

The Diminutive Duke
A Submissive Message in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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Abstract

"The Diminutive Duke" is extrapolated from three separate essays written on Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess." Through historical study, close readings and critical analysis, an incompetent Renaissance-era duke is shown to have a wounded ego. Instead of lashing out at society in defiance, as previous critics have described Browning's character, the case is made here to show that the duke surrenders impotently and subconsciously to the alpha-personalities he welcomes into his life.

Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess," contains twenty-eight couplets written in iambic pentameter. Couplets and iambic pentameter are Shakespearean devices frequently associated with the highly stylized poetry of romance. The romantic, sonnet-like format of this poem substitutes for the love and intimacy that were absent from the speaker's first marriage. "My Last Duchess" is not a conventional love song: it is a sales pitch. An Italian duke of the Renaissance speaks to a marriage broker, the envoy of a count, hoping to finalize a contract for an arranged marriage. The widower duke finds himself in need of a wife at the end of a disappointing marriage, and this prospect has fueled literary debate as to any ulterior motives the duke has in his quest for a new duchess.

The only sense of romance in this poem is the way the duke woos his listeners. He speaks as much to himself as he does to the count's envoy. In format, these couplets are virtually all enjambed. The written lines are rarely punctuated to mark the end of a complete thought, leaving the curious reader to wonder where this train of thought will lead and what the duke's ulterior motives are. The duke carries this entire discussion single-handedly; asking and answering all questions, saying what he, himself, wants to hear. He is soothing his own sense of inadequacy, using words to bandage a bruised reputation. His reputation was damaged and his own confidence wounded by an irrepressible wife who brought shame to his duchy. This coincides with his personal fear of waning power; the political power of his reign, control over his subjects, and his own questionable virility. The setting of our story tells us much about the characters. We are taking a walk with the duke as he escorts his guest through a grand collection of art. He speaks of the works of art as well as his previous wife, the deceased duchess, whom the emissary meets in portraiture. The poem alludes to the fact that the duchess was sentenced to death by the duke's own decree. In the past, this monologue has been interpreted as a thinly-veiled threat to any that might cross the duke's path, including a future wife.

The time period is the Italian Renaissance. The d'Este family of Alfonso II, the historic duke characterized in Browning's poem, almost certainly commissioned and collected artworks as any

powerful family of means would have done. Browning's duke clearly has an impressive art collection, expansive enough to warrant a tour of its contents. The collection would illustrate to the viewer not only the owner's riches, but his far-reaching power; the duke has the ability to influence the world by controlling what the world sees in the art produced at his command. Much as he acquired his pieces of art, the duke acquired a wife in hopes that she would produce him heirs and perpetuate the legacy of the family name. In this monologue, the duke angles to acquire yet another wife to fulfill the same marital obligations.

The duke believes his previous wife was unfaithful to him. This is evidenced by the allusions made to her sexual exploits. The repeated phrase "spot of joy" connotes everything from a brief moment of happiness to the blissful sensation of orgasm; from a coy, flirtatious "blush" to the body's physiological response to virgin intercourse (Browning 31). A "spot" of blood occurs at the initial tearing of the hymen. Ostensibly, the duke had expected to be his young wife's first and last lover, himself "calling up that spot of joy" (21). Instead, he suspects that his wife "flush[ed]" at another man's compliment which he believed was tantamount to seduction (19). The duke tells the listener that the duchess had a roving eye, as "her looks went everywhere" (24). "She thanked men ... as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift" (31-34). The "gift" which the duke bestowed upon his duchess may have been the prestige that is offered the members of this family dynasty, or the privilege of bearing his heirs to perpetuate the "name," or the honor of receiving his seed at all. However, any sense of prestige, privilege or honor had been undermined by the duchess' alleged infidelity and the likelihood that she had received another man's "gift" of seed.

This writer theorizes that the duchess was carrying a baby not her husband's because the duke was impotent and had not yet bedded his young wife. In various forms, the word "stoop" is used repeatedly to intimate bowing, bending, submitting or the shrinking of one's posture. In this vein, it could be construed as a euphemism for a sex act, as if to bow over a partner. At face value, one might take the duke's choice "Never to stoop" as a refusal to lay with the woman who has defiled his name and station (43). Yet, we must read between the enjambed lines to find the truth of the matter. Recalling that this entire monologue is in defense of his bruised reputation, we know the duke wishes to be perceived as powerful, virile and masculine. Here, the duke alludes to a conscious decision not to bed his wife, but he glosses over the truth. Perhaps he was unable to bed his wife due to a sexual impotence. This secret is his silent proof of his wife's infidelity: he is certain he did not impregnate her.

Not only had the duchess insulted her husband with her philandering ways, but the word had spread at court of her adultery and of his theoretical impotence. "Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile?" (43-45) He perceived patronizing smiles and snickers from his duchess and courtiers alike, and he felt he needed to protect his reputation and title. With the power of his duchy, he "gave commands; / Then all smiles

stopped together" (45-46). The duke ordered the duchess' death and the particular manner was decapitation. Gesturing toward her portrait, the duke stresses "There she stands / As if alive", begging the reader to consider the opposite (46-47). We conclude she died not standing, perhaps even "stooping" (in the sense of "crouching"). "[T]he faint / Half-flush that die[d] along her throat" was blood coaxed by the blade where she would have stooped at the chopping block (18-19).

Those of us with scant knowledge of the Renaissance Period and its reigning nobility might be surprised to find record of a duke making excuses for wielding power over his duchy. This is the case in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." The duke's apparent need to rationalize his own actions and his treatment of his wife is intriguing, particularly in an era dominated by patrilineal oligarchies. Browning peers into Europe's past with this 1842 poem which is loosely based on events in the real life of an Italian duke of the Renaissance, Alfonso II of Ferrara. "[T]he duke ... attempts to justify – if not to the envoy, then to himself – why he should have done away with his wife" (Ryals 71). Clyde de L. Ryals notices that, by putting words like these into Alfonso II's mouth, "Browning's monologues dramatize how speech is the means humans employ to justify themselves and their actions, how ultimately almost all speech is little more than rationalization" (71). In fact, this rationalization is part of the ruse. The duke calls attention to his own behavior, feigning to defend it while counting on the fact that his audience expects to hear an excuse. The duke employs here a distraction, an aural sleight-of-hand, to disguise his true personal shame, which is his own ineptitude. He does not have the skill, wisdom or insight to match the reign of his predecessors or to ensure the future of his inherited duchy. Early flaws in judgment when selecting a bride foretell the demise of his kingdom. This incompetence is the fatal flaw that the duke disguises with his fast talk while escorting the envoy through his art gallery.

The duke's irrepressible urge to explain his own actions might be a sign of his awareness that he had perhaps crossed a behavioral line or committed some social faux pas. This suspicion is cemented with Carolyn James' commentary on the nature of marriage in the Renaissance. According to her article entitled "Friendship and Dynastic Marriage in Renaissance Italy," there was, indeed, a shift taking place in society's expectations of marriage as well as evolution of the relationship itself, and early-Renaissance Italy was at the forefront of this transformation of the condition of marriage. Marriage was becoming known as an alliance both politically and civilly, almost foreshadowing the notion of gender equality to come some centuries later.

In describing the differences between each culture's experience of the Renaissance movement, James says that Italian women, being of a very social and interactive culture, were more visible, better educated and more politically aware than their European counterparts. Aristocratic women were expected to mingle at social gatherings, to engage in witty conversation and to discuss matters of diplomacy. "Dynastic marriages were often contracted to end wars ... [and] wives of princes were often called upon to act as deputies to their frequently-absent husbands" (7; 6). These qualities in a wife were becoming especially valued as beneficial to a union. Patriarchal attitudes

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were falling out of favor, and old-fashioned husbands who insisted on oppressing their wives of quality were scorned for undermining the potential benefits of “a dynastic marriage alliance” (8). This indicates that there was a relatively new expectation for civility and friendship between husband and wife, which required some effort and nurturing from both parties to maintain a successful relationship.

During the Medieval and Renaissance eras, many aristocratic and royal marriages were arranged to improve social status, family influence, and political advantage. Historically, the d’Este family of Ferrara was especially adept at negotiating successful marriage alliances. Linking themselves with the Sforzas of Milan, the Gonzagas of Mantua, and the Aragonese of Naples, the House of d’Este extended their multi-generational reach across much of the Italian peninsula (D’Elia n. page). The dowries that came with marrying well helped back a successful army or satiate a restless neighboring city-state. As said by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, a scholar of the Medieval and Renaissance Ages, “*Chi to’ donna, vuol danari*: He who takes a wife wants money” (Klapisch-Zuber 213). Society encouraged marital gifts to be exchanged as long as the marriage “remained alive and useful – that is, as long as there were children being born” (241). With this, a woman’s wifely duty is equated to – and rewarded for – reproduction.

Alfonso II was remarkably conservative for the 1550s, contrasted with his forward-thinking fellow Italians. With his patriarchal mindset, we conclude that the duke was of the medieval opinion that a wife “had nothing to transmit but a dowry, the prestige of alliance, and the fecundity of the wife’s womb” (307). However, that out-dated triad of marital expectations caused his first marriage to disintegrate.

It is worth pointing out that in the mid-1400s, some one hundred years before Alfonso II married his first wife, Lucrezia, the difference in ages between a bride and groom had increased from approximately seven years (aged at 15 and 22 respectively) to approximately twelve years (becoming 18 and 30 respectively) while the bride’s marriageable age increased. The real duke married his 14-year-old bride at the age of 25; thus, both were young and likely perceived as naïve. Browning’s duke perceives no equity in the nuptial gifts of his wife’s dowry or her family’s alliance. He clearly holds his own “gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name” as more valuable than any prestige her family could lend to the marital contract (Browning 33). A powerless family alliance is symbolized by the meek, agrarian mule she rides instead of a regal horse which would show military strength. The duke has perhaps discovered that his new family-in-law had neither power, nor prestige, nor funds enough, nor land enough to assist the duke in protecting his kingdom, much less to expand it. This is yet another disappointing turn of events for the duke now that these two families are intertwined. Even the “fecundity of [his] wife’s womb” may be in question. If an earlier interpretation from this author could be posited again, the young bride may have been a pregnant adulteress, which is a flagrant breach of her husband’s expectations. On the other hand, since the historic Lucrezia was uncommonly young for a Renaissance bride, at only

fourteen, she may have been not yet fertile: the “white mule / She rode” might be a sign that she was not yet a menstruating woman and would not be capable of bearing children for some time to come (Browning 28-29).

The ducal character channeled by Browning clearly believes his first bride was immature, impetuous, and unfit as hostess of his castle or as a politician’s wife. Yet, he makes no admission of his own youth, immaturity, or inexperience in matters both personal and political. He laments that his wife needed to be told “ ‘ here you miss, / Or there exceed the mark’ ” because her behavior was superfluous; “too soon”, “too easily” and “everywhere” (38-39; 22-24). Were this duke as open-minded as other Renaissance-era husbands, he might have “lessoned” his bride in the etiquette and affairs of home and state with which a competent hostess and duchess should be acquainted (40). This duke “choose[s] never to stoop” (42-43). In refusing to have a constructive conversation with his wife, thinking that it would compromise his authoritative status, the duke is refusing to nurture what could be a dynastic marriage. Since he views the position of tutor as being beneath him, this indicates that he views his wife as inferior and, by association, her entire family. From the duke’s perspective, the fact that his bride had not been adequately prepared for her career as duchess reflected poorly on her family, to whom the duke was now contractually bound. Given that his wife’s dowry rang hollow, her family had no prestige to share equal to the Ferrara lineage, and his wife would not produce him legitimate heirs, the duke saw no redeeming aspects in his alliance with this family-in-law. Browning’s duke had not merely chosen an unsuitable wife, but even more significantly, he had poorly selected the family with which to conduct such a political merger. This proof of his poor judgment would not bode well for his political reputation or his hold on the kingdom.

This is a precisely the error of judgment that the duke veils in the monologue that is “My Last Duchess.” He casts blame on his deceased wife for the nature of their flawed marriage and even links it, the flawed marriage, to the cause of her death, all in an elaborate effort to disguise his own impaired judgment and to protect the reputation of his lineage and the power of his duchy. More than rationalizing his own behavior in the marriage, and beyond admitting to the Renaissance’s transformation of the dynastic marriage as an ideal, he obfuscates his own political ineptitude in the hopes that his audience will not foresee the demise of his duchy.

In truth, the House of d’Este dwindled shortly after Alfonso II died in 1597 with no known heirs. The d’Este kingdom was eventually declared an abandoned fiefdom and was absorbed by the church as a papal state.

The portrait of his first duchess is also a constant reminder to our duke of how fleeting power can be; the reign of his dynasty, control over his castle and court, or even dominance in his bedroom. This two-dimensional duchess is the only version of his first wife which he can control, and this is the version which he will keep and bequeath to future generations as the emblem of his powerful

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reign. Furthermore, in this speech, he re-energizes his power by resurrecting his dead wife, "and there she stands" (Browning 4). She has been immortalized by his "munificen[t]" hand and the duke has thereby secured his own immortality (49). Future generations will see her portrait and think of his lavish power. His "last" duchess is ever present, preserved in art, an *everlasting* warning (according to other critics) for any future duchess of how she may find her end if she does not comport herself in a noble manner (1).

In "Browning's Witless Duke," B. R. Jerman refutes the interpretation of a veiled warning being sent to his next wife. Jerman speaks of an utter lack of ulterior motive in granting a tour of his art collection and in his conversation. Jerman asserts that the monologue is not ominous, and that the art tour is merely a courtesy extended to a respected guest: that, in essence, it bears little symbolism and no more significance than mere etiquette. Far from coercive, Jerman sees Browning's duke as such a "witless ... vain and possessive ... dilettante" to whom the thought "would never occur" to send a "sinister" message of foreboding to his future bride. He sees no "warning, demanding ... insinuating, hinting, implying, or intimating" whatsoever of "how she must behave once she is his wife" in the poem (Jerman n. page).

True, a gallant host would escort his guest on a tour of the manor and art gallery, as was the "common courtesy in great houses" (n. page). In this case, a tour of the art gallery provides a uniquely suited location for a candid display of both great art and personal truths. "[N]one puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I": approaching a portrait of his deceased wife, the duke pulls back the curtain which is a threshold of intimacy (Browning 9-10). Not everyone sees this portrait: its partitioned viewing booth is a room-within-a room, an inner sanctum where "rarit[ies]" of art and honesty can be exposed (55).

Jerman proposes the unlikelihood of the duke declaring his humiliating embarrassment in his first marriage since he is a stubborn man who would "Never ... stoop" (43). Jerman finds it equally unlikely that the duke would "consciously unbend to tell 'strangers' " what in particular he expects from a wife (n. page). The emissary, probably already in the know thanks to social gossip, might already be expecting such an ultimatum from the duke about his next wife's decorum. With that logic, Jerman posits that "His Grace would not condescend" to speak the obvious (n. page). This would indicate that "His Grace" speaks something *not* obvious, something the envoy did not expect to hear. The expression of this singular communication is quite a departure for the duke. The private setting of this insulated room is the stage for the duke's "act" of personal self-disclosure (n. page). His message for this select audience is uniquely candid and genuine.

Nonetheless, the root purpose of speech is communication. So, if "he is not issuing a warning to his intended bride," then we must ask what exactly is the message the duke wishes to convey (n. page)? What bearing, if any, might the location have on the nature of this one-sided conversation? This author does see an underlying message that foretells something of new marital expectations. It is

not what the duke demands from his bride; instead, it is a hint of the behavior she can expect to see in her groom. Rather, the underlying message in his monologue is a subtle, even subconscious, hint that he will be an improved husband; that she as a better wife will make him a better husband. The duke has already ascertained that the count's daughter is ideal wife-material. He alludes to a more progressive and liberal relationship, more akin to his married aristocratic peers. This attitude is, indeed, symbolized in his collection of art and read in his choice of words.

Despite the fact he has brought about the end of his first duchess, the use of "last" does not necessarily have the ring of finality to it. He clearly intends his "last" duchess not to be his final duchess as he plots a new marriage for himself with this very oratory.

This is an intimate conversation, as shown by the intimate viewing booth of the portrait. The duke discloses the personal tale of how he was embarrassed and humiliated by the previous duchess. By confiding in the envoy, the duke hopes to win the envoy's sympathies. Showing that he is willing to adjust his stubborn behavior by opening up to the envoy is evidence that the duke might be equally open with his new duchess. Risking vulnerability while negotiating a merger is a much softer side of the "vain and possessive" duke and the envoy might infer from it that the duke will be a more progressive, liberal husband, as other Renaissance husbands were becoming. The count's emissary can now pass along the message that the duke is a changed man.

The duke has already decided that the count's daughter is the best candidate for a successful marriage, and he makes his point by tactfully comparing her to his past wife who left so much wanting. The portraiture is a measure of the first duchess' demeanor. The previous duchess had such a homely persona (speaking figuratively), that the paint "worked busily [in merely] a day" was a vast improvement on the model, and might be considered "a wonder" (Browning 4; 3). This framed incarnation of the duchess is the only version worth keeping, more so than the woman herself. For his next marriage, the duke seeks the best incarnation of a wife, someone befitting the masterpiece that might be inspired by her. He drops the names of Frà Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck to show the power of his celebrity in commissioning work from the famous artists and to hint that he might arrange a similar honor for his new wife, who would presumably deserve only the best.

A bronze cast is an intricate, life-like, three-dimensional statue, requiring several stages of planning and construction with careful attention paid to trigonometry. It is a far cry from a two-dimensional painting. Bronze is a strong, durable alloy and bronze casts have been known to withstand the ravages of time. As a synthesis of high art, math and science, the bronze statue that we approach in this tour exemplifies the rebirth of culture and enlightenment that was the Renaissance.

Innsbruck is pointedly mentioned to establish a link not only between the artist, Claus, and the city, but also to another countryman. If we can accept the widely held opinion that the character of

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Browning's duke is drawn from Alfonso II, then this second wife he pursues would be Barbara of Innsbruck. This historical fact is relevant to explain the link between Claus of Innsbruck, his bronze cast of Neptune, and the would-be Barbara as the future bride. Frà Pandolf's hometown is not stressed, which sets his painting quite apart from Claus' bronze statue, which warrants a more boastful introduction. The duke is quite pleased to have the bronze in his collection and we glean from his own fervent sales pitch that he would be similarly pleased to secure this engagement with the woman from Innsbruck. Being connected in this way to Claus, the would-be Barbara is then associated to the work of art itself; Neptune Taming a Sea-horse.

In speech, the duke has already indicated his respect for the elevated stature of his future bride. He has also alluded to himself being a liberal and humble husband who might "stoop" to honor his new wife. If the statue can be taken as a symbol of the commissioned marriage, then the duke is the subdued sea-horse and the new duchess is the powerful Neptune. The duke might be tamed by his mate to become a better husband, and this is the crux of his subtle persuasion.

Like a choreographer, the duke employs the crescendo of theatrical drama in the route of his gallery tour, moving on to bigger, better, more momentous displays. "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" (Browning 54-56) This climax of the tour is intended to outshine the duchess' portrait, and as such, is a symbol for the much-improved replacement of a wife the duke seeks. Moving on to the Neptune statue, which is better still than the painting, emulates the elevated stature the duke looks for in his next wife. Our duke marches through his rhetoric just as the pair march through the art collection; to arrive at the grand finale. He has rehearsed this vignette to lead the envoy to a particular conclusion, and it is no accident. This one-sided conversation has been a uniquely intimate one held in the relative privacy of a meaningful work of art. The duke has employed candor and symbolic references in his purposeful speech. Instead of a sly warning to frighten his future bride, the duke makes the subtle and novel suggestion that a new duchess might reign dominant over him.

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