chapter 2, an epic allows the audience to hear a familiar story with familiar episodes, and analyze each episode for the ways in which it demonstrates the hero's exemplarity, and the ways in which it leads to (or delays) the story's ultimate end. As Paul Ricoeur describes it: "As soon as a story is well known—and such is the case with most traditional and popular narratives as well as with the national chronicles of the founding events of a given community—retelling takes the place of telling. Then following the story is less important than apprehending the well-known end as implied in the beginning and the well-known episodes as leading to this end."<sup>81</sup> In national epics, then, the audience's task is to understand how the early events in the tale inevitably led to (or at least foreshadowed) the ending. The emphasis is not on what happened but on how it happened. Wolfgang Iser describes a similar situation for the readers of *Pilgrim's Progress*, another story in which the ending is known from the very beginning. There are many moments in the story at which the reader "is aware of the end result, and so his interest lies not in whether the pilgrim will arrive, but in what the pilgrim has to do in order to get there. This latter form of tension is epic, since the outcome of the adventures is already known."<sup>82</sup> Again, the emphasis is on how the already-known ending will come about, although in this case the specific episodes leading up to the ending are not known by a first-time reader.<sup>83</sup>

Such is not the case for the reader of *The Ring and the Book*, who knows all the key events by the close of book 1. Browning's audience does not quite align with Ricoeur's description of the epic experience, either. Certainly in Browning's work, "retelling takes the place of telling," and "following the story" is not our chief concern. But neither are

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80. I therefore disagree with Altick and Loucks when they claim that the poem's resemblances to epic are merely superficial. See Altick and Loucks, 7.

81. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980–81), 175.

82. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 9.

83. In this respect, Iser's description of *Pilgrim's Progress* resembles my description of *The Prelude*. There are, however, important differences (*The Prelude's* associational, rather than linearly causal, structure, for instance) which make *The Prelude* a more lyrical, rather than epic, work. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see chapter 2.

we focused on seeing the end as implied in the beginning, or on the relationship of episodes to the end. Browning's reader must concentrate not on the *how* of the narrative's action, but on the *why*, and Browning locates the explanation for the story in an understanding of the participants' characters. Traditionally, the function of character in epic is to provide an exemplar, to embody one particular trait, or a related set of traits, highly valued in the author's culture. When epic tension is emphasized in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the ending is certain for both the narrator and reader, then "events and characters are relevant only insofar as they bring out the exemplariness of the road to salvation."<sup>84</sup> Indeed, "in the epic . . . everything [is] subsidiary to the idea."<sup>85</sup> Some readers argue that characters in *The Ring and the Book* function as exemplars. According to Sue Lonoff, "While [the speakers] are highly particularized they are also exemplars of moral qualities—of good and evil, foolishness and wisdom."<sup>86</sup> Certainly the absolute purity of Pompilia and the unmitigated cruelty of Guido encourage readers to view them as models of good and evil, and their exemplary status is reinforced by the Pope's and Browning's unambiguous judgments of them. Browning's characters, however, are much more particularized, rounder, more vital, than in most epics. They also manifest their essential natures through a medium that significantly differs from epics.

The reader of *The Ring and the Book* searches for a character's essence, not in the actions of the narrative, but rather in representations of the character's motivations and thought processes.<sup>87</sup> The importance of these internal, subjective states suggests that the core of the poem's meaning is lyrical. As Langbaum aptly declares, "By their motives shall ye know them! This is Browning's injunction throughout."<sup>88</sup> The degree to which the events themselves are de-emphasized is apparent very early in the work. Less than four hundred lines into the poem, Browning declares:

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,  
Husband and wife, what manner of mankind,  
But how you hold concerning this and that

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84. Iser, 8.

85. *Ibid.*, 28.

86. Lonoff, 152.

87. Ross Posnock also finds that "[b]y eliminating any element of surprise or suspense [Browning] makes the reader attend to the elaboration . . . of the characters' thoughts and feelings," but sees this technique's significance as showing "the poem's affinities to James and modernism." Posnock, 287.

88. Langbaum, 120.

Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.  
(1.372–77)

His readers “know the tale already,” remarkably early in the poem, but merely knowing the bare events is not sufficient knowledge. The reaction Browning desires from his readers is their judgment of the participants’ characters, “what manner of mankind” they are. Events and their accompanying temporal change are neither the center of attention, nor a sufficient vehicle for conveying character. Instead, the nature of a person’s discourse is used to convey the static, internal nature of the person him- or herself.<sup>89</sup> The poem’s core of meaning, then, lies in the atemporal characteristics of lyric.<sup>90</sup> And in this respect, through the repetition of narrative to produce a focus on lyrical elements, “Browning’s effort . . . is to reveal the timeless in the temporal.”<sup>91</sup> The interplay of means and ends is even more complex in *The Ring and the Book*, however. The lyrical element of motivation reveals each speaker’s character, and hence serves the rhetorical purpose of the dramatic monologue. Finally, characters’ motives are the basis on which the Pope and Browning’s readers ethically judge the characters and their actions; motives also serve the rhetorical purpose of narrative. Narrative means serve lyric ends, which are themselves means to serve the ends of narrative and portraiture.

## ALLITERATION AS CHARACTERIZATION

Telling the same basic plot is certainly not the only feature common to

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89. Indeed, all but one of the characters are static in their personalities. The one exception is Caponsacchi: “Caponsacchi is the only character in the poem shown to be capable of change—the only character, indeed, who is shown undergoing the process of change.” Armstrong, “Note,” 271.

90. This is consistent with Langbaum’s claim that in the end, “the dramatic monologue is resolved not dramatically but lyrically, not by the completeness of the situation but by a completeness that resides within the speaker.” Langbaum, 200–201. In this respect, I disagree with Melissa Valiska Gregory’s argument that “throughout *The Ring and the Book*, the rhetorical force of lyric violence demands a social response: consideration and likely condemnation.” Gregory, 503. To my mind, though the reader is asked to make judgments, the poem strongly suggests that social institutions are ill-equipped to judge this case properly.

91. Altick and Loucks, 35. In contrast, Herbert Tucker argues that *The Ring and the Book*’s underlying “premise is the inescapability of the historical condition,” and the poem suggests that cultural and historical conditions shape the characters’ motives and desires. Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 442.

all the speakers. They also share a proclivity for the same metaphors and allusions, a frequent use of alliteration, and the mere fact that their speeches are divided into lines of blank verse. All of these commonalities emphasize Browning's hand in the story. This in turn creates a triple vision of time: the reader is simultaneously aware of the time being narrated, the time of each character's narration, and the time of Browning's writing, making the reader more cognizant of the lyric moment of composition than is usual in epic and many other narratives.<sup>92</sup>

Alliteration, however, does more than just lend textural unity to *The Ring and the Book* as a whole.<sup>93</sup> This should not be surprising, since it is one of the prominent features of Browning's style throughout his oeuvre, and Browning uses it quite deliberately.<sup>94</sup> Although Browning's alliteration is sporadic, it is also very noticeable.<sup>95</sup> In *The Ring and the Book*, however, alliteration becomes especially appropriate for emphasizing Browning's technique and purpose. It is a poetic device which quite obviously uses repetition, and this echoes, on a much smaller scale, the poem's larger structure based on repetition. One of Browning's chief goals is to present vividly but indirectly the participants' characters, and here, too, alliteration is helpful. The poem frequently clusters characteristics around a person's name, joining them through alliteration. The sonic echoes emphasize the person's reputed attributes, and this

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92. Other critics have noted these multiple demands on the reader. Donald Hair claims, "We must keep in mind three generic points of view: the narrative, in which the facts of the story are presented simply as facts susceptible of varying interpretations (only one of which is right); the dramatic, in which each character interprets the story according to his own approach to life; and the lyric, in which the poet applies his moral and artistic insight to both the story he tells and the characters he creates." Hair, *Browning's Experiments*, 126. Samuel Chell suggests the poem highlights not just the psychological moment of an individual speaker, but also the reader's present moment of engagement with the poem, which is made more vibrant through the reader's engagement with the past. Chell, 94. And W. David Shaw notes, "[T]he action of *The Ring and the Book* . . . constitute[s] a series of revelations . . . which have the effect of shifting attention to the reader's own experience." Shaw, *Dialectical*, 313.

93. A common definition of alliteration is "the repetition of the sound of an initial consonant or consonant cluster in stressed syllables close enough to each other for the ear to be affected, perhaps unconsciously, by the repetition." Percy G. Adams, *Graces of Harmony: Alliteration, Assonance, and Consonance in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 3. I agree with Adams that alliteration can be loosened to include repetitions of only parts of consonant clusters; for instance, I would say *t* and *tr* alliterate with each other. I depart from Adams in including unstressed syllables in alliteration, but only when they echo nearby stressed syllables.

94. As Donald Hair notes, Browning tends to "lin[k] words with alliteration," frequently using "the link [as] metaphorical as well as alliterative." Hair, *Language*, 185.

95. As Percy Adams describes it, "in the famous dramatic monologues, . . . Browning could go for lines without apparently feeling the need to appeal in any way to the ear. And then . . . would come a burst of echoes, especially of alliteration." Adams, 171.

alliterative emphasis can be used either to strengthen an accurate characterization, or to undermine ironically an inaccurate one.<sup>96</sup>

Seymour Chatman makes a useful distinction between two common relationships of alliterative syllables to a line's meter. If alliteration is used with two immediately contiguous syllables, it opposes the meter; such alliteration either creates a stress cluster, or draws disproportionate attention to an unstressed syllable. If, instead, an unstressed syllable is placed between the alliterating ones, then the alliteration is cooperating with the meter, adding extra emphasis to the regular metrical stress pattern. Chatman refers to the former case as "ametical" alliteration.<sup>97</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the latter case as "metrical alliteration." Both patterns are common in *The Ring and the Book*, and we occasionally find both in the same line, as when a fountain of Triton "Puffs up steel sleet which breaks to diamond dust" (1.892). "Diamond dust" is an example of metrical alliteration, and contains assonance in the latter two syllables. The phrase "steel sleet" contains ametical alliteration with the repeated *s*, assonance with the hard *e* sound, and a chiasmus of the words' final two consonants—*t* and *l*. In general, ametical alliteration is more noticeable in Browning's poem, and is consistent with his tendency to roughen the meter with dense stress clusters.<sup>98</sup> Occasionally, Browning uses ametical alliteration for more than two consecutive syllables, as in "frayed flesh free" (2.630), "cur-cast creature" (2.632), "first fool's-flurry" (3.499), and a series of four stressed and alliterative syllables in Guido's complaint that he is "whealed, one wide wound all of me"<sup>99</sup> (5.135).

Browning's alliterative patterns are by no means limited to single lines. He often carries several intertwined patterns of alliteration, assonance, and consonance through a substantial passage, as when Caponsacchi is incredulous that he must tell his tale again to the same three judges:

96. This is consistent with Roma A. King, Jr.'s analysis of alliteration in "Fra Lippo Lippi": "Alliteration serves . . . as one means of portraying character," and "often alliteration heightens satiric meaning." King, 38, 37.

97. Seymour Chatman, "Comparing Metrical Styles," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), 156–57.

98. I agree with Elisabeth Howe that "effects of alliteration, repetition, or rhythm in Browning's monologues usually are aimed at creating dramatic suspense or emphasizing some aspect of character or situation, rather than producing a musical effect." Howe, 54.

99. Of course, since alliteration is based on sound, rather than spelling, "whealed," "one," "wide," and "wound" share the same initial *w* sound, and hence are alliterative, despite the fact that the *w* sound is spelled three different ways ('w,' 'wh,' and not explicitly indicated by spelling at all).

. . . yet **now no** one laughs,  
 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**,  
 The **pen's** **pretence** at **play** with the **pursed** **mouth**,  
 The **titter** stifled in the hollow **palm**.<sup>100</sup>  
 (6.9–16)

The alliteration of “laugh” with “lords” is especially obvious since the entire words are repeated; “laugh” or “laughter” appears four times, and “lords” twice. Five other consonants are alliterated, including the use of *p* four times in a single line. The passage also contains more subtle effects. There are two almost unnoticeable combinations of assonance and consonance: the first syllable of “permissible” with “smirk” and “pursed,” and the second syllable of “pretence” with “pen.” Were it not for the presence of an additional consonant at the end of “smirk” and “pretence,” they would both be mild internal rhymes. And the first two syllables of “levity” and “indecorous” have a chiastic pattern of assonance. Finally, we have examples of metrical alliteration in “lords, but laugh,” and ametrical alliteration in “now no.”

A special subcategory of metrical alliterations are “epithet-noun” combinations, consisting of a “bisyllabic modifier plus [a] monosyllabic head.”<sup>101</sup> Some examples are Half-Rome’s claim that Pompilia’s was a “bestial birth” (2.604), and the Other Half-Rome’s labeling the Archbishop as a “mighty man” (3.1000) and Guido as a “sleeping spouse” (3.1071). Such combinations draw particular attention to the attribute given to the noun, and the sonic repetition in the words suggests an especially close relationship between them, tightening their lexical connection. The emphasis provided by alliteration can be used either to make common connections seem even more natural and forceful, or to heighten the irony of an uncommon connection. It is generally accepted that “rhymes can be used to emphasize serious similarities or dissimilarities, to effect ironies by association”; similar effects are possible by the use of alliteration, assonance, or consonance.<sup>102</sup> To return to our

100. Alliterative consonants are marked in boldface, and italics indicate assonance or a combination of assonance with consonance.

101. Chatman, “Composing,” 157.

102. Adams, 28. One of the central arguments of Adams’s book is that alliteration, assonance, and consonance can be just as effective as rhyme in producing such results.

examples, the alliteration in “mighty man” may lead us to pause and consider the Archbishop’s misuse of power and his fleshliness, characteristics that might otherwise have been overlooked in this quick phrase. “Bestial birth” is especially effective because the sonic compatibility of the words highlights both their applicability to Pompilia’s descent from a prostitute, and their inapplicability to a character who is often compared to the Virgin Mary.

Alliteration’s power to emphasize characterization is not limited to phrases that are precise epithet-noun combinations, and this power has a strong appeal for Browning. When the court sentences Guido to death, they also pronounce, “His wife Pompilia in thought, word and deed, / Was perfect pure” (1.245–46). The metrical alliteration of the phrase “perfect pure,” combined with its consonance in its first and last syllables, creates a sense of the orderliness and harmony the phrase implies, and the fact that the phrase alliterates with Pompilia’s name makes the attachment of purity to her seem irrevocable.<sup>103</sup> Browning often uses alliteration for characterization, usually choosing the letter that begins either the character’s name, or a noun describing his social status. For instance, the prosecution claims that Count Guido’s guilt is clear, and that there are five circumstances increasing his culpability: “Crest over crest crowning the cockatrice” (1.168). The *c* in “count” is repeated four times in one line, and the sense of “crest over crest” conveys the repetition, the piling one on top of the other, that the line enacts. It all culminates in a label for Guido as an evil beast.

Similar techniques can be used ironically, to argue a viewpoint with which Browning himself would not agree. In fact, the same play on the letter of a name or title can be used to produce opposite characterizations. Guido’s defense lawyer also uses the repetition of the *c* in “count” to paint Guido’s disposition:

All conscience and all courage,—there’s our Count  
Charactered in a word; and, what’s more strange,  
He had companions in privilege,  
Found four courageous conscientious friends.  
(1.185–88)

This passage contains many sonic echoes. “Found four” contains ametrical alliteration. The last syllable of “charactered” rhymes with

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103. Park Honan claims that *p* alliteration shows Pompilia’s true nature even as Guido denies it. Park Honan, *Browning’s Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 300.

“word,” highlighting the vehicle Browning uses to effect his purpose of understanding character. Most prominent, however, is the repetition of *c* through all four lines. Arcangeli tries to affix the abstract qualities of “conscience” and “courage” more firmly and naturally to “Count” Guido through the sonic link among the traits and his title. By calling Guido’s accomplices “companions,” Arcangeli lets them partake of the characteristics conferred by his already-established sequence of alliteration, which he repeats in adjectival form (“courageous conscientious”) for greater emphasis. This passage paints Guido precisely as he is not, and if we realize that, we learn much about Arcangeli’s character. These lines also illustrate another common feature of Browning’s use of alliteration—the obvious repetition not only of initial consonant clusters, but also of entire words. Although Herbert Tucker sees, elsewhere in Browning’s poetry, a fear of endless repetition embodied in the poet’s use of alliteration,<sup>104</sup> I believe that in *The Ring and the Book* Browning embraces repetition as productive of both subtle and glaring distinctions. This poem conveys its meaning, and encourages the reader’s use of moral judgment, precisely through its use, on large and small scales, of repetition with a difference.

*The Ring and the Book* unveils character, and invites the reader’s judgment of characters, throughout its ten dramatic monologues. The framework of each of the books seamlessly blends lyric and narrative temporalities, emphasizing the lyric time of discourse but conferring to it a narrative progression in time. This feature, common to all dramatic monologues, is mimicked in the overarching structure of the poem: there is also temporal progression from one monologue to the next. The repetition of the same story elements mimics an epic reading experience, but also creates a triple awareness of time—the time of the story, the time of the characters’ discourse, and the time of Browning’s composition. The characters’ epic exemplarity is found not in their actions, but rather in their motives and personalities, traits that are further emphasized through Browning’s pervasive use of alliteration. In essence, *The Ring and the Book* repeats its narrative in order to convey lyrical internal states. But if temporally the poem uses narrative means to serve lyric ends, rhetorically it uses lyric means to serve narrative ends, by making these internal states the basis of the reader’s judgments.

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104. For example, Tucker says of *Sordello*, “Trapped in repetition, the poet can find ‘more to say’ only by saying more of the same thing, even of the same sound.” Tucker, *Browning’s Beginnings*, 22. In reference to *Pauline*, Tucker claims, “Browning embodies the threat of repetitive sameness in an alliterative near-tautology.” *Ibid.*, 42.