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BROWNING'S OLD ROMAN MURDER

CASE ON BROADWAY  
(TITLE)

BY

Yvonne B. Maynard

**PLAN B PAPER**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION  
AND PREPARED IN COURSE

Poetry of the Victorian Period

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY,  
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1965  
YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS  
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## BROWNING'S OLD ROMAN MURDER CASE ON BROADWAY

### PURPOSE:

This paper examines the use Arthur Goodrich made of The Ring and the Book in creating his successful play Caponsacchi and the problems he faced in adapting Browning's dramatic poem to a viable poetic drama.

### OUTLINE:

- I. History of the play in the making
  - A. Initial steps
  - B. Technical difficulties
    1. Unity of purpose
    2. Selection from Browning's wealth of material
    3. Browning's poetry
  - C. First tryout and rewriting
    1. Excessive length
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- II. The Goodrich adaptation
  - A. Theme
  - B. Plot
    1. Scope of the story
    2. Seventeenth-century Roman law
    3. Summary of the plot
  - C. Characters
    1. Caponsacchi
    2. Pompilia
    3. Guido
    4. Other persons of the play
- III. Evaluation of the play
  - A. The play on the stage
    1. Plot and style
    2. Acting and scenery
  - B. The play in print
    1. Characters
    2. Theme
    3. Poetry

## BROWNING'S OLD ROMAN MURDER CASE ON BROADWAY

Early in his writing career, Robert Browning was asked by the great actor William Charles Macready to write a tragedy and save him from going to America. Thus encouraged Browning spent much time during the next ten years trying vainly to write a successful play for the stage. Although his dramas were full of fine, expressive poetry and subtle, intellectual thought, he lacked stagecraft: the ability to project his characters across the footlights for the theater audience. The dismal failure of one play after another and the unfortunate quarrel with Macready resulted in the poet's giving up for good his interest in writing for the theater. Therefore, in spite of the fact that much of Browning's work is intensely dramatic, nothing he wrote was ever successfully put on the stage until the mid-twenties of this century. At this time an able, young American actor Walter Hampden, in his continual search for a vehicle of promise, decided to give Browning's The Ring and the Book a try.

Rose Palmer, an enthusiastic Browning student, first suggested in a letter to Hampden that the role of Caponsacchi would be a fine part for his acting talents -- if a play could be made of The Ring and the Book. She sent along some suggestions for dramatic scenes and later submitted a rough script. Mr. Hampden had never read the poem, but his brother-in-law Arthur Goodrich was a great admirer of

Browning's work and had read The Ring and the Book many times. So the actor handed the Palmer ideas to Goodrich and asked his opinion. At this time Goodrich had written several popular novels and two clever and successful comedies, but he had never done a serious play, much less a poetic drama. Nothing daunted he reported to Hampden that the idea seemed possible and that, furthermore, he would attempt the writing himself if he could have a free hand in constructing the play. Palmer and Hampden agreed at once and so began the unique "collaboration between the author of 'So This Is London' and the mighty man who, heaped with honors, has lain buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey since 1889."<sup>1</sup>

The technical difficulties of translating Browning's intricate series of ten monologues, retelling the same story from different points of view, into a playable drama would have taxed the most calloused adapter. Goodrich, because he sincerely admired Browning, deliberately set out to preserve as much of the letter and spirit of the original as the theater's stern demands would allow. When he insisted on doing all the planning and writing himself, he argued that in the theater a story must have only one point of view, absolutely clear and quickly grasped by the audience. Since he was writing the play as a starring vehicle for Walter Hampden, Goodrich

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<sup>1</sup>Clayton Hamilton, "Afterword," Caponsacchi by Arthur Goodrich and Rose A. Palmer (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1927), p. 180. (Mr. Hamilton was a dramatist and, in the years after World War I, a highly respected editor and critic of drama. In the latter capacity he served at various times Forum, Everybody's Magazine, Vogue, and Vanity Fair.)

had no choice of viewpoint; the central figure would be Caponsacchi. A second Herculean chore for a Browning lover was that of selection from the poet's "clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness"<sup>2</sup> of over twenty-one thousand lines. Keeping the drama within an evening's playing time necessitated drastic cutting, a hard task for the reverent adapter, who must give up that fine story point or this lovely passage of poetry. And speaking of poetry, the third and most difficult problem was writing not only good blank verse, but blank verse in the distinctive Browning manner. For Goodrich proposed to use the poet's lines wherever possible; therefore, his own work must blend without parody. As any Browning student will agree, Arthur Goodrich had indeed set himself a challenging task.

In the spring of 1923 a working draft, entitled The Ring of Truth, was tried out by Hampden in Indianapolis. The first night proved the play was still far too long; the final curtain came down considerably after midnight. But a more serious flaw appeared in the relative strengths of the two characters Caponsacchi and Guido; the latter kept stealing the play. Goodrich had in both instances followed Browning's lead too closely. Nevertheless, as reported by Clayton Hamilton, "By all of the ordinary portents of the theater, the piece appeared to be a failure; but, somehow or other, it managed to administer to my spinal column an unexpected kick, and I

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<sup>2</sup>Henry James, Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 385.

predicted then and there, the probability of a successful play."<sup>3</sup> However, the following year Hampden was absorbed in an enormously successful revival of Cyrano de Bergerac and went on the next two seasons with Shakespearian revivals. So Goodrich had three years to rebuild his Browning play. He continued to work on it at intervals, pruning still more drastically, building up Caponsacchi, cutting down Guido and tightening the narrative line. At last, on October 26, 1926, the play was ready, and Hampden and his company were prepared to "Let this old woe step on the stage again." (Browning, The Ring and the Book, I, 816)

The Goodrich adaptation is remarkable in that, despite great changes in the story and even greater omissions, the play manages to suggest so much of The Ring and the Book. Browning wove several themes -- the search for truth amid human testimony, the testing of souls on this earth, the sublimation of sexual love for spiritual integrity, and, like Milton, "an attempt to justify the ways of God to man" by showing that God always raises up a hero to do mortal combat with evil -- into "an idealized reading of life."<sup>4</sup> Caponsacchi touches on these themes, but channels them through the play's central theme, the spiritual testing of the worldly priest. Goodrich took from Browning's vast storehouse of material only what served to tell this story.

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<sup>3</sup>Hamilton, "Afterword," Caponsacchi, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup>William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 346.

The twelve books of the poem describe the murder case in its entirety: events leading to the shocking murders, events of the murder night, the trial and execution of Guido and his accomplices and, finally, comments of four interested persons soon after the execution. The play presents the final stage of the trial in a frame of prologue and epilogue; the three acts are Caponsacchi's retelling of his part in the tragic events.

At this point Judge Gest,<sup>5</sup> who was dismayed with Browning's treatment of Seventeenth-century Italian law, must have objected strenuously to Goodrich's version. In The Old Yellow Book it's Guido and his four accomplices who are on trial. Under torture they have fully confessed to the murders, but the court must decide if there were extenuating circumstances which would warrant a penalty less than death. The chief argument used by Guido's counsel is that a husband has the right to kill an unfaithful wife in defense of his honor. Obviously the case then turns on whether or not Pompilia is innocent. Witnesses are examined individually and the lawyers present their arguments in printed form to the judges. (Our trial by jury with cross-examination of witnesses on the stand is quite something else.) Browning had to invent the excuse for Caponsacchi's monologue: the judges have recalled him from relegation to give them further evidence concerning his part in Pompilia's flight from her husband.

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<sup>5</sup>John Marshall Gest (ed. and trans.), The Old Yellow Book (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1927), chaps. XIII-XIV, pp. 600-20.



Furthermore, Browning had the Pope review the whole case in order to decide if Guido should be spared the extreme penalty. Actually in the original case the real-life judges, finding Guido guilty, order the death penalty, and the Pope has only to decide if Guido's minor church orders give him immunity from the civil law. Goodrich's judges, however, decide on clemency and the Pope reverses their decision. Although Judge Gest's translation of The Old Yellow Book showed that both the elopement trial and the murder trial were civil law cases, Browning pictured the case as tried by an ecclesiastical court with priests as judges. Goodrich followed Browning's misconceptions and then made additional unhistorical changes in the proceedings so that an authority on Italian law of the period would be hard put to see the connection between the play version and the old Franceschini murder case.

Goodrich, however, was concerned not with historical accuracy, but with the problems of telling Browning's story on the stage. In the play's prologue the Pope, unable to decide the case submitted to him in print, calls a final hearing for the two prisoners Guido and Caponsacchi, who are both on trial apparently; although, obviously, the charges must be different! At any rate, the Pope secretes himself in a curtained alcove<sup>6</sup> in order to hear the truth that lies in

The hearts of men, yes, in their voices too,  
And in their look, in all that human thing  
That is themselves. This is the truth I seek!  
(Goodrich, Prologue, p. 7)

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<sup>6</sup>Goodrich found the idea of the Pope in hiding at the trial suggested by Browning (The Ring and the Book, IX, 9-10). Vain-glorious Bottini, the prosecuting lawyer, wishes he could present his argument before a court of fifty judges and have the Pope secretly listening.

The stage Guido, emboldened by the favorable cheers of the mob outside, craftily pictures himself as the wronged husband and uses the false tale Browning had him tell in his revealing second monologue (Book IX): how he came to the Comparini's house to see his baby son and try for a reconciliation with his wife only to find her in the arms of Caponsacchi. The cowardly priest, he says, slipped away to get help but Violante and Pietro attacked him and he killed them in self-defense. Caponsacchi has been sitting withdrawn, apparently disinterested, but when Guido calls Pompilia "that thief, poisoner and adulteress" (Browning, The Ring and the Book, V, 1964), the priest sharply interrupts, "He lies!" So the judges, already nearly won by Guido, grudgingly bid the priest tell his story. Caponsacchi opens with Browning's hymn of praise to Pompilia, "The glory of life, the beauty of the world. . ." (Browning, The Ring and the Book, VI, 118-19) In order to clear her name he promises to make the judges see, rather than hear, her story. As he describes the carnival setting and tells how he and Canon Conti disguised themselves as fortune tellers and joined the merry-making, the lights dim to black out and curtain indicating that what follows is a flashback.

The long first act, entirely played in the same carnival setting, establishes the character of the main persons in the play and sets up antagonism between Caponsacchi and Guido before the former meets Pompilia. The priest prevents Guido from following the escaping Comparini by a wrestling throw and then setting his fat friend Conti on top of the prostrate villain. Later Pompilia appears begging the

Archbishop for help; he turns her over to the Governor, who is plotting to help Guido ruin Pompilia for a share of her fortune. The Governor tells her to wait -- he will be back soon. In come the two young Canons, and Conti throws the fateful comfits -- Goodrich makes it a handful of confetti -- to "make her give you back your gaze."

(Browning, The Ring and the Book, VI, 403) Caponsacchi and Pompilia are still gazing at each other when Guido and the Governor return. Guido, ordering Caponsacchi to stay away from his wife, leads Pompilia off-stage while Conti pulls his dazed friend in the opposite direction.

Act II consists of three scenes: the first in Caponsacchi's cell shows the great lengths to which Guido has gone to trap the priest and his wife, the second in the idyllic balcony scene at Guido's palace sees Caponsacchi pledge his help, and the third in the court of the Castelnuovo inn brings the three together with an exciting sword duel, Pompilia's attempt to kill Guido and the arrest of the priest and the wife.

The first scene of Act III is set in "A Court of Justice at the Vatican." The atmosphere is much less formal than for the murder trial in the prologue; this is just another hearing of another triangle affair for the judges. Despite The Old Yellow Book, Goodrich has both Pompilia and Caponsacchi present and both stoutly defend their innocence. The judges finally decide to punish both a little -- Caponsacchi is relegated for just eight months so he can be back in Rome for Christmas and Pompilia is put directly into her parents' care. In the second scene it's Christmas Eve at Pietro's house and

the old couple are happily fussing around Pompilia when Conti comes to ask permission for a visit from Caponsacchi, just returned from Civita. Against Violante's wish Pompilia agrees. Therefore, when a second knock comes the family is expecting Caponsacchi and opens the door to his name. Guido and his men search for the baby and then Guido methodically butchers Violante and Pietro in an effort to make Pompilia tell where the child is hidden. When he raises his hand to take her life, he finds he can't bring himself to strike. He orders his men to kill her, and as she falls Caponsacchi and Conti appear. Caponsacchi struggles with Guido and disarms him just as Conti returns with help. Pompilia dies in the priest's arms. The curtain line is Caponsacchi's agonized cry, "Oh, great, good, just God! Miserable me!" (Browning-Goodrich, Caponsacchi, III, ii, p. 164)

At the opening curtain of the epilogue, Caponsacchi has just finished his story, but the judges, for all Browning's good reasons -- the shouts of the mob favoring Guido, fear that people will say the Church is covering up for a priest, Caponsacchi's lack of proof to back his testimony, the fact of his elopement with Guido's wife, and the quite obvious fact of his love for Pompilia -- finally agree that Guido should have clemency. Caponsacchi's despairing plea for truth against the coward world brings the Pope from hiding. The old man makes his decision known in a paraphrase of Browning's lines ordering the execution of Guido and his men in the People's Square on the morrow. Then Guido's bravado deserts him and he begs

for his life and cries out in horror of the headsman's knife,

Oh, Judges! Cardinals! Christ! Maria! God! --  
Pompilia! Will you let them murder me?

(Browning-Goodrich, Caponsacchi, Epilogue, p. 173)

When Guido has been dragged off, the Pope clears Pompilia's honor, acclaims Caponsacchi a true servant of God, and bids him, "Work, be unhappy, but bear life, my son." (Browning, The Ring and the Book, X, 1207)

A Browning portrait in The Ring and the Book is a multiple exposure from different points of view. There's a central core of agreement among the various first-person descriptions of the principals in the Franceschini case, but, the total picture shows a considerable range of views. All the monologues agree, for example, that Caponsacchi is a worldly priest till he meets Pompilia. After that, Guido and those who side with him see Caponsacchi as a libertine and Pompilia's clandestine lover. Those who oppose Guido see the priest as a soldier-saint, a St. George who rescues Pompilia because it is his duty before God to help the weak and oppressed. Browning said he left it to the reader to decide where the truth lies, but his masterly monologue for the Pope makes it quite clear what the reader should decide. Goodrich, however, wanted no double exposures; he painted his portraits with clear, bold outlines. The audience must know at once what sort of people his characters are and keep the correct impression throughout the play.

Caponsacchi is the fullest characterization and truest to the

Browning original. We see the charming, spirited, handsome, young priest whose superiors have encouraged him to worldly pursuits, meet the test of his life: for the sake of his promotion to Rome should he ignore Pompilia's great need, or risk his reputation, perhaps his life, in an effort to save her? To build up the role of the priest, Goodrich changed the theater scene to a night of carnival and showed Caponsacchi and Conti, against the rules of the priesthood, masquerading as fortune tellers. This masking does not occur in Browning's poem, but the idea was undoubtedly suggested by the Pope's reference to Caponsacchi's "change of motley" (Browning, The Ring and the Book, X, 1127) from hypocrite's disguise (he first plays the courtier dressed in priest's costume) to fool's costume (then he plays God's servant dressed as a courtier). The Pope sighs at the failure of other churchmen to help Pompilia in her need,

whilst thou Caponsacchi  
 In mask and motley, pledged to dance not fight,  
 Sprang'st forth the hero.

(Browning, The Ring and the Book, X, 1162-64)

At any rate Goodrich's Caponsacchi in mask and motley puts on a very amusing show as a fortune teller and daringly speaks to the Archbishop himself. But when the frightened Comparini appear, his inner goodness is revealed by his promptness in coming to their aid. True to the Browning portrait, the play's hero is seen to have had great nobility of character all along; meeting Pompilia is the challenge that stirs him from his light life to dare to champion Right without hesitation.

The Pompilia of the play, although accurately copied from

Browning's model, is reduced to four major scenes, but they are good ones. In the first act as she pleads with the Archbishop to be sent to a convent to escape her loveless marriage and cruel husband, she tells of her strange, secret wedding, of her unsuccessful struggle to please Guido, and of her husband's servant-mistress, but the prelate uncomfortably manages to mouth only the conventional advice to conduct herself so that she will win her husband's love away from the mistress. In the balcony scene, which won high praise from the critics, she parts company with Browning's Pompilia by telling Caponsacchi that she is pregnant and he must help her save her child. Goodrich thereby swept away Lawyer Bottini's arguments to the effect that she had pretended to flirt with Caponsacchi to draw him into rescuing her. (Browning, The Ring and the Book, IX) The playwright also made it perfectly clear that Pompilia can neither read nor write and that the letters are Guido's forgeries. Her third important scene is at the inn where her flashing attack on Guido and the clear outrage in her words win the inn's people to her side. Finally, her death scene, with some of Browning's most poignant lines, makes the tragic climax for the play.

Because of Goodrich's determination to focus audience sympathy on Caponsacchi, the role of Guido is reduced to that of a stock villain. Completely discarded from Browning's powerful characterization in depth are all the humanizing touches: the pride of family, the rankling of poverty, the humiliation of his child-bride's fear and revulsion of him, and the ridicule of neighbors after his poor showing in the

elopement affair. Browning's Guido jeers at the idea of himself in middle age playing the romantic lover for his wife's sake. No, he would have needed a shameless invitation from a bold, passionate woman to fire him up. For her he says:

I would have rummaged, ransacked at the word  
 Those old odd corners of an empty heart  
 For remnants of dim love the long disused,  
 And dusty crumbings of romance!

(Browning, The Ring and the Book, V, 691-94)

Furthermore, Guido's very allowable grievance, the fact that the Comparini disclaim Pompilia as their true child, is never mentioned in the play. Also missing are the craft and cunning Browning gave his villain, Guido's unerring stabs at his hearers' weaknesses, and his sinuously diabolical skill at argument. For example, he holds that his fault as a husband wasn't that he was too hard on his wife, but too easy; he should have cut off the last joint of her little finger to teach her to keep away from pretty priests and she'd be alive and well yet! After all, he reminds his judges, what of the monastery novice who finds he's changed his mind about becoming a monk? He'll feel the chain and scourge; just so should a husband manage a bride! The Browning Guido is certainly evil to the core, but we get a look into the dusty corners of his loveless heart, guess at the forces which shaped him and find some pity for him. The stage Guido is a black monster, busily engaged in ruining two innocent people. As one critic of the play put it,



Guido is "a villain more villainous than even the Bowery would have the courage to risk these days."<sup>7</sup>

For many of the other characters of the story, the playwright's pen proved a deadly weapon. The two lawyers of Books VIII and IX have disappeared completely; the defendants in both trial scenes do their own pleading. The lengthy first three books of the poem have been reduced to a brief exchange of gossip among three soldiers of the Papal Guard. As they await the hearing of Guido and Caponsacchi in the court room at the opening curtain, Giotti, "forty, big, burly, overbearing," takes the position of Browning's "Half-Rome"; Andrea, "young and dreamy," defends Caponsacchi and pities Pompilia from the viewpoint of "Other Half-Rome"; and Melchior, "thirty-five, immaculate, dandified," assumes the sophisticated attitude of "Tertium Quid." From the long Book IX, "The Pope," Goodrich very skillfully lifted the story-bearing speeches and so placed them in the Prologue and Epilogue that although the Pope's lines are relatively few, the role serves as the hub of the play. The earnest old man has studied the printed facts; now he must learn the truth the facts do not reveal. Then in the Epilogue, as God's representative, he must rescue Caponsacchi from the evil forces of the world and clear Pompilia's name of the unjust stains of Guido's lies. The judges are individualized in the play to a greater extent than in the poem. In the elopement trial one judge

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<sup>7</sup>Stark Young, "Sacred and Profane Love," New Republic, Vol. 51 (May 25, 1927), 17.

is portrayed to considerable comic effect while representing the sophisticated Roman's reaction to the Caponsacchi-Pompilia story of utter innocence while engaging in outwardly scandalous behavior. At each new piece of testimony he judiciously exclaims, "Hard to believe -- but not impossible!" (Goodrich, Caponsacchi, III, i) Pietro and the Governor of Arezzo are merely bit parts; in the last act Violante has one strong scene in which she probes her daughter's true feelings for Caponsacchi and sagely counsels against the proposed farewell meeting with the priest. The Archbishop's brief part skillfully conveys the shallow churchman's want of true Christian spirit in his worldly advice to the young priest on how to get ahead in the Church and in his trite counselling of Pompilia, trapped in a desperate situation. The loyal friends Cannon Conti and Gherardi (Browning called him Guillichini) are relatively more important to the play than to the poem; Conti is pictured as a lovable, lazy, comical fellow, who, nevertheless, is a staunch admirer of Caponsacchi's real worth. The brief parts of the sly serving-maid Margherita, the landlord at the inn, and his servants amazingly manage to suggest real individuals. Certainly Browning's adapter was a master craftsman when delineating character for the stage.

To evaluate the play as a theatrical piece, we must, of course depend on the critics of its day. The anonymous reviewer for the Literary Digest wrote:

It is a robust play, with a story that is a story, and no tendency to suggest what can just as well be told in an act of three scenes. When people are to be killed they

are killed on stage -- and not, it might be added, with any particular straining after illusion.

It is you will understand, old-fashioned. So old-fashioned that criticism rather pales before it. It is theatrical, but quite evidently no one ever intended it be anything else. . . . It is ancient in method, it is marred here and there by the tense realization of lesser actors that Browning is a very 'difficult' poet, and yet it is curiously alive. It is theater, but it is good theater. It is illusion builded out of granite, but it is illusion still. It proves once more that vitality is not a modern discovery, and that brave deeds and flashing swords have not lost their power strangely to move.<sup>8</sup>

Stark Young thought:

Dramatically, "Caponasacchi" is refreshingly sound old-style Bowery melodrama . . . [with] great swathes of virtue, purity, guile and devoted love.

But . . . there enters into these events . . . a certain mood of beauty. The soul of beauty is at least invoked.

And there are moments . . . that have a degree of reality.<sup>9</sup>

Still another reviewer found:

As dramatized for the stage this story is a compelling play, swift in movement, holding the auditor's interest to the end. It is theatrical in the sense in which the greatest plays are theatrical; for as it is played it does not suggest a book, but life.<sup>10</sup>

For the acting, one critic praised Edith Barrett as "the flower-like Pompilia. . . . Four times Miss Barrett studiously seconding the gallant Hampden, came close to transfiguring the stage!"<sup>11</sup> Young

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<sup>8</sup>"Browning on Broadway," Outlook, Vol. 144 (December 22, 1926), 524-25.

<sup>9</sup>Young, New Republic, Vol. 51, 17.

<sup>10</sup>"Browning's Murder Story Reaches Broadway," Literary Digest, Vol. 91 (November 13, 1926), 29-30.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

admired her "genuine pathos and convincingsness"<sup>12</sup> and Cecil Yapp's performance as Canon Conti. Of the play's star, he said:

Mr. Walter Hampden brings what no other actor on our stage could bring. He takes the poetry, the sanctitude, the golden text and the intellectuality of the play in good faith, which is more than either a more able and inspired or a more callous and routine actor could do.

Young went on to say that Hampden's performance was bona fide, sincere and careful and that his company had a good ensemble spirit and spoke better English than is general in the theater. But the crowd scenes were bad: actors trying to be heard in a noisy festival -- "actors born joyless trying to be gay." Young also commented that Claude Bragdon's balcony setting was particularly effective and the carnival scene, "though trite does no harm at least." Burns Mantle reported for the season 269 performances of Caponsacchi and that the "poetic drama pleased the Hampden [theater] crowd mightily."<sup>13</sup> William Lyon Phelps, a staunch supporter of the Goodrich-Hampden project, in his "Foreword" to Caponsacchi said of their effort:

The result is the play "Caponsacchi," beautifully mounted by Claude Bragdon, and superbly acted by Walter Hampden, who, with an admirable company, has delighted intelligent playgoers. . . . Mr. Goodrich, with the cooperation of a truly great actor, has produced an intensely exciting and deeply affecting play. There is not a moment of dullness from beginning to the end, and the different scenes have been arranged with extraordinary skill. I regard this play as the chief event

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<sup>12</sup>Young, New Republic, Vol. 51, 17.

<sup>13</sup>Burns Mantle (ed.), Best Plays of 1926-27 and Year Book of Drama in America (New York: Small, Maynard & Co., 1927), p. 10.

of the dramatic season in New York, and it is my hope that it will become a permanent feature on the American stage.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, as a working script in the hands of the Hampden group, Caponsacchi was a solid success as theater.

"Here were the end, had anything an end" (Browning, The Ring and the Book, XII, 1), but Goodrich and Palmer printed the play, thereby challenging us to examine the work as literary art. Can it be recommended to today's reader? The Browning student, of course, will be interested in seeing how one dramatist adapted a Browning work for the stage. However, such a reader will find it difficult to judge Caponsacchi because from the larger Browning work he will fill in the characterizations and histories of Pompilia and Guido. The reader who is unfamiliar with The Ring and the Book must take Guido's evil on the author's word. The sorry details of the nobleman's luckless, loveless life are missing along with his fierce and unyielding struggle against a relentless fate. Browning's Guido can stand beside Milton's Satan and make no apology to the Prince of Darkness, but the black-hearted villain of the play must make the reader wonder if such an "opprobrious blur" (Browning, The Ring and the Book, VI, 1500) can be possible. Pompilia's spotless purity of soul may raise questions too; in fact critics have complained that Browning himself set aside all the laws of heredity and environment when he made his

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<sup>14</sup>William Lyon Phelps, "Foreword," Caponsacchi by Arthur Goodrich and Rose A. Palmer (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1927), pp. vi-vii.

little, nameless waif into a glowing tribute to Elizabeth Browning. Goodrich so faithfully copied Browning's Pompilia, he could have said with truth, "I found her just as she is in my play in The Ring and the Book."<sup>15</sup> A reader not distracted by the dramatic presentation of excellent players can't help wondering why the judges, who hear the same testimony as the Pope, decide in favor of Guido. Apparently they judge on legal technicalities and the Pope reads the hearts of men!

Young raises the modern reader's complaint against a Browning theme that also appears in the play:

There is the feministic vision of love enveloping the whole incident, that sublimation of love passion that so many people once found so stimulating and comforting, and that even yet has its public. . . . However that may be, it is the Browning conception of love that lifts this play of "Caponsacchi" into an air of spiritual beauty, romanticizes and santifies its melodrama and pushes its dramatic theme into that effect of philosophy and preaching so beloved of Browning followers. . . . For my part, all that moved me in "Caponsacchi" were the simple and constant human values of the situation, the child's innocence, the craft, the complications of the world, the march of the machinery by which society exists.<sup>16</sup>

But the central theme of the testing of Caponsacchi, who leaves his unpriestly duty of playing troubadour for the ladies to play St. George for Pompilia, is clearly stated and, on the whole, convincing. The priest flings to his cynical judges a question that neither they nor

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<sup>15</sup>Browning said, "I assure you that I found her just as she speaks and acts in my poem in that old book The Old Yellow Book." See Frances Russell, One Word More on Browning (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1927), p. 120.

<sup>16</sup>Young, New Republic, Vol. 51, 17.

the cynics of any age have adequately answered:

Is there no worship, only that of flesh?  
How silent you all are!

(Goodrich, Caponsacchi, Prologue, p. 18)

And the poetry? Young carped, "The poetry of Caponsacchi is of the Browning sort, and hardly that at its best."<sup>17</sup> Of course, one who does not like Browning's poetry won't admire the poetry of the play. Goodrich obviously liked the Browning sort of poetry and quoted over 150 lines, paraphrased twice as many more, and used the sense of a great many passages. The borrowed speeches in the play are often spoken by characters other than those who speak them in the poem, but the quoted passages fit very smoothly into the flow of the dialogue. Goodrich's own lines, used chiefly for the give and take of conversation, really do sound like people's talk. Occasionally his dropping of prepositions becomes painfully noticeable, but he learned that trick from his master. Goodrich was, it seems, so thoroughly steeped in the Browning thought and poetic phrasing that he displayed the poet's faults as well as his virtues. Nowhere do Goodrich's lines reach the excellence of the best of Browning's, but the dramatist wisely borrowed many of the poet's finest passages and built of his own lines a setting for these gems, so that they flash forth at high points of the story.

The Browning student on reading Caponsacchi for the first time will likely feel disappointed because that "vast, and so essentially gothic a structure /The Ring and the Book/, spreading and soaring

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

and branching,"<sup>18</sup> has been shrunk to a small, but serviceable, modern church. However, if he will give it some study, he will find that the design is clean-cut, the stained-glass windows sparkle with the same colors of the greater work, and the music frequently echoes the big themes with remarkable clarity. For a writer who had never before attempted a serious drama, a poetic drama, or an adaptation, Arthur Goodrich turned in a highly creditable performance and his play is still the only version of a Browning work to succeed on a public stage.

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<sup>18</sup>James, p. 385.



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