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Beatrice Corrigan

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Elijah”), waiting, entranced, for the spirit of the place to take possession of her.



VERNON LEE AND THE OLD YELLOW BOOK

By BEATRICE CORRIGAN

IN a letter dated January 31, 1887, Robert Browning wrote to the English essayist and novelist Violet Paget, who had adopted the pseudonym of Vernon Lee: “Dear Vernon-Lee-Violet-Paget treats poor R.B. as if he were the Philistine he is not, when she plays at supposing he forgets her existence, and fearing he will detect an impertinence in her kindly taking the trouble to copy out for him a choice and characteristic bit of history, — and moreover bidding *him* not trouble himself to say ‘thank you’ — when the veriest pig does as much for the acorn he grunts over. I do thank you, dear Miss Paget, — as you know I ought and must, — for both the extract and the letter that brings it this morning.”¹ The editors of Browning’s letters do not suggest what this bit of history may have been, or why Vernon Lee should have thought it of sufficient interest to Browning to be worth the copying. But a possible explanation may exist in her own letters and in a passage from one of her books.

On Easter Sunday, 1886, she had written to Browning from Florence telling him that she was sending him a present of her newly published volume of essays, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London, 1886), because it contained references to the character of Caponsacchi in *The Ring and the Book*.² On May 13 of the same year Browning thanked her for the gift, saying that he had read it carefully, had found it “very subtle, very beautiful,” and intended to read it through again in a day or two (*New Letters*, 327-8).

The passage in *Baldwin* which she specially indicated to him is a long conversation which the eponymous character holds

¹ William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Knickerbocker, editors, *New Letters of Robert Browning* (New Haven, 1950), 340.

² “Intimate Glimpses from Browning’s Letter File,” *Baylor Bulletin*, xxxvii (September 1934), 112.

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with "Carlo," and which Vernon Lee says in the same letter that she herself had held with the Italian critic Enrico Nencioni, whose article in the *Nuova Antologia* in July 1867 had first introduced Browning to the Italian public. Nencioni too mentions this conversation with Vernon Lee in "L'Anello e il Libro," first published in the *Nuova Antologia* in December 1885, and later included in his *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Florence, 1910). Discussing Browning's transformation of the characters in *The Ring and the Book* from sordid reality to literary creations of great spiritual and psychological significance, Baldwin asks: "Have you ever come across a little book by a man called Ademollo, 'Le giustizie di [sic] Roma'? . . . It is a collection of summings up of the chief criminal cases of Rome from the end of the seventeenth century, a sort of death register kept by the confraternity which attended the condemned in prison and on the scaffold. And among these summings up is that of the murder of Pompilia and her reputed parents by Guido Franceschini. Well, there you get the real Guido, and you see that this man whom Browning has shown us as great, a creature of the stature of Faust or Othello, was what such a cardinal's parasite, outwitted cheat, and sneaking murderer, could not help being — a very small person indeed." (*Baldwin*, 296-7.)

The book in question had been reviewed by Nencioni in the *Fanfulla della Domenica* in 1882, and its full title is *Le giustizie a Roma dal 1674 al 1840*. It was first published in Rome in 1881 as an extract from the *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* (vol. IV), but Nencioni reviewed a reprint of 1882. Baldwin's description of it is inexact. Alessandro Ademollo, an expert in seventeenth-century archives, had published as the first part of his volume the diary of a certain Abate Placidio Eustachio Grezzi from a manuscript in the Biblioteca di S. Agostino in Rome. Baldwin confuses Grezzi's society with the Confraternita di S. Giovanni Decollato, which prepared the condemned to die devoutly and accompanied them until the moment of their death; he had actually belonged to the Confraternita della SS. Natività di N.S. Gesù Cristo degli Agonizzanti. In August 1697, Pope Clement X had granted this fraternity the privilege of exposing the Holy Sacrament before the

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church of S. Maria degli Agonizzanti for the veneration of criminals on their way to execution. The name of the criminal and a description of his crime was placed on a placard before the door of the church. When the execution was over, the candles before the Sacrament were extinguished, the Host was carried back into the church, the placard was taken down, and Rome knew that justice had been satisfied. Grezzi kept a diary of the executions in Rome between 1674 and 1739, giving a brief account of the crime committed in each case.

Browning had heard of *Le giustizie* before he read *Baldwin*. Vernon Lee had first been presented to him on July 12, 1881, when Mary Robinson, the friend at whose parents' house she had been staying in London, took her to call on the poet and his sister Sarianna at his "very pretty house with trees in front & behind by the Maida Vale canal."³ On August 13, 1885, she was again taken to visit them by Mary Robinson, who seems to have been a favorite with the poet, and as it was raining heavily the call lasted for some time. Browning was very gracious and showed them "his wife's Greek books so small she could easily hold them in one hand while lying down; & he showed us what really interested me, the real 'Book' of the *Ring & the Book*. It is made up of the printed pleadings of the lawyers for & against Guido Franceschini and several MS letters; evidently it was the *dossier* sent immediately on Guido's death to some protector of his by his lawyer. It seems absurd, but it moved me much more to think that this was the book out of which that great poem had come, than that the man who was showing it to me had written that poem; I suppose it was easier to associate Caponsacchi, Pompilia, Guido, with that old vellum-bound book than with the very solid old piece of prose who turned over the leaves. Browning wishes me to get him a copy of the *Giustizie di Roma*." (*Vernon Lee's Letters*, 192.)

The 'Book' which the poet showed his visitors was of course the "square old yellow book" which he had bought from a stall in Florence in June 1860, and in which he had found the raw material for his most famous poem, the story of Guido Franceschini's murder of his wife, Pompilia, and her parents, Pietro and

³ *Vernon Lee's Letters* (Privately printed, London: 1937), 75.

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Violante Comparini, in Rome in 1698. Guido's motive for the crime was his wife's alleged misconduct with Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi, who had helped her to flee from her husband in Arezzo to her parents in Rome. The present of *Baldwin* was a natural consequence of this visit in which Vernon Lee had evidently talked to Browning of Nencioni's find; and the passage which she copied out for him, and which he described as "a choice and characteristic bit of history" may well have been the relevant entry in Grezzi's diary. *Le giustizie a Roma*, reprinted from a periodical, was already four or five years old, and was possibly difficult to find except in a library. This theory is supported by Browning's use of the word *extract*.

The Franceschini execution is the third entry in the diary for 1698, and reads as follows:

Saturday. February 22nd.
Giovanni Baldeschi della Mara of Città di Castello.
Biagio di Luca Agostinello of Città della Pieve.
Domenico di Francesco Gambassini, Florentine.
Francesco di Pasquino of Mont'Auto.
Guido di Tomaso Franceschini of the city of Arezzo.

The said Franceschini was beheaded, and the other four hanged by day in the Piazza del Popolo, and under the gallows stood Alessandro di Pietro, because they had killed in the Strada di Babuino half an hour after sunset Franceschini's wife, her father and her mother of the Comparini family on the alleged grounds of honour. There was such an extraordinary crowd there that never is such a thing remembered, a great number of stands being erected so that people might see, and windows were rented as a favour at as much as three crowns apiece. They passed before our church, where each halted, and particularly one of them uttered there before the Blessed Sacrament many expressions of compunction which gave great edification to all.

In this account the names of the four accomplices are given more precisely than anywhere else, and as they were taken from the official record they may be considered accurate. One added detail is that Alessandro di Pietro, mentioned in no other account, stood under the gallows, a position reserved for someone who had connived at a crime but had played no active part in it. He may possibly be identified with the steward of Guido's brother Paolo who, according to another document, was arrested after the murder at Paolo's villa where the assassins had assembled.

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Ademollo quotes in a note to the Franceschini entry the following passage from a contemporary unpublished diary which he does not describe or identify.

Coming into Rome one evening, Franceschini with four cut-throats whom he had brought with him killed his wife, Pietro Comparini, and the latter's wife, in their own house, because of past grievances on the subject of honour. The history of the occurrence is as follows. This Franceschini, brother of the Abate of the same surname, who was gentleman-in-waiting to Cardinal . . ., married a girl believed to be the daughter of Comparini, who later denied that she was his daughter in order not to pay her dowry, and who formerly had claimed that she was his daughter in order to cheat his creditors who would have seized the entailed property and goods which he possessed. When the paternity suit was brought to court the decision was handed down that she was not his daughter (as indeed she was not) but had been taken by the husband and wife and brought up as their daughter from childhood. For this reason then Franceschini, seeing his hope of the promised dowry disappointed, quarrelled with his wife whom he had taken to Arezzo, and treated her badly. She fled with a canon to Rome, where at her husband's instance she was arrested and placed in detention. But when he refused to pay for her food she went to Comparini's house, where they were all murdered wholesale.

This note was probably copied too for Browning by Vernon Lee. It is interesting not only as disinterested corroboration of the almost overwhelming evidence that Pompilia was not really Pietro Comparini's daughter, but as the only statement extant that Pietro had been a party to his wife's deception of his creditors.

The fourth entry in Grezzi's diary for 1698 may also have been sent to Browning. It reads:

Thursday. March 6th.

Domenico di Pietro Silvestri from Urbania was clubbed to death and quartered by day at the Ponte S. Angelo for having killed a prostitute in the Borgo and robbed her; three days before he had been to see the execution of Franceschini, and had set up a stand which he rented at four crowns, and he had the aforesaid woman mount up on it. He was arrested the next day in the Ghetto, where he had gone to sell the stolen goods, and in eight days was sentenced. He passed before our church, where he halted.

This murder and subsequent execution brings to ten the deaths which were the direct result of the ill-fated marriage of Pompilia and Guido.

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It is remarkable that neither Ademollo nor Nencioni in his review of *Le giustizie* associated the Franceschini case with Browning. Ademollo was one of the few historians of his period interested in the seventeenth century, yet he had apparently never heard of *The Ring and the Book*. Though Nencioni speaks of the poem in his review, and says that it is based on similar documents, he does not mention the Franceschini entry which, it may be added, is of unusual interest because, to the best of my knowledge, it is the only account of the case ever published in Italy after 1700.

The emotion which *Le giustizie* aroused in Vernon Lee is not difficult to explain. Guido Franceschini's execution was one of six in 1698. Other sufferers were a highway robber, a man who had killed his sister for her fortune, a servant who had murdered his master, and a habitual criminal who had spent most of his life in the galleys. Even the figure of Pompilia is slightly diminished by an entry a few pages farther on in the diary, for there it is recorded that a prostitute, stabbed in the Piazza Farnese, prayed, as Pompilia had done a couple of years earlier, to the Madonna delle Fornaci and was miraculously saved, though she survived only to be whipped and banished from the Papal States. Vernon Lee sees Guido in the cold light of reality, "a very small person indeed;" and she was not the first to make this comment, for many of Browning's contemporaries, even those who like Julia Wedgwood and William Allingham had not seen the original documents, had questioned his interpretation. Julia Wedgwood had, like Vernon Lee, seen in Guido's crime only "stupid brutality," and to her in 1868 Browning had defended his views warmly, as he does not trouble to do in 1887.⁴ But whether or not Browning still retained the reverence for Pompilia and the abhorrence for Guido which gave his great poem such intensity, the correspondence quoted above shows that his interest in the Old Yellow Book and its protagonists was still strong nearly twenty years after he had made his memorable purchase in the Piazza S. Lorenzo.

An additional account of the Franceschini murder was discovered in the Casanatense Library in Rome, but not until

⁴ Richard Curle, editor, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood* (London, 1937), 152-163.

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1900. Within the last twenty years several versions of already familiar accounts have turned up in the Vatican Library and elsewhere, and a large collection of papers in the Communal Library at Cortona has come to light. The latter contains all the material of the Old Yellow Book with the exception of one letter, as well as documents from two earlier trials in the Comparini - Franceschini relations, some from the lawsuit brought by Guido to secure payment of Pompilia's dowry, others relating to Pietro Comparini's denial of paternity. There is added to these a long description of Guido's last hours and execution.⁵ This wealth of additional material was all unfortunately found too late for Browning's enjoyment. But it seems almost certain that he did, through Vernon Lee's good offices, read Grezzi's record of the Franceschini execution a couple of years before his death in 1889.

The last meeting with him mentioned in her correspondence was at a dinner given by the Gosses in June 1887, and she wrote to her mother on that occasion that he "treated me like a long lost grandchild." Taken in conjuncture with the playful sunny good-humor of the letter quoted at the beginning of this article, there can be no doubt that she had indeed given him pleasure, if my conjecture is correct, by sharing with him Nencioni's discovery about the characters immortalized by his genius.⁶

⁵ Beatrice Corrigan, editor, *Curious Annals: New Documents Relating to Browning's Roman Murder Story* (Toronto, 1956).

⁶ I should like to express my gratitude to Miss Irene Cooper Willis for her kindness in granting me permission to quote from *Vernon Lee's Letters*. My thanks are also due to Miss Sybille Pantazzi for bringing to my attention the references to *Le giustizie a Roma* in the *Letters* and in *Baldwin*.

