IN WRITING TO FANNY HAWORTH IN 1837 THAT HE was soon “to begin the finishing Sordello” and “to begin thinking a Tragedy” (presumably King Victor and King Charles), Browning said that he wished also “to have another tragedy in prospect.” “I want a subject of the most wild and passionate love, to contrast with the one [King Victor] I mean to have ready in a short time. I have many half-conceptions, floating fancies: give me your notion of a thorough self-devotement, self-forgetting; should it be a woman who loves thus, or a man?” (Orr, Life, pp. 103–4). The subject that he came up with was made into the play entitled The Return of the Druses.

Originally in three acts, the play was expanded to five at the suggestion of Macready. Macready however was not pleased: “Read Browning’s play,” he recorded in his diary on 3 August 1840, “and with deepest concern, I yield to the belief that he will never write again—to any purpose. I fear his intellect is not quite clear” (Diaries, 2:73). Browning nevertheless continued to argue his case for the play’s suitability for the stage. Macready reread what he could but found it “mystical, strange and heavy” (Diaries, 2:80). Finally Browning retrieved the manuscript from the obdurate Macready, put it away, and did not publish it till January 1843, when it appeared, with some revision, as the fourth pamphlet of Bells and Pomegranates.

It seems that the more he revised the play, the more “mystical” and “strange” it became; which is to say, it grew increasingly ironic. One is not surprised that Macready did not know what to make of it, for the play permits, and indeed encourages, the audience to take two opposite views of the motives of the chief characters, whose actions in turn are presented in a
series of ironic reversals. In *The Return of the Druses*, somewhat as in *Strafford*, Browning constantly undercuts his protagonists—in consequence demolishing sympathy for them—only in the end to represent them in such fashion as to elicit the audience's compassion for their plight. The effect is indeed "mystical, strange," and perhaps even "heavy."

The basic theme of the play is deception. "We live and breathe deceiving and deceived," said Paracelsus (4.625). Working with this early insight, Browning has the hero of *The Return of the Druses* say upon first appearance, "I am found deceiving and deceived" (2.35). The question is enlarged to encompass a consideration of the degree to which deception is necessary and justifiable in human affairs and of the extent to which deception takes on a reality that is the thing itself. In other words, is not the robe (or veil) of the thing ultimately, in the phenomenal world, the *ding an sich*?

Djabal has plotted the death of the hated governor of the island and secured the protection of Venice, whose ships are to take the Druses to Lebanon. Now that deliverance is at hand, he questions why he should declare himself the reincarnate Hakeem, as his people expect their deliverer to be. Is it not enough to be Djabal? Has he not deceived himself and others as to his nature? Surely he is but a man, not God: "And I feel this first to-day!" (2.14). But having pursued his goal with concentrated fervor and having accomplished all that Hakeem promised, "Would it be wondrous that delusions grew?" he asks himself. "Could I call / My mission aught but Hakeem's?" (2.47, 53–54). Is the man who accomplishes the work of deity not an incarnation of deity? In answering the question, the play is worked out in terms of a dialectic of power and love involving Djabal and Anael, his bride-to-be.

As the child of murdered parents, Djabal has a personal as well as tribal motive for his actions. In pursuit of his end—the death of the prefect and the subsequent return of his people to Lebanon—he has resorted to any means: the chill policy and lore of Europe as well as the hot-headed pride and deviousness of Syria. Through power he has become the leader of the Druses, and through power he will deliver them. As the play opens, it is Hakeem the God of power that he represents him-
self to be. But the nature of this manifestation of Hakeem—if indeed he is Hakeem—troubles him. Surely, he asks at the beginning of act two, he could have attained the power simply as Djabal: what he has done “took / No less than Hakeem?” “What of Hakeem?” he ponders. His has been thus far a strangely deficient notion of what God is, who certainly is more than power. But what else? At this point Djabal does not know, and consequently, convinced that his “delusion mixed itself / Insensibly with this career,” he determines to renounce all claims to be the incarnate God.

But just at this moment, Khalil enters, greets him as Hakeem, and announces that the people are instituting choirs and dances to the returned caliph “as of old / 'Tis chronicled you bade them” (2. 71–72). Determined to abjure what he now fears to have been imposture, Djabal asks his faithful lieutenant why he, Khalil, never essayed to save the Druses. Khalil replies that only belief in the power of Hakeem has united his people and goaded them on from seeking some selfish prize. Djabal begins to rethink his position, and his interview soon thereafter with Anael, his betrothed, further convinces him that he cannot confess to being a mere pretender.

For her part Anael feels unworthy because she can feel no awe for the godlike, only love for the human in Djabal. To prove her faith in his divinity, she undertakes to kill the prefect. Having done the deed, she calls upon Djabal to exalt himself and her with him. Djabal, however, overcome with the result of his duplicity, tells her the truth. Momentarily her revulsion is extreme, but then aware that he is merely human after all, she loves him more than ever. She insists that he confess to the Druses that he was an impostor and that in his abasement their true love will be realized: “Oh, best of all I love thee! / Shame with the man, no triumph with the God” (4. 113–14).

But Djabal draws back. His pride will not allow him to perform this act of degradation. Once more possessed of a sense of power, he insists that he is indeed a god: “for I know myself, / And what I am to personate” (4. 137–38). And so as Hakeem, the God of power, he exclaims: “Thus I grasp thee, sword! / Druses, 'tis Hakeem saves you!” (4. 149–50).
In the last act Anael comes to denounce him before all the Druses. To her he turns to repent the course of action that grew out of the conflict between his Arab instinct and his Frank brain. From the clash there now arises "my mere Man's nature" that allows him to love her as he never loved before (4.270-80). He submits to her and awaits his doom from her lips. Anael, however, become aware that through love the divine is incarnated in the human, utters "Hakeem!" and then dies. As if inspired, Djabal turns to the crowd to remind them of what has been done for them and to ask, "Am I not Hakeem?" Through love power has grown to godhead.

Browning had been intrigued with the notion of growth toward godhead ever since Paracelsus, in which his protagonist describes "a tendency to God" (5.722) arising from the interplay of love with power in human life. In Sordello the poet-narrator had spoken of Sordello's need for a revelation of power through love, presumably in an incarnation of deity (6.590-602). And now in The Return of the Druses, Browning turned to consideration of incarnation not so much as a revelation but as development of human character, of "soul." This is very much akin to the theory of progress enunciated in Paracelsus but with this difference: the fulfillment of the "tendency to God" is not an eschatological expectation but a possibility of present realization. The Incarnation of Christ, by implication, was thus not a historical event that happened once for all but is ever being repeated in acts of sacrificial love.

This is the "mystical" view of the tragedy. Regarded in this way, The Return of the Druses is hardly a play "of the most wild and passionate love" that Browning referred to in his letter to Miss Haworth. But seen from a different angle, the drama does focus on human passion, is in fact a study in the psychopathology of romantic love.

Not until he saw Anael did Djabal announce that his was the promised mission of Hakeem (2.224-27). When he first speaks of her, he seems to regard her as a distraction from what he thought he ought to be about (2.93-94). Yet later, in talking to Anael, he says that the people needed a miracle if they were to be freed, and so "I said / 'Be there a mira-
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cle!'—for I saw you!” (4. 66–67). He was to exalt her as the beloved of Hakeem. But, he erroneously believes, he receives from Anael not love but worship: she adores the god, not the man. Djabal, however, in common with Browning’s lovers whom we have met previously, can only love the woman whom he can worship. Not until the end does she achieve the requisite superior position when he can tell her, “I love thee—I—who did not love before!” (5. 280). “How,” he asks, “could I love while thou adoredst me?” (5. 282). But now that she despises him and is above him so immeasurably, he can love her fully. What elevates her in his mind is her present power to doom him to death: “Oh, luxury to worship, to submit, / To be transcended, doomed to death by thee!” (5. 287–88). And so he stabs himself to join Anael in the exaltation of death. Djabal manifests the same pathology as the lovers in earlier works who have need of “queens” as objects of their love.

Though Browning’s lovers studied previously yearn for the full realization of their love that can come about only in a world beyond that of quotidian reality—in death, in other words—none had specifically envisioned their “dying into love” as exaltation. In The Return of the Druses, on the other hand, the two lovers almost explicitly see death as means of translation to a higher sphere of pure love where they are deified as love’s lovers. “What remains,” asks Djabal of Anael’s dead body, “But to press to thee, exalt myself to thee?” And then just as he stabs himself: “Thus I exalt myself, set free my soul!” (5. 389–91).

Anael tells that she can only love one who can redeem her people (3. 17–20). But as it happened, she fell in love with Djabal at first sight. Although she says that she realized he was not fully human, it was Djabal the man, not Djabal the god, she loved (3. 92–106). And then, lest she lose sight of her people entirely under this spell of passion, “I vowed at once a certain vow— / Not to embrace you till my tribe was saved” (3. 107–8). Thereafter she has consciously repressed her passion for the man so as to achieve a higher love for the god. But she has not been at ease in her “man’s preference” (3. 74)—“Never a God to me! ’Tis the Man’s hand, / Eye,
voice!” (2. 260–61)—and feels constantly reproached by Djabal for her inability to love on a more elevated, less passionate plane.

To prove her faith in him as Hakeem, she will kill the prefect. Although appearing fearful of the deed, she nevertheless seems more than half in love with death:

Death!—a fire curls within us
From the foot's palm, and fills up to the brain,
Up, out, then shatters the whole bubble-shell
Of flesh perchance!
Death!—witness I would die,
Be worthy you!

(3. 115–24)

Afterward she speaks of the assassination as if it had been performed at the behest of Djabal, as if indeed Djabal himself had committed it (4. 29–42, 91–93). Finally, when Djabal confesses that he has spoken falsely and is but a man, Anael exclaims: “I better love thee / Perchance than ever. / Shame with the man, no triumph with the God” (4. 110–14). No longer need she pretend to anything other than romantic passion.

Her passion is not, however, to be realized, for Djabal insists that he will continue to be Hakeem with Anael as his exalted bride. At the end, when she is to expose him, Djabal says that he repents, that his is now a “mere Man's nature” that loves her more than ever and is “doomed to death” by her (5. 279–88). Whereupon she does not betray him as intended but screams “Hakeem” (5.293) and dies into what she doubtless envisions as a paradise of love.

Understanding of the play depends upon interpretation of that one word “Hakeem” that Anael utters. Does it mean that she recognizes Djabal as the incarnation of deity or that she lies to the crowd to save him? We can never know. The arguments to be made are fully as good on one side as the other. And Browning has, I believe, designed it to be so. The indeterminacy of meaning is the meaning. Or to put it another way, *The Return of the Druses* is an ironic play.
Some of the ambiguities and ironies of love are manifest in the character of Loys. Soon to become a Knight Hospitaller and take the vow of chastity, he has returned from Rhodes to replace the old prefect and rule the Druses on the island as though he were one of them. His heart leaps up to be back among the tribe, but clearly he is most thrilled to be again near Anael—Anael with “the great black eyes I must forget” (1.364). Unable to control his feelings, he declares his love in language that is strongly sacramental, as though in loving her he were supplanting one passion with another: “your breathing passes thro’ me, changes / My blood to spirit, and my spirit to you, / As Heaven the sacrificer’s wine to it” (3.12-14). Anael tells him that she does not love in return but in such a way that Loys is misled into believing that she does. He thereupon admits that his espousal of the cause of the Druses was not altruistic but was for the sake of Anael, whom he now proposes to marry. Renouncing his knighthood in the Christian order, Loys goes to inform Djabal what he proposes to do, only to discover that Anael is the Druse’s intended bride. Loys refuses to believe what Djabal tells him, and when in the last act Anael comes to denounce Djabal as an impostor, he exults that of all these Druses she alone was true and makes an impassioned plea for her love. Anael, however, chooses Djabal and then dies, leaving Loys without love and, from his witness of the Church’s impurity, with a shaken religious faith. For Loys as for some of Browning’s other lovers, love is a kind of religion.

Also like the characters in previous works, those in The Return of the Druses see themselves as playing roles assigned by fate. Thus Djabal must stay to kill the prefect: “’tis forced on me!”; “all things conspire to hound me on!” (3.148, 158). When Anael insists that he must confess his fraudulence, he momentarily acquiesces: “How can I longer strive with Fate?” (4.118). In the end—“See fate!” (5.268)—when he asks Anael to speak his judgment, he gathers the Druses close to hear: “I am out of reach of fate” (5.290).

In playing their parts the characters assume various costumes, mainly robes and veils, which they are ever putting on and taking off. “I dare / Assume my Nation’s Robe,” says
Djabal, when he comes to a new conception of “what I am to personate” (4. 149–50). Finally, when the Nuncio demands that he “cast off that husk, thy form,” Djabal asks, in full assurance that his is the right role and that he is decked in the right clothes, “Am I not Hakeem?” (5. 332, 339). Loys, the only one able to “unmask” Djabal (2. 321) and “unveil” the prefect (3. 280), finds that Anael’s eye breaks his own “faint disguise away” (3. 40). The Druses impatiently await the time when they can “off—with disguise at last” and “from our forms this hateful garb strip” (1. 16–17).

Just as clothes disguise or reveal, so do words enrobe personality and thereby permit it to work its will. Djabal is a master of speech, “his voice a spell / From first to last” (3. 48–49). But for him, as for the Duke of Ferrara, language is only an instrument of power: “Babels men block out, Babylons they build” (4. 130). When, however, it is necessary to communicate on the level of intimacy and love, he cannot find the proper words: “To yearn to tell her, and yet have no one / Great heart’s word that will tell her” (2.102–3). “In what words / Avow that all she loves in me is false?” (2. 287–88). It is this linguistic inability on the part of Djabal and the other characters as well that makes for the misunderstandings that trigger so much of the action of the drama. Only when he finds the language proper to to his “mere Man’s nature” does Anael speak the one word—“Hakeem”—on which the whole plot turns. Toward that utterance point all the “glozing accents” (1. 18), “mad words” (3. 5), vows (3. 66, 107), euphemisms (3. 131–33), babblings in foreign languages (5. 50–58).

Up to this moment faith in the incarnation is but faith in the report: “After all,” say the Druses, “I know nothing of Djabal beyond what Karshook says, he knows but what Khalil says, who knows just what Djabal says himself” (5. 83–85). After the pentecostal moment the Druses address Djabal as Hakeem, and Djabal gives his blessing to his apostle Khalil by laying on of hands and saying: “Thou art full of me—I fill / Thee full—my hands thus fill thee!” (5. 356–57). With this gift of the spirit, language is no longer problematic, is indeed unnecessary: no longer “requiring words of mine,” “now, thou hast all gifts in one,” Djabal tells Khalil: “With truth and
purity go other gifts! / All gifts come clustering to that” (5. 359–62). The messianic expectation realized, Djabal “his last word to the living speaks” (5. 382).

The Return of the Druses is one of Browning’s most complex and beautiful plays. This is not however the general view of this work. Few agree with Chesterton that it “contains more of Browning’s typical qualities exhibited in an exquisite literary shape, than can easily be counted.”1 At the beginning we discover a sheer gorgeousness of language not previously encountered in the two dramas intended for the stage:

The moon is carried off in purple fire:
Day breaks at last! Break glory, with the day
On Djabal, ready to resume his shape
Of Hakeem, as the Khalif vanished erst
On red Mokattam’s brow—our Founder’s flesh,
As he resumes our Founder’s function!

(1. 1–6)

In Anael’s denunciation of Djabal as an impostor, there is a wealth of suggestion and strength of imagery that displays Browning at his best:

Hakeem would save me! Thou art Djabal! Crouch!
Bow to the dust, thou basest of our kind!
The pile of thee I reared up to the cloud—
Full, midway, of our Fathers’ trophied tombs,
Based on the living rock, devoured not by
The unstable desert’s jaws of sand,—falls prone!
Fire, music, quenched: and now thou liest there
A ruin obscene creatures will moan thro’!

(4. 95–102)

Anael had built up her idol into the sky and girded it round with the symbols of her tribe’s inherited belief only to discover that like a statue in the desert it collapses to lie there and be degraded by beasts. This imagery of the bestial and the god-like, the sands and the empyrean, throws a dramatic flash of
light on the nature of the love of Anael and Djabal and on the conception of the incarnation worked out in the next act.

As for the characters, Djabal is splendidly conceived. One is surprised like Browning that, whatever the defects of the piece as a play, Macready was not smitten with the part (New Letters, p. 21). There is not only a good bit of swashbuckling dash about him but also an appealing self-consciousness that makes even his imposture (if such it is) attractive. For he is, as he says, both deceived and deceiving—and he may or may not be so till the end. It is the enigmatic quality of his character that invites comparison with such a role as Hamlet. Anael, on the other hand, is a bit too hysterical from beginning to end. She is interesting not so much as a character as a medium for working out an idea. Loïs is mainly an instrument for the complication of the plot and for the underscoring of the ironic nature of the play; as a character, the boy-knight is a bore.

The structure of the play is ironic. Djabal is that day to be proclaimed Hakeem (act one); Djabal, disavowing deception, plans to escape from the island without claiming to be Hakeem and without marrying Anael but is prevented from doing so by the return of Loïs (act two); Loïs misunderstands Anael and believes she is to marry him while Anael misunderstands Djabal and believes he will not marry her until she has proven her faith in him (act three); Anael murders the prefect, discovers Djabal’s fraudulence, and goes to denounce him (act four); Anael appears before the assembled Druses, proclaims Djabal Hakeem, and dies, and Djabal accepts the role of Hakeem and kills himself so as to be exalted to Anael (act five). These ironies are intensified by the story of Loïs—his idealization of Djabal, his discovery of the veniality of his order, the superfluousness of his replacing the prefect and the complications resulting from his return, so that in the end he is left with neither love nor unblemished religious faith: he is a man whose life and work have, despite the best intentions, come to naught. Browning called the play a tragedy, but it more nearly resembles ironic domestic drama, differing in genre and mode from a play by Ibsen, say, mainly in its affinity with heroic drama.

It is this unstable combination of the heroic and ironic that
probably caused Macready such uneasiness. In outward form Browning borrows heavily from the heroic play. In fact, on the surface it is not dissimilar to a French neoclassical tragedy. As in Corneille, for example, there is unity of time and place—the day of the revelation of Hakeem on the island in the Sporades; concentration of the action on one inevitable crisis—the proving true or false of Djabal’s claim to be Hakeem; the characters’ constant analyses of the motives that cause them to act—the many asides in which Djabal, for instance, examines his reasons for advancing his claim; new action resulting from, and explained by, each self-analysis—Anael will assassinate the prefect to prove her faith in Djabal, whom she has ever regarded more as man than god. On the stage these frequent asides make for a static play. Djabal’s soliloquy at the beginning of act two takes sixty-two lines. In Djabal’s first interview with Anael, their colloquy is interrupted by eight asides, one by Anael taking seventeen lines immediately followed by one by Djabal lasting for thirty-seven lines (2. 269–85, 286–322). Both of these are highly interesting monologues of a metaphysical nature in which the actors reflect on love, truth, faith, and doubt, and the degree to which they are intertwined; but whatever their intellectual interest, they effectively halt the action of the play for a considerable length of time. When to this static quality is added ironic action that undercuts or in some way calls into question the essential truth or even necessity of the monologue, the effect upon the audience must be that of pure mystification. Browning always set great store by *The Return of the Druses*, but it is understandable that from the time of Macready on no one has ever wished to produce it on the commercial stage.

After Macready refused *The Return of the Druses*, Browning composed still another play in hopes that it would be acceptable to the actor-manager. “‘The luck of the third adventure’ is proverbial,” he wrote Macready. “I have written a spick and span new Tragedy (a sort of compromise between my own notion and yours—as I understand it, at least). . . . There is action in it, drabbing, stabbing, *et autres gentillesses*—who knows but the Gods may make me good even yet?” (Hood,
Macready, who was already half-convinced that "he [Browning] is for ever gone" (Diaries, 2:76), did not even bother to read the play till September 1841, and then took another sixteen months to begin preparations for production. After several weeks of bitterness and recriminations between Browning and Macready, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon was performed on 11 February 1843. On the same day it was published as the fifth pamphlet of Bells and Pomegranates to prevent Macready from further alteration of the text. The play vanished from the boards after three performances, from which point Browning's break with Macready was complete.

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon is Browning's worst play and may well be the worst piece he ever published under his name. Wanting desperately to be a successful dramatist—"who knows but the Gods may make me good even yet?"—he was willing to go to any lengths to receive applause from a theatrical audience. For titillation he offered "drabbing"—that is, whoring—and "stabbing" treated in a melodramatic mode in a three-act structure approximating the French pièce bien faite. For sentiment he offered the pathos of young love and life cruelly cut off by an uncomprehending elder whose only concern is for the ways of the world. For sophisticated amusement he presented a smart young woman who comments wittily on the events unfolding. In addition, he borrowed heavily from Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats, obvious imitations and echoes of whom were probably designed to impress the audience with the "literary" quality of this drama that also had "action in it." In brief, the play is a farrago of literary and theatrical clichés.

The plot is largely based on Romeo and Juliet: two lovers from neighboring households meet at night in secret after the lover scales the balcony into her bedroom from a grove of trees, their trysts are discovered, the lover is killed in a duel by her brother, the beloved dies (presumably of a broken heart), the brother of the girl commits suicide by poison. So that no one would overlook the resemblance to Shakespeare's tragedy, Browning made the girl to be fourteen years old, the same age as Juliet, and employed the light-dark dramatic imagery of that play. The medieval setting, the lights showing through
stained glass with heraldic devices, the gules of the escutcheon—these seem to come from The Eve of St. Agnes, which of course also bears marked similarities to the Shakespearean play. Tresham seeking vengeance and lamenting the pity of the situation appears to be modeled on Othello, and Tresham believing himself to have let loose the Furies that must inflict punishment on himself and others of his family seems to come from the Orestesia. Guendolyn and Austin, who have little relation to the plot, are borrowed from Much Ado About Nothing: her witty, slightly acerb remarks and her loyalty to Mildred recall Beatrice, and Austin, won over by his fiancée to Mildred’s cause, seems to be based on Benedick. The frequent references to pride, Paradise, sin, the snake in the garden—these obviously echo Paradise Lost.

With so much borrowed from other authors, is there then anything that is distinctively Browning’s? More than anything else, the characters’ sense of playing roles in a drama written and controlled by a master playwright-director, called God or Fate, is what gives them the ironic dimension characteristically Browningesque. Like the duke of Ferrara, Thorold is preoccupied with his ancient lineage and therefore highly conscious of himself and his position as the present earl of Tresham. He is “all accomplished—courted everywhere—/ The scholar and the gentleman” (3. 1. 135–36), at home equally in the library poring over genealogical records or in the world displaying his courtly manners; in short, he is the eighteenth-century honnête homme, the embodiment of “the perfect spirit of honor” (1. 3. 38). It is his sense of family pride and, closely allied to it, his sense of honor that lead him to assume various roles in the play and that result in tragedy.

In the beginning Tresham is the grand seigneur and loving brother—“what a nobleman should be! / like / A House’s Head!” (1. 1. 64–66)—who wishes more than anything else to marry his sister off to someone of impeccable pedigree. He finds his highest hopes fulfilled in Henry Mertoun; but his plan is frustrated by Mildred, whom he discovers to have a lover and who ceases in his eyes to be his sister but is “the woman there”—“Mildred once!”—who would betray Mertoun, “honor’s self” (2. 265–69, 306). Tresham thereupon becomes
the stern judge: "I curse her to her face before you all! / Shame hunt her from the earth!" (2. 325–26).

For the most part thereafter, Tresham envisions himself as the Archangel Michael in battle with Satan. When he apprehends Mertoun in the grove beneath Mildred's window, he asks how one deals with such a culprit and then answers that one "sets the foot upon his mouth" (3. 1. 89). "What right," asks Mertoun of him later, "have you to set / foot upon her life and mine?" (3. 1. 152–53). With his misguided sense of honor and trapped in the role he has assumed, Tresham mortally wounds Mertoun in a duel that there is no need to fight, either pragmatically or for principle. As the tragedy reaches its end and Tresham learns he has acted precipitately and wrongly, he renounces his assumed role of judge and avenger.

But Tresham does not yield up one role without assuming another. For without his role—his dramatic mask, as it were—he is nothing. When he ceases to be God or God's avenging angel, he reverses roles and becomes the accursed whose evil deed, as in the Oresteia, "lets loose a fury—free to lead / Her miserable dance amidst you all" (3.1. 220–21). Only at the end, when it is no longer necessary to present a face to the world, does he forgo all roles on life's stage, where other players continue the drama without him:

There are blind ways provided, the foredone
Heart-weary player in this pageant-world
Drops out by, letting the main Masque defile
By the conspicuous Portal:—I am thro'—
Just through!—

(3. 2. 137–41)

To Mildred role-playing is nothing less than dissimulation and hence "deliberate wickedness": "I / Shall murmur no smooth speeches got by heart" (1.3. 144, 146–47). But she does not remain true to her resolve, for when adversity is experienced rather than anticipated, she too envisions herself in a role: the role of Mildred the suffering penitent: "I must have crept / Out of myself. 'Tis she, / Mildred, will break her heart,
not I” (3. 2. 20–24). It is this Mildred who three times pictures herself as the young, loving orphan who fell into sin (1. 3. 238–40; 2. 371–73, 411–13).

As for Mertoun, he is so little given to role-playing that the one time he does assume a role he plays it badly enough that the other characters comment on his inadequacy in the part. Of Mertoun’s asking for permission to press his suit to Mildred, Austin says that he would have played the scene differently and Guendolyn agrees that she would have too. Tresham concurs in their appraisal of Mertoun’s performance and then proceeds to play the part for him: “He should have said what now I say for him” (1. 2. 151).

Consideration of the appropriateness and adequacy of words is never far from the characters’ thoughts and is, in fact, related to the basic theme of the drama—deception. What’s in a name?—this is the question that the play tacitly poses. One answer is that kind hearts are more than coronets and simple faith more than Norman blood. Another answer is that names—words—conceal as much as they reveal. Extending greetings to Mertoun, Tresham says: “your name / Would win you welcome”; for the young earl is “a name! a blazon!” (1. 2. 8–9, 130). Tresham is, Guendolyn remarks, totally absorbed in Mertoun’s “old name and fame” (1. 2. 144). When he learns that Mildred has been receiving a lover nightly, Tresham demands to know his name (2. 229–31). When he apprehends the disguised Mertoun, Tresham again demands to know the man’s name. Learning that it is Mertoun, he discovers to his great dismay that word and thing are not identical, at least do not seem to be so.

Yet it is Tresham’s adamant refusal to listen to the words that Mertoun does wish to speak that results in tragedy. Disturbed that things are not always what they seem, Tresham comes to fear language as the chief instrument for deception. “Not one least word on your life!” he tells Mertoun. “Be sure that I will strangle in your throat / The least word that informs me how you live / And yet are what you are!” (3. 1. 74–76). He fears this for the very reason that Mertoun might somehow be capable of a verbal magic that would teach the unteachable and so explain “how you can live so, and so
lie!” (3. 1. 80). It is better not to know how things can be other than they appear and yet be true.11

It is the Romantic Ironist’s view of life—the ability to hold contradictions in mind and accept them—that Tresham cannot tolerate. When old Gerard tells him the story of having seen for the past month someone climb into Mildred’s bedroom at night, Tresham momentarily is faced with the possibility that Gerard is not to be doubted and also that Mildred is not guilty of lust: “oh, no, no!” he exclaims, “both tales are true” (2. 96). But he cannot live with this possibility, and so he yields to belief in his sister’s near-total depravity. When he discovers that Mertoun also is untrue, no escutcheon is left unblotted to shield him from the perception that things are not what they seem. No, indeed, he will not listen to Mertoun’s glozings—and thereupon runs his sword into the young earl’s body.

In his dying breath Mertoun insists, “You’ll hear me now!” (3. 1. 94). For the man has the right to speak in his own defense who “presently may have to speak before his God / His whole defence” (3. 1. 97–99). Mertoun then tells why he had not asked earlier for Mildred’s hand and, for purposes of the play, this explains all: “Tresham—oh, had you but heard! / Had you but heard!” (3. 1. 150–51). And Tresham himself regrets, “Had I but heard him—had I let him speak / Half the truth / I had desisted!” (3. 2. 94–96). Had he but listened, he would have seen “tho / The troubled surface of his crime and yours / A depth of purity immovable!” (3. 2. 98–100). Only in his last moments does Tresham arrive at the ironist’s understanding that two different tales can be alike true. Like other of Browning’s protagonists, Tresham comes to knowledge when it is too late to act on it.

Mildred also turns during her last few moments of life to the necessity and yet inadequacy of language. Tresham had agreed to bear Mertoun’s last words to her, but when he comes to repeat them, Mildred prevents him: “You / Tell me his last words? He shall tell me them, / And take my answer—not in words, but reading / Himself the heart I had to read him late” (3. 2. 72–75). Only in death are words unnecessary.

Although Mildred and Mertoun do not aim their lives so
explicitly toward a *Liebestod* as do some of Browning's other lovers, they nevertheless view their love as something apart from ordinary life. Early on, Mertoun says that they will soon find "happiness / Such as the world contains not" (1.2.96–97), but Mildred has a dim intuition that this cannot be: for how can they have happiness that is not of this world if they are alive? "Our happiness," she insists, "would exceed / The whole world's best of blisses." No, she says, tell your soul what mine has grown used to hear "like a death-knell": "this will not be!" (1.3.98–103). The world simply cannot admit such ecstasy. When confronted by her brother, she asks him to kill her, "so should I glide / Like an arch-cheat into extremest bliss!" (2.241–42). As Mertoun is about to expire, he apostrophizes his beloved: 'Die, Mildred! leave / Their honorable world to them—for God / We're good enough, tho' the world casts us out!' (3.1.174–76). And Mildred, needing not "to hide love from the loveless, any more," feels that her soul has been "loosed of all its cares at once— / Death makes me sure of him for ever!" (3.2.14, 71–72).

The uneasiness and fear that Mildred feels concerning their earthly happiness, even long before their liaison is discovered, seem to stem from a belief that their lives are somehow beyond their own control. How did "sin the snake" glide "into the Paradise Heaven meant us both?" The answer: "Sin has surprised us" (1.3.79–80, 120). But how was this possible? Not because she has not been on her guard, as Milton's Raphael warned Adam and Eve to be, but because "I was so young—I loved him so—I had / No mother—God forgot me—and I fell" (1.3.238–40). This is her plea, which becomes a refrain throughout the play; yet God does not seem entirely to have forgot her because, according to her, he seems indulgent (2.413) and to hear her (3.2.30).

Tresham also wonders how in his Paradise, the ancestral home of the Treshams, there has sprung up this "poison-tree, to thrust from Hell its roots" and stretch "its strange snaky arms" (3.1.24–26). For him the answer is that it was Fate (3.1.219–21). No longer a free agent, he is brought by the trees and river to the yew beneath Mildred's window: "I'll shun / Their will no longer—do your will with me!" (3.1.11–
12). Acting in concord with their will, he then determines “Mertoun’s fate” (3.1.203). Yes, it is fated that only blood can wash away a blot on the escutcheon (3.2.147–149).

In his as in Mildred’s case, there are ironies in Tresham’s attitude toward God or Fate. For his “fate” is his “perfect spirit of honor,” which means living in the past, among his glorious ancestors. He must act in such and such a way because his honor demands it. He is, furthermore, the preserver of that chivalric code of honor which in the eighteenth century is being threatened from all sides: “With God’s help I will keep / The old belief,” whereas those like Mertoun are “unable to recall the Past” (3.1.81–82, 128). Yet in the end he acts in a way contrary to what his code requires. Mildred observes that surely Tresham has let Mertoun plead his case before the duel “because your code / Of honor bids you hear before you strike” (3.2.90–91). As we have already noted, Tresham refused to hear a word from Mertoun, and this he admits to his sister, who comments simply that heaven “needs no code to keep its grace from stain” (3.2.107). An additional irony is that, despite all that has gone before, Tresham dies with the admonition to “hold our ‘Scutcheon up’ with “no Blot on it.” For it is required by “fate” or “honor” that “blood / Must wash one blot away” (3.2.146–48). In this tragedy the protagonist dies unenlightened.13

Guendolyn and Austin are so much on the periphery of the action that it is difficult even to speak of their roles, much less of their role-playing. Yet on Guendolyn’s part there is sufficient awareness of, and detachment from, the events to earn her the right to be the voice ironic in the play. Like D’Ormea in King Victor and King Charles, she hovers near the chief figures, seeing more than they see and urging them to act in certain ways. Also like D’Ormea she possesses the self-awareness that permits her to recognize her role-playing for what it is. She speaks, for example, of her “attempted smartnesses” and can refer to herself as “foolish” (1.3.20, 56). Furthermore, she possesses exactly that quality of which Tresham speaks and most lacks—the ability to “join hands in frantic sympathy” (3.1.78). She has this by virtue of her detachment, self-awareness, openness to experience, and power of
empathetic insight. "I divined— / Felt by instinct how it was," she says to Mildred upon realizing that Mertoun is the clandestine lover (2.425–26). Not only is she aware of her own role-playing but also she can penetrate the roles and disguises of others, what she calls "the world's seemings and realities" (2. 398). Guendolyn is, however, but forced on the play. She has no more integral part in it than her betrothed, Austin, who is only a stick figure. We welcome her presence, nevertheless, just as we welcome D'Ormea's in *King Victor and King Charles*, because she at least has some vitality, which is more than can be said for Tresham, Mildred, and—albeit he sings and climbs trees¹⁴—Mertoun.

If the characters do not elicit our interest, even less does the action capture our attention. Most of it is incredible. Why should Mertoun not have wooed and won Mildred in the accepted way? Why does Mildred yield her virtue so readily? Why, after having spoken for Mildred's hand and expecting a positive answer the next day, does he jeopardize their future by stealing into her bedroom on the night of his first visit to Tresham? Why does Mildred display the light that allows him to enter? Why in his clandestine approach does he sing a song? Or even more basically, why being close neighbors have Mertoun and the Treshams not met?¹⁵ *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is incredible in its every aspect, including the fact that Browning wrote it. The anonymous reviewer of it in the *Times* for 13 February 1843 gets to the root of the play's failure when he remarks of the dramatist: "His whole thoughts seem to have been directed to the production of striking effects, and these, in some instances, he certainly has obtained, but it has been at the expense of nature and probability." In sum, Browning violated his own dramatic principle: instead of focusing on action in character, he tried to put character in action—and he failed.

Having quarreled with Macready, Browning was forced to look to other theatrical managers as prospective producers of his play. Charles Kean—the son of the great Edmund Kean, whose brilliance as an actor first turned Browning toward dramatic writing—offered the young poet-playwright a goodly sum for a new play. In March 1844 he read his play to Kean,
who seems to have liked it but could not promise to produce it before Easter of the following year. Greatly surprised, Browning decided to forgo the money Kean promised and publish the piece. As he wrote a friend, "something I must print, or risk the hold, such as it is, I have at present on my public: and two or three hundred pounds [from Kean] will pay me but indifferently for hasarding the good fortune which appears slowly but not mistakeably setting in upon me, just now" (Hood, Letters, pp. 9–10). Unless he was seriously deluded, Browning was apparently winning a select but growing audience, however badly his plays might fare on or off the stage. Colombe's Birthday appeared as the sixth number of Bells and Pomegranates in April 1844.

Despite its later date of composition, the play is thematically more closely akin to Sordello than any of the other subsequent works we have examined. In the first place, it has a political theme. Although the other plays, with the exception of A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, have political subjects, none of them is truly political in focus, the relationships between rulers and ruled being examined more in terms of the individual than of governed society. As we saw, this is not the case in Sordello, which has as one of its major concerns the question as to which means of government will best serve the society at large and, further, how the individual can effectively work for the establishment of such government. In Colombe's Birthday Browning again presents a society in the process of transition—from autocratic rule to representative government. Valence appears as the new type of political leader, the "advocate" chosen by the people to speak for them, enjoying their confidence, and embracing their causes and sufferings as his own.\textsuperscript{16} Prince Berthold represents the old autocratic ruler whose main concern is possession and power. He is the more modern type of Charlemagne, and Valence is the more modern type of Hildebrand—the types of strength and feeling adduced in book five of Sordello. Both know that in the seventeenth century—the play is dated "16—"—the days of empire are numbered. Valence speaks of "the old shapes" that are worn out and of the new ones now appearing that are to supplant "Marshall, Chamberlain, and Chancellor" and that are to be
icates of the people (3. 247–50). The prince, realizing the old European order is near an end, speaks of the favored few who may perhaps be allowed to finish out their days in the “masque” of Europe and of the “dim grim kind of tipstaves at the doorway” who stands there to bar entry to newcomers (5. 23–45).

It is apparent that Valence and Berthold contesting for Colombe represent the Browningesque dialectic struggle of love and power that we have so frequently noted, the difference here being that the conflict is translated into more overtly political terms than was the case in the other plays. Love wins out, and power is left to pursue its course wearily; but it is not the least of the ironies of the play that, as we shall see, power is more attractive than love. Colombe's Birthday perfectly displays that ambivalence which Browning admitted to in correspondence with his future wife: “I have been all my life asking what connection there is between the satisfaction at the display of power, and the sympathy with—ever-increasing sympathy with—all imaginable weakness” (Kintner, 1:270).

On the personal level love is shown to be superior. As Valence says, the prince may conquer the people by force but never rule effectively without the people’s love: he can be their despot but not their duke (3. 260–68). In addition, power without love is shown to be devoid of vivacity, as the prince prepares to go his old way “somewhat wearily” (5. 387). Finally, Colombe chooses love, in the person of Valence, after having been required to judge the two almost allegorical figures on the “stage for the world's sake” and “vindiccate / Our earth and be its angel” (4. 402–7). But the choice that she makes in the end is by no means clearcut—she wishes to wed Valence and keep her duchy too, which is to say that she wants both love and power. But it is a matter of one or the other and so perforce she gives up “Juliers and the world” (5. 354). In its conclusion the play shows that love and power cannot coexist, which in political terms means that enlightened, effective government is not possible. The prince goes forth to accumulate more power, and as his deputy in Juliers he leaves behind Dietrich the
black Barnabite “to ply his trade” (5. 380–82) while Valence and Colombe retire to the floral seclusion of Ravestein. Unlike Sordello, Colombe arrives at a decision, one that is in effect forced on her; but her choice means turning her back on the world—on Cleves, whom she has promised to help—and seeking personal fulfillment at the expense of society. One is left wondering, if but ever so slightly, whether she might not better have chosen the prince.

Browning also seems to have had mixed feelings about her decision. For he built his play around the irony that makes Berthold, the loser, a more attractive character than Valence, the winner, just as in Strafford he made the more appealing character represent the worse cause. Valence is first in love with Cleves and then with the duchess, for whom he gives up his fellow townsmen and their troubles, although he is, at least in the penultimate act, uncomfortable about doing so. He is entirely selfless as far as Colombe is concerned and is willing to sacrifice all for her, and comforts himself that his love for her, which resulted from his first sight of her, is “Heaven’s gift” (2. 88, 3. 364, 4. 118). Humorless and physically unattractive, “ungainly, old before his time” (2. 87), he is also poor, being able to offer Colombe nothing but himself. The prince, on the other hand, is a splendid man of the world. He can offer Colombe everything but “love.” Unlike Valence he does not fall in love at first sight, having already had some unhappy experience along the lines of passion: “I am past illusion on that score” (5. 79). But he can offer respect and admiration, which may grow into affection.

Colombe’s Birthday is, in the second place, like Sordello in that Colombe herself resembles Palma. A duchess in name only during the year’s time that she has occupied the throne, she has been awaiting what Palma called an out-soul—but what Colombe calls a power above her power, someone of “greater potencies,” a man who though constantly by her side she could “still keep distant from, / And so adore” (4. 253–58). She recognizes this man in Valence whose “renovating” force on her nature she discovers on first meeting (3. 347). Yet she does not give herself entirely to her protector until she learns what another contending power might have to offer:
Devotion, zeal, faith, loyalty—mere love!
And, love in question, what may Berthold’s be?
I did ill to mistrust the world so soon—
Already was this Berthold at my side!
The valley-level has its hawks, no doubt:
May not the rock-top have its eagles, too?
Yet Valence...let me see his Rival then!

(4.413–19)

The eagle turns out to fly too loftily for such as she, and so she contents herself with the home bird: “I take him—give up Juliers and the world! / This is my Birth-day” (5.354–55).

As I propose to show to greater extent presently, Colombe is only a play duchess, being by nature more like a violet by a mossy bank half-hidden from the eye. As the motto asks: “Ivy and violet, what do you here / With blossom and shoot in the warm springweather, / Hiding the arms of Monchenci and Vere?” Before becoming duchess Colombe lived as “queen / Over the water-buds” (1.16–17). Like a flower she was plucked and put on display. She did not crown herself—in fact, claimed a right to the throne no more than church flowers claim to have written the words in the saint’s book near which they are placed (2.164–66). Better far that she return to her old life “among the flowers” (2.186). After many associations of Colombe with flowers, mainly by Valence (for example, 3.266–67, 4.288, 5.348), the prince sums up by saying to her: “Too costly a flower were you . / To pluck and put upon my barren helm / To wither” (5.362–64). “Any garish plume will do” (5.364) for the eagle. The violet is better returned to its mossy banks, not “hiding the arms of Monchenci and Vere.”

Superficially Colombe’s Birthday is domestic drama with strong overtones of Shakespearean romance. But here the heroine does not win a handsome lover who also turns out to be a prince; instead she chooses the poor, plain suitor who is no other than he appears. Not the eagle of the heights but the hawk of the valley captures this dove (colombe). The “hero,” as Melchior calls him (5.355), does not get the girl and, in not getting her, is certain she has made the proper choice. To
Colombe and Valence he says: "I could not imitate—I hardly envy—/ I do admire you. All is for the best" (5.360–61). What we have then is neither domestic drama nor ordinary romance but ironic romance, which in this instance does not lead to tragedy, as in the earlier plays, but to a conclusion satisfactory to all, although the audience is left with some doubts. All the other theatrical pieces, both before and after, are called tragedies; this one alone is simply called "a play."17

The ironic nature of this play is underlined, as in the case of the other dramas, by the constant reminder that the action and the characters are only fictions. So numerous are the documents that are passed around, studied, and quoted that they are elevated from the position of subtext—as in Strafford, say—to become part of the actual text from which the characters read and speak as though it were a script for a dramatic performance. This means that the characters see themselves as playing parts in a drama whose text thus becomes what Colombe calls a "rescript" (2.182).

The play opens with Guibert, one of the duchess's courtiers, "reading a paper," which turns out to be a demand from Prince Berthold that Colombe yield the duchy according to Salic law. She has for the past year, therefore, been but playing the role of duchess, and on this first anniversary of her "investiture," which is also her birthday, while she has been "wreathing her hair" (1.98) to receive the good wishes of her subjects, someone must present her with the prince's letter telling that she has been incorrectly cast in the part that she must now yield. When she learns that she has been but a "play-queen" (3.265), she is much shaken and insists that she will keep the ducal crown. She did not ask for the role, she tells her courtiers; she did not write the words for her part (2.165–66). Yet now they want to revise the play just when she is settling into the role. But she has no recourse; she must do as the prince demands and as they say: she will return to her life "among the flowers" in her old role, "Colombe of Ravestein no longer Duchess here" (2.186–87). Speak then no further of "rescripts," she says, as she takes off her coronet (2.181–88), although as it happens the rescript is rescripted.

Up to this point Colombe has been like a May queen,
decked out for display but having no real authority. Her life for this past year has been one of “pure pleasure,” during which she could not find out the loves of her people and would not look for their fears (2. 100, 184–86). Colombe has in fact been cast pretty much in the same role as Countess Gis mond (as she later became) at the tournament. And then, as in the case of the Countess, there steps forth an “advocate,” Valence of Cleves, who brings with him a petition from his townsmen for the redress of their wrongs. Colombe receives the paper, looks it over, accepts it, and returns the prince’s paper to her courtiers with contempt. She will remain in the role of duchess, with a new supporting cast consisting of Valence and the people of Cleves, and with every intention of revising “established form,” which is in need of “new consecration” (2. 292, 296).

Valence has come to the court at Juliers as the representative of the people of Cleves. So much engrossed is he in his role as their advocate that he comes to think of himself as Cleves (2. 92–94). He has arrived to utter no “grand harangue,” the language of courtiers, but unheroic speech on behalf of Cleves. But he has difficulty in speaking at all, and he keeps glancing at the paper he holds for the proper words. “Cleves, speak for me!” he says (1. 229). Having gained admission to Colombe’s chamber by agreeing to carry to her the prince’s letter, he is tongue-tied and “suddenly occupying himself with his paper,” as the stage directions indicate, he can speak only when he reads from the script in which the people of Cleves have told him to “take from our mouths / Our wrongs and show them” (2. 148–49). Having unwittingly become the “instrument” of Colombe’s disgrace, he speaks in defense of the duchess, who names him her “Marshall, Chancellor, and Chamberlain” as well as her “only subject” (2. 190, 288–93, 348). He becomes, in short, “the leading man” (3. 280).

Prince Berthold then appears in act three, and it becomes only too apparent that Colombe and Valence are but engaging in make-believe. Colombe is but a “shadow” duchess after all (3. 190), and she will have to yield her throne. Yet she cannot bring herself to give up the part all of a sudden, for it will ruin
her reputation. "How will it be read, sir? How be sung about?" she asks Valence, commissioning him to appear before the prince and speak "what I shall call to mind I should have urged / When time's gone by" (3. 209, 203–5).

The prince himself has been playing the role of conqueror and, finding no apparent opposition to his claim to the duchy, is concerned for what nowadays is called his "image." If he gain conquests so easily, he will have to forgo the role of "victor" (3. 12–13, 52). Then appear the courtiers, who have been acting out their roles in the "masque" and "mummery" till the claimant arrived (1. 94, 95). It is expected that they will speak and act exactly like the courtiers at the other cities the prince has claimed (3. 65–68), but to Berthold's surprise they return his letter to the duchess by crumpling it in a gesture of contempt in the same way that she had done. Somewhat amused and not entirely displeased, the prince finds them "better actors" than he had anticipated and himself looking "much bolder" than he knew (3. 143, 142).

In the interview with the prince, Valence, refusing to employ the "faded language" of courtiers (3. 331), impresses Berthold with his playing of his role: Valence's "method" of acting is by "feeling's play" (4. 174). Berthold in turn impresses Valence as the perfect actor of the role of the gracious and courteous prince. Berthold is, says Valence, "a noble spirit in noble form," although he could wish that the prince "less had bent that brow to smile / As with the fancy how he could subject / Himself upon occasion to—himself" (3. 324–27).

Valence comes away from the interview with the papers, "cold hard words" (3. 319), that the prince has originally sent to Colombe and that the courtiers had returned to him. Reading them, Valence concludes that Berthold is the true duke and that Colombe has been allowed to play her "shadow" role only by the connivance of kings and popes, whose pleasure it temporarily served. The courtiers meanwhile fear that the duchess has so captivated the prince that he has become "her puppet" (4. 33) and that Valence will end up as "the very thing he plays, / The actual Duke of Juliers" and the prince dismissed "with thanks for playing his mock part so well" (4. 46–47, 60, added in 1849 edition). Only later does it occur to them that
another part of the script by which roles are enacted lies in the archives—the old duke's will that forbids Colombe to marry one of her subjects and retain the ducal crown.

Valence himself is concerned that he has become Colombe's advocate more than Cleve's. He rationalizes that his life continues Cleve's and Cleve's his, but if he were "to take God's gift swerve no step," might he not then be the advocate of both (4. 114–16)? Considering further this possibility, he sees a new role for himself: "I that spoke for Cleve, can speak /For Man" (4. 384–85), but to convey his love directly to Colombe he finds "there's no language helps here" (4. 399). She, however, discovers how to communicate her love for him by telling him what he should say to his supposed inamorata (4. 357–64), all the while finding it "mournful—that nothing's what it calls itself" (4. 412).

Berthold is surer of his language, doubtless because he is more authentic in his role. He is a real prince, whereas Valence is a make-believe marshall, chancellor, and chamberlain and Colombe a fairy princess. He believes it good policy to marry Colombe. At the moment he is sure of his claim to the duchy, but he recognizes that scripts can be rewritten—"a new gloss on the ancient law, / O'er-looked provisoes, past o'er premises" (5. 16–17). Appointing Valence to carry to Colombe his suit for marriage, he rehearses Valence in the language to use, fully aware of his own clichés (4. 182–85) and those of others (4. 131–32.)

In the last act—which Valence sees as a kind of morality play, "a stage / For trial" (4. 402–3)—Berthold speaks for himself. He woos Colombe not by expressions of love but by considerations of policy. In the "great masque" of politics in which his part is to "career on all the world for stage," like a new Alexander of Macedonia, he needs someone to play the part of his "representative" at home (5. 29, 93, 94). He himself is "nothing" as a human being—he is only the role he plays—and he does not therefore urge her to marry himself, Berthold, but "the Empire" (5. 221–22). Having been ready to be swept off her feet by the prince's protestations of passion, she concludes that she can win his respect only "by putting on a calculating mood" (1. 122). She writes her reply to his propo-
sal on his requisition. "Read it and have done!" she says, ready for a new script and a new role (5. 353). The prince then accepts her refusal, congratulates the pair in a "few words," assumes the dukedom, and commands the courtiers to go copy "the precedents / Of every installation, proper styles, / And pedigrees of all your Juliers' Dukes" (5. 383–85). He is ready to depart for the next act in the masque of European politics.

In general, the characters in Colombe's Birthday play their roles with perhaps a greater degree of self-consciousness yet also with a greater sense of freedom of will than those we have met previously. To be sure, they feel themselves partially bounded by various fateful documents, but at the same time they realize that it is possible to revise them in some degree—with new glosses, for example—so as to render them as "rescripts." Only Colombe feels her life, to any great extent, determined by fate. Next year will not be like the last, she says in echo of Mildred in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon: "It cannot be! It is too late to be! " "What part had I," she asks, "or choice in all of it?" (2. 52–53). She has been, she feels, a mere puppet; and of all the characters in the play, she alone refers to "my fate" (4. 198). It takes Berthold, who feels constrained by neither fate nor anything else, to remind her that her "will and choice are still as ever, free" (5. 215).

The degree of free will permitted the characters is perhaps best exemplified in Guibert, who wavers between selfishness and altruism. His susceptibility to "conversion" is suggested by the fact that he swears by Saint Paul (1. 286, 3. 113), although his crest ironically has the motto "Scorning to waver" (2. 208). "Whoever's my kind saint," he says, "do let alone / These pushings to and fro, and pullings back" (1. 343–44). For him it is constantly a matter of scripts and visions succeeded by rescripts and revisions.20 Where in act three he follows on the heels of Valence and would stand with him (139–40, 305–6), in act four he decides that "selfishness is best again. / I thought of turning honest—what a dream!" (51–52). In the end, however, he submits to conversion, not without some ironic detachment: "'Tis my Birth-day, too" (5. 378). Guibert is very much of the same mold as Guendolyn of A Blot in the 'Scutcheon.21
There are some splendid scenes in *Colombe's Birthday*. The romantic colloquy between Colombe and Valence in act four recalls the wooing scenes between Rosalind and Orlando in *As You Like It*. There is also some excellent poetry—for example, Valence's defense of Colombe in act three or, even better, Valence's prophecy of Berthold's career:

He stands, a man, now; stately, strong and wise—
One great aim, like a guiding-star, before—
Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness to follow,
As, not its substance, but its shine he tracks,
Nor dreams of more than, just evolving these
To fulness, will suffice him to life's end.
After this star, out of a night he springs;
A beggar's cradle for the throne of thrones
He quits, so, mounting, feels each step he mounts,
Nor, as from each to each exultingly
He passes, overleaps one grade of joy.
This, for his own good:—with the world, each gift
of God and man,—Reality, Tradition,
Fancy and Fact—so well environ him,
That as a mystic panoply they serve—
Of force, untenanted, to awe mankind,
And work his purpose out with half the world,
While he, their master, dexterously slipt
From such encumbrance, is meantime employed
In his own prowess with the other half.
So shall he go on, every day's success
Adding, to what is He, a solid strength—
An airy might to what encircles him,
Till at the last, so life's routine shall grow,
That as the Emperor only breathes and moves,
His shadow shall be watched, his step or stalk
Become a comfort or a portent; how
He trails his ermine take significance,—
Till even his power shall cease his power to be,
And most his weakness men shall fear, nor vanquish
Their typified invincibility.
So shall he go on, so at last shall end,
The man of men, the spirit of all flesh,  
The fiery centre of an earthy world!

(4, 209–51)

One looks to Shakespeare—to Cranmer’s compliment to the future Queen Elizabeth in *Henry VIII*, for example—for comparable splendor. In general, the language of *Colombe’s Birthday* is simpler, less convoluted than in the other dramatic pieces.

The play is demonstrably better in the last three acts than in the first two. Browning himself seemed to be aware of having got stronger as the play progressed (*Domett*, p. 106). Something had happened to give him—in the writing of this play, at any rate—a new attitude toward love. In the last two acts, there is little evidence of the pathology of romantic love that we have earlier witnessed so frequently, no talk of “queens” but of “play-queens” bringing the happy fulfillment of Valence’s love for Colombe. The author does, of course, allow Colombe to dally with her advocate in act four. As the anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum* for 19 October 1844 notes, she “flatters him with brilliant hopes, and then, like a true daughter of Eve, turns him over to the rack of suspense, unable herself to decide betwixt power and love”; but the resolution in act five is a happy one in which the duchess, according to the stage directions, “with a light joyous laugh” turns to her lover and says: “Come, Valence to our friends—God’s earth—” which “as she falls into his arms” he completes by saying “—And Thee!” Colombe accepts her unromantic lover, part of “God’s earth,” and does so happily, in spite of the fact that she must give up the duchy. The dialectic of love and power is left unresolved but for the first time definitely concluded, not by a joining of the two but by a rejection of one in favor of the other.22

On her birthday Colombe is reborn, and the play that tells the story of her soul’s achievement is thus a comedy. This new kind of dramatic mode does not, as it might seem, preclude an irony of form. On the contrary, comedy—particularly realistic comedy, as this approaches being—opens up an irony of possibilities: it does not assert that the lovers lived happily ever
after, as the ordinary romance asks us to believe, but leaves us with questions like these: Will not Valence in his flowery retreat at Ravestein regret turning his back on the poverty of Cleves? Will Colombe find "devotion, zeal, faith, loyalty—mere love" (4.413) sufficient? In other words, what seems like a perfectly enclosed play, proceeding through five acts from morning to night of one day, is in fact more open-ended than the tragedies of earlier date. For all its external qualities seemingly pointing toward finality, *Colombe's Birthday* is an ironic drama that defers closure to a point beyond the play itself.