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“Clutch[ing] Gold”: Wives, Mothers, and Property Law in *The Ring and the Book*

JILL RAPPOPORT

In Robert Browning's epic exploration of a 1698 murder case, Count Guido Franceschini confesses to killing his wife Pompilia, confident that her alleged dishonor justifies his action and, crucially, that the money he married for will pass into his hands despite his guilt. Because his responsibility for the deed is never in question, the poem's twelve-book, multivocal narration of Guido's trials uses this murder less to assign blame than to invite assessments of seventeenth-century systems of gender, justice, and property. Those systems may seem remote from the companionate marriages and reformed divorce laws of the nineteenth century, yet *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869) also encourages Victorian readers to judge their own present legal system through its critique of the earlier Italian laws, softening the implications of more direct commentary by “Linking our England to his Italy.”¹ Along these lines, Pompilia's tragic union with Guido has been compared to the Victorian marriage market, commonly understood to traffic in women.² Guido unequivocally views his wife as a possession, “avow[ing that he] dared buy / A girl,” calculating “the market-price” of his title in that exchange, and expecting that “when I buy, timber and twig, a tree— / I buy the song o' the nightingale inside” (V: ll. 425–426; V: l. 462; V: ll. 605–606). Pompilia's struggle for ownership has been framed, accordingly, in terms of her claims to body, spirit, and child, rather than to the substantial material wealth for which she acts as conduit. Discussions of material property in the poem, on the other hand, generally emphasize inheritance and its vertical and male lines of descent, focusing on birth and confusion over rightful heirship rather than on wives or marriage (Petch, “Law” p. 318). Yet a wife's economic agency is central both to the poem's tragedy and to English legal debates during the years when *The Ring and the Book* was being written. Whether or not women should lose their claims to property upon marriage or continue to inherit, earn, possess, or alienate independent wealth was a vital question during the 1860s, and Browning's poem

engages in it, not only through Pompilia and her embattled inheritance but also through the actions of her biological and adoptive mothers.

The decades-long Victorian reform of married women's property law is typically understood in terms of its effects on wives and marriage, but as we will see, the prospect of changing marital rights affected entire families and unsettled other features of Victorian life as well. In its depictions of money-wielding mothers, Browning's poem reflects cultural tensions regarding these economic developments. By demonstrating sympathy toward disempowered wives along with widespread concern regarding the generational ramifications of maternal economic agency, *The Ring and the Book* underscores the dissonance in popular attitudes toward women's property rights shortly before the first legal reforms. If in this telling the "British Public" the poem addresses remains ambivalent,³ depictions of Guido's trial render a more consistent verdict, finally suggesting the necessity not only of improving individual laws but of altering the court system itself.

I. "He Only Stipulated for the Wealth" (VII: l. 779): Property Matters in Marriage

The golden "Ring" that opens and names Browning's poem has invited copious critical interpretation as "a figure, a symbol, say; / A thing's sign" (I: ll. 31–32).⁴ But it is also, and essentially, a piece of precious metal. Temporarily mixed with alloy to create a "manageable mass" (I: l. 21), the ring, once shaped, returns to its original, unmixed state: "Prime nature with an added artistry— / No carat lost" (I: ll. 29–30).⁵ As a costly object of enduring value, this metal—"Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore" (I: l. 28)—introduces the key problem of property into this variably retold trial. Valuable property and the question of whose "it was, is, shall be" motivate adoption, marriage, and murder in *The Ring and the Book* and explicitly and implicitly figure in the social and legal determination of the case's rights and wrongs.

Gold itself, unlike many of the items at the start of the poem, is of unspecified value, and indeed the ring initially seems remarkable for being "gained" yet never explicitly given or sold (I: l. 30). Yet despite this suggestion that the precious ring is unlike other alienable goods, the malleable metal circulates in many monetized forms throughout the poem.⁶ Even monks and nuns, in Guido's account, come to "Clutch gold" (XI: l. 701), and by the end of *The Ring and the Book*, strangers reporting on the outcome of the trial finally reduce it to a wager lost, "fifty drops / Of heart's blood in the shape of gold zecchines!" (XII: ll. 73–74). More strikingly, the profit Browning secures from the "square old yellow Book" (I: l. 33), whose discovery prompts his poem, is also described

in terms of this valuable metal: “my . . . gain was gold” (I: l. 460). Not just a metaphor for poetic value here, this aptly colored yellow “gold” marks a bargain, a profitable exchange.⁷ Noting that he only “Gave a *lira* . . . , eightpence English just”⁸ (I: l. 39) for his book, he emphasizes the origins of his epic at “market-time” where “re-venders . . . display their ware” (I: l. 44; I: l. 52). He highlights the commercial context of his discovery by recalling the price of other goods (“A pile of brown-etched prints, two *crazie* each” [I: l. 66]) before aligning his purchase with those items in his reiteration of its price (“a *lira* made it mine” [I: l. 83]). This early emphasis on exchange, which includes appraising the pope’s very provisions (the pope’s “own meal costs but five carlines a day” [I: l. 324]) presages a larger tale in which everything, including speech, has a price. “What would cost one such nullifying word?” asks Guido (XI: l. 331).

Not only objects and language but people themselves are monetized in *The Ring and the Book*, calling attention to how exchange, as both action and metaphor, pervades this verse novel. Pompilia, most notably, is trafficked twice, first as an unborn baby in order to secure the continuity of her adoptive parents’ wealth beyond her father’s lifetime, and subsequently as the child bride and “chattel” (VII: l. 520) of Guido. Her case is dramatic in its secrecy and the extreme suffering that ensues, but the transactional basis of her family relations is not unique. Guido sees himself in terms of his market value (“the wrought man worth ten times the crude” [XI: l. 1027]), while children, whether loved or spurned, occasion their fathers’ cost-benefit analyses. Defense lawyer Dominus Hyacinthus de Arcangelis eagerly anticipates his son’s eighth birthday celebration by calculating what his guests might be persuaded to give (“Land to bequeath!” [VIII: l. 1106]) or how they might rewrite their wills “in favour of a boy” (VIII: l. 1796). With different feeling but similar economic motive, Guido disavows any interest in Pompilia’s child, mocking the popular attitude that to have a son is to “Possess a treasure,—is not that the phrase?” (XI: l. 1852). Resentful at being “exchanged for” an unloved child “stronger, wiser, handsomer than I / By fifty years” (XI: l. 1873, XI: 1859–1860), Guido asks, dismissively, “what profit [he might gain] in [a] son” (XI: l. 1885).

Property appears everywhere in *The Ring and the Book*. And yet, a central tenet of Victorian property rights and one that was under question in the 1860s—that, under common law, a wife lacked property rights nearly in toto—remains absent from discussions of marriage in Browning’s poem. Coverture, the subsuming of a woman’s legal and economic rights under her husband’s upon marriage, granted all of her assets to him under common law, whether earned or inherited; a wife was unable to legally enter into contracts or to bequeath property in her own name.⁹ Widows, who had formerly held rights to a

portion of their deceased husbands' land, lost even that certainty following the Dower Act of 1833.¹⁰ Between 1856, when over 26,000 signatures appeared on a parliamentary petition for married women's property rights,¹¹ and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 (33 & 34 Vict., c 93; 45 & 46 Vict., c 75), which granted first the right to income and small bequests and subsequently the right to property in general, married Englishwomen's property was a subject of fierce debate and also literary exploration—though critical investigations of the topic in novels by Anthony Trollope or George Eliot are more common than those in works of poetry such as Browning's.¹²

Another reason *The Ring and the Book* has not been discussed in terms of married women's property rights is, I think, that critical discussions of marriage in Browning's poem, by focusing largely on Pompilia,¹³ have focused on a different legislative achievement, one that also benefited nineteenth-century women but preceded changes to their property rights:¹⁴ the reform of divorce law. Depictions of Pompilia and Guido steadily and not at all subtly undermine the "one-flesh" marital ideology that justified Victorian England's common law doctrine of coverture. Even as various speakers echo religious decrees that "wife and husband are one flesh" (VII: l. 333),¹⁵ Browning's poem bears out, repeatedly and from diverse perspectives, the impossibility of marriage merging two people in body or will and the importance of severing incompatible ties. Guido claims that "Pompilia . . . refused from the beginning day / Either in body or soul to cleave to mine" (V: ll. 607–609). Pompilia, in turn, pleading against his conjugal right to marital rape (still permitted by nineteenth-century English law [Shanley, pp. 156–159, 185]), notes their "estrangement, soul from soul" (VII: l. 723) along with the distinction between idealized union and economic transaction: "He only stipulated for the wealth" (VII: l. 779). For Pompilia, the clashing of spirit and body becomes a more important argument against coverture's constraints than the financial transaction Guido has arranged with her mother. In this emphasis on the spouses' emotional and physical estrangement as well as on Guido's violence and extramarital activity,¹⁶ the poem appears to be waging a battle that had been won in the English courts a decade earlier with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (20 & 21 Vict., c. 85), which made expensive parliamentary acts no longer necessary for divorce. Such a law, despite its sexual double standard (Shanley, pp. 43–44), might have helped a latter-day Pompilia leave her abusive and adulterous husband, and the absence of any such option for Pompilia is central for understanding both her plight and Victorian women's changing marital rights. But *The Ring and the Book* does not simply illustrate the point, seemingly settled by the late 1860s, that spouses needed ways out of unhappy marriages. It takes up problems

endemic to putatively happier unions as well. When the poem was crafted, in 1868, debates about marriage centered on property, rather than divorce. The poem's focus on wealth alongside marriage makes it part of contemporary discourses that questioned the common law as it shaped even the strongest and most loving of marital bonds, asking why marriage should legally erase a woman's economic autonomy. Rather than focus on the poem's overt but general sympathies for unhappily married women such as Pompilia, then, the rest of this essay will explore how it addresses the question of married women's property reform less directly, in the spirit of Browning's famous statement that "Art may tell a truth / Obliquely" (XII: ll. 859–860).

And here it is useful to start with a different and less remarked-upon marriage, that of the Comparini, Pietro and Violante, Pompilia's adoptive parents. The only two major actors in this tragic Renaissance tale who do not get to speak for themselves, both are murdered, by Guido, before the book's trial occurs. Alongside and despite its overt sympathy for marital problems in Pompilia's case, *The Ring and the Book* offers little compassion or support for this other wife, even as it acknowledges that she, too, faces marital problems. By recontextualizing Violante's actions within an economic and material realm, however, we can more clearly comprehend her own marital difficulties, the reasons she has received much harsher treatment both within and outside of the poem, and the importance of reassessing her role from an economic perspective.

Initially, Violante and Pietro's marriage seems a stark contrast to their daughter's, one "all Rome might note / And quote for happy" (III: ll. 116–117). Marital comfort apparently derives both from being comfortably "balanced so, / . . . i' the social scale"¹⁷ (III: ll. 119–120) and also from their complementary characters:

in the couple's very souls
 You saw the adequate half with half to match
 Each having and each lacking somewhat, both
 Making a whole that had all and lacked nought. (III: ll. 127–130)

Such harmonizing roles would seem to accord with Victorian ideologies of marriage's separate spheres and one-flesh aims, except that the pair reverses traditional gender functions: "The acquiescent and recipient side / Was Pietro's, and the stirring striving one / Violante's" (III: ll. 132–134). This reversal, to which I will return, becomes central to the problems of property that the couple encounters and attempts to resolve, with tragic cost.

As goes “The story always old and always new” (II: l. 214), these otherwise contented spouses lack a child. Their infertility not only saddens but also seems poised to impoverish them in more material ways. Pietro’s annual income depends on capital in which he has only a life’s interest—“moneys’ use / Lifelong” (II: ll. 211–212), “his till death, not afterward, / Failing an heir” (III: ll. 161–162). To circumvent this impending loss, Violante arranges an adoption, compensating a prostitute for a yet-unborn child—Pompilia—whom she passes off as her own even to Pietro after Pompilia’s birth. She keeps the secret until it becomes evident that Pompilia’s marriage has brought none of the security that her dowry and promise of future inheritance had been intended to purchase. Attempting to retrieve the dowry, Violante makes Pompilia’s origins known and thus draws attention, legal and social, to the occasion of her adoption.

The poem’s generalized speakers stand in harsh judgment of her original maneuver. Half-Rome, calling Pietro a “fool” (II: l. 21) and Violante “the mischief” (II: l. 247), argues that the adoption, which will “cheat the rightful heirs” (II: l. 580), is the means by which “Violante gave the first offense” that will ultimately justify her murder (II: l. 34). The Other Half-Rome frames the transaction as a fall of biblical proportions, noting that “Eve saw the apple was fair and good to taste, / So, plucked it, having asked the snake advice” (III: ll. 170–171). Tertium Quid further considers it “Flat robbery of the proper heirs thus foiled / O’ the due succession” (IV: ll. 218–219). A number of critics seem to agree with these assessments, calling Violante “vulgar and utilitarian,” “manipulate[ive]” and “merciless,” “stupid, scheming,” and motivated by “greed” and “selfishness.”¹⁸

The poem’s portrayal of the secret adoption becomes more sympathetic, however, with regard to the doting father. “Pietro craved an heir” (II: l. 213), and once Pompilia arrives he contentedly “Crawled all-fours with his baby pick-a-back” (II: l. 259). Half-Rome notes that the transaction was at least

Partly to please old Pietro, fill his cup
 With wine at the late hour when lees are left,
 And send him from life’s feast rejoicingly. (II: ll. 577–579)

Speakers discussing the secret adoption thus express sympathy for Pietro and the “heirs . . . foiled,” not for Violante. But this, I think, is where other characters—and critics discussing the case¹⁹—miss a fundamental point. While these heirs might indeed have felt “cheat[ed]” and “robbe[d]” once the truth was known, we never hear from them or their legal representatives. Among the many speakers in the poem, they are not the only or even primary ones

who stand to lose if Pietro produces no heir. Even Pompilia, in offering up an ambivalent defense of her mother's actions, has a limited understanding of them:

She thought, moreover, real lies were lies told
 For harm's sake; whereas this had good at heart,
 Good for my [biological] mother, good for me, and good
 For Pietro who was meant to love a babe,
 And needed one to make his life of use,
 Receive his house and land when he should die.
 Wrong, wrong and always wrong! how plainly wrong! (VII: ll. 306–312)

In focusing attention on Pietro's feelings—his joy in the child he was “meant to love,” his dismay that his life has no “use” if he cannot pass on his property, and his indignation that only the interest is his, not the capital which “It vex him he must die and leave behind” (II: l. 583)—speakers and those critics who briefly acknowledge his economic motives for paternity (e.g., Desaulniers, p. 332) pass over both the feelings and the economic plight of his wife, whose income will apparently cease entirely upon Pietro's death and for whose financial circumstances characters and critics alike have had little concern.

As a widow, a childless Violante would be left impoverished. None of Pietro's income has been saved for her: “the good fat rosy careless man, / . . . has not laid a ducat by” (IV: ll. 102–103). Indeed, even without a child their means are so stretched that “Pietro finds himself in debt at last” (IV: l. 97) because, we learn, “[he] could never save a dollar” (IV: l. 121). Pietro, as a poor financial manager who fails to provide for his wife, is not exceptional in nineteenth-century literature. In novels from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864–1866) and Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), when husbands have nothing at all to “leave behind,” wives, by necessity, provide for themselves. Violante, lacking the independent wealth that some nineteenth-century women's families settled upon them outside common law, must compensate for this deficiency through her wit. The actions that so many characters and critics deplore—the secret adoption, her insistence on her daughter's marriage behind Pietro's back, and the revelation of Pompilia's origins when this miserable marriage proves to be a bad deal for the Comparini—might be seen, then, as the economic efforts of a desperate and intelligent married woman who lacks legal or socially acceptable ways to provide for herself but nonetheless takes on the financial role her husband will not fill.

Even before the adoption, the Comparini's resources begin to "burn out" until "Creditors grow uneasy" (IV: ll. 96, 100). As "the stirring striving one" in their union, Violante must take action, while Pietro remains merely "acquiescent and recipient." Reviewing the terms of her husband's income, she "meditates the tenure of the Trust, / *Fidei commissum* is the lawyer-phrase, / These funds that only want an heir to take—/ Goes o'er the gamut o' the creditor's cry" and negotiates the deal by which Pompilia will join her household (IV: ll. 134–137), temporarily quieting creditors and apparently insuring Violante's own future as well. But again, and despite the Comparini's joy in their child, they face financial insecurity that Pietro does nothing to mitigate.

Pietro's estate was dwindling day by day,

 And poverty had reached him in her rounds.
 This came when he was past the working-time,
 Had learned to dandle and forgot to dig,
 And who must but Violante cast about,
 Contrive and task that head of hers again? (II: ll. 257, 265–269)

Half-Rome, no friend to Violante, nonetheless highlights the necessity of economic action by a wife whose husband is "rapt far above such mundane care" (II: l. 258). Now in need of present as well as future protection, Violante marries her young daughter to a nobleman whose home and reputedly more stable place in the social order she hopes they can enjoy together. As Candace Ward notes, Violante's "co-optation of her husband's role is perceived as threatening," but the attempt to find financial security through marriage is not itself unusual; "she's participating in the system" (p. 9). Reassuring Pompilia that she has acted in the best interests of their family, she attempts to explain the security she has sought in the form of "a husband and a noble name, / A palace and no end of pleasant things" (VII: ll. 553–554), all of which were to become "a common lap" for Pompilia and her parents to "share and share alike" (VII: ll. 563, 562).

The tragic results of this plan are familiar within the poem and its critical legacy, but the desperate desire for economic stability and the limited means by which a woman such as Violante could attain it have gone unremarked. I dwell at length on her choices and their undercited circumstances both because they are generally faulted for the tragedy and because the mixture of sympathy with judgment typically and even generically afforded to dramatic monologues²⁰—including murderers such as Guido—has been withheld

from this character, who is demonized for lying, trafficking her daughter twice, and finally revealing her daughter's origins. As many have noted, Browning's poem manifests obvious sympathy for Pompilia as a victim in a bad marriage, but characters and critics alike disregard Violante's lack of options in her own unequal, financially disempowered marriage. The hostility or, at best, pitilessness directed toward her suggests just how strong resistance to women's economic agency has been.

Although Pompilia's murder warrants extensive debate in *The Ring and the Book* (is the murder of an adulteress justified? is Pompilia indeed an adulteress?) those of the Comparini do not. Introduced in the framing monologue as "the old couple, slaughtered with the wife / By the husband as accomplices in crime, / Those Comparini, Pietro and his spouse,—" (I: ll. 389–391), they are nominally held accountable after death for having "abetted" Pompilia in fleeing her husband (I: l. 810). They do offer shelter to their daughter, as I discuss further below. I am claiming, though, that the real "crime" for which they are jointly punished is economic, and that the larger poem attributes this crime almost entirely to Violante. In its depiction of Violante's seventeenth-century struggle, however, *The Ring and the Book* also showcases the limited options available for contemporary Englishwomen without property, the creativity through which women without legal protections or male providers must make shift, and the many social and legal problems that Victorian commentators feared might arise through such unregulated economic activity. Yet Violante's actions prove particularly troubling within the world of the poem and its Victorian counterpart because of their perceived implications for her parental role. As I will now show, the condemnation she receives for actions necessitated by her position as a wife but affecting her as a mother highlight some of the fears that underlie married women's exclusion from property rights as well as a justification for maintaining this status quo.

Part II. Two Relationships: "Wife's self / That's mother's self" (VIII: ll. 86–87)

Unsurprisingly, Victorian debates about the reform of married women's property law focused on the condition of being a wife. More striking, however, is the frequency with which the property of *mothers* features in literature about married women's property reform during the most heightened period of its debate. In a wide range of newspaper records and fiction before the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, a mother's need to support her children served as the rationale for granting working women increased property rights.²¹ The widely reprinted 1856 petition for married women's property rights calls partic-

ular attention to the “drunken father, who wrings from a mother her children’s daily bread” and deplores “the law . . . depriving the mother of all pecuniary resource.”²² Other articles detail the plight of abandoned wives who work hard to provide for their children, only to have their husbands return and “seize every farthing” these resourceful mothers have managed to set aside for their families.²³ But children also became the rationale for denying these rights to wealthier women, whose financial interests were seen as conflicting with those of the heir.²⁴ Keener attention to motherhood underscores the importance of generational ties and transmissions in the legal and popular discourses surrounding a wife’s fortune.

The Ring and the Book highlights the difficulty of married women who were treated as property, like Pompilia, or left without provisions, like Violante. Yet as the case of Guido’s murdered wife reveals, at stake in the reform of married women’s property law is wives’ ability not only to hold or inherit property in their own names but also to transmit it to their own heirs, and this is where the poem presents a more ambivalent assessment of their property rights. Violante lies about Pompilia’s birth to secure an heir and reveals that lie only to undermine Guido’s position. Doubts about the legitimacy of Pompilia’s son Gaetano further threaten claims to the Comparini wealth. Pompilia’s own description of her son—“Only his mother’s, born of love not hate!” (VII: l. 1764)—also disturbs kinship lines and property rights. Alongside the overt sympathy for disempowered wives evident in Browning’s treatment of Pompilia’s marriage, then, we see a more ambivalent depiction of economically active mothers, whom many of the poem’s speakers implicate in the tragedy. These competing narratives of family property gesture toward a powerful cultural anxiety about the generational ramifications of reconfiguring married women’s property rights.²⁵

Motherhood as such is not an obvious problem in the poem. In Pompilia’s understanding that her child will “stay / For evermore, eternally quite mine” (VII: ll. 204–205), the poem nods at women’s struggle over infant custody laws during the nineteenth century (Shanley, pp. 136–140), endorsing a mother’s right to her child and challenging the primacy of paternity. Indeed, Pompilia’s rendering as the mother of God seems to make motherhood sacrosanct: “I felt like Mary, had my babe / Lying a little on my breast like hers” (VII: ll. 1692–1693).²⁶ Pregnancy practically saves Pompilia’s life, giving her “my purpose and my motive,” “something I must care about” (VII: ll. 1245, 1238). When she attempts to leave Guido, she acts “Not for my own sake but my babe unborn” (VII: l. 1616) in accordance with what the pope interprets as divine inspiration:

Oh child that didst despise thy life so much
 When it seemed only thine to keep or lose,

 Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
 And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,
 Accept the obligation laid on thee,
 Mother elect, to save the unborn child,
 As brute and bird do, reptile and the fly,
 Ay and, I nothing doubt, even tree, shrub, plant
 And flower o' the field, all in a common pact
 To worthily defend the trust of trusts,
 Life from the Ever Living (X: ll. 1064–1065, 1073–1081)

Motherhood here is not only natural and divine but also aligned with preservation, or, in the poem's economic language, saving. In contrast with structures of exchange, such as those associated with "careless" "Pietro [who] could never save a dollar," Pompilia must care and keep her child close. This conception of motherhood as something innate even to rooted flora ("tree, shrub, plant / And flower") further removes it from associations with circulation or expenditure.

Against this "good" example of divine maternity whose "Perfect . . . whiteness" (X: l. 1006) the pope extolls, *The Ring and the Book* shows us two others—Pompilia's birth and adoptive mothers—who seem at first to be her foils in their inability to keep motherhood apart from economic exchange.²⁷ These other mothers come across as most tainted in financial transactions regarding their daughter, whom they are willing to sell first in adoption, then in marriage. Their actions appear, within the poem's many monologues, to warrant even less sympathy than murder itself, despite the bleak economic circumstances that provoke them. When Pompilia's biological mother, a poor prostitute, decides to accept Violante's offer, she does not merely make a difficult choice or help initiate a tragic chain of events but "abolish[es] her place and part / In womankind" (II: ll. 568–569) because she accepts money for her child. At best, this "poor real dying mother in her rags" is "faulty" (VII: ll. 287, 273) and "careless" (III: l. 215) for having "sold this babe eight months before its birth" (II: l. 570). Pregnancy, according to Half-Rome, should be out of reach for a woman of her class and situation, who "found by chance / Motherhood like a jewel in the muck, / And straightway either trafficked with her prize / Or listened to the tempter and let be,—" (II: ll. 564–567). At worst, she

loses claim not only to the maternity she has had to trade but even to her gendered humanity, her (culturally limited) status as a female person.

Adoptive mother *Violante*, as we have seen, meets with similar scorn; some of the poem's speakers find death no more than her just desert. After "buying [*Pompilia*] . . . at a price" (VII: ll. 272–273), she is repeatedly condemned for meddling in money matters. Criticized harshly for having "bought *Pompilia*" in the first place (III: l. 576), she accrues still more guilt for subsequent trade in counterfeit goods, depicted in terms of circulating false coin through her daughter's adoption and marriage. She

palmed the babe

On *Pietro*, passed the girl off as their child

To *Guido*, and defrauded of his due

This one and that one. (III: ll. 576–579; see also VII: l. 274)

Significantly, adoptive fatherhood entails "no sin at all" (IV: l. 287); paternity is not only assured—"He found himself the sire indeed" (IV: l. 212)—but appears good for *Pietro*: "this gift of God / . . . Steadied him in a moment, set him straight / On the good path he had been straying from" (IV: ll. 288, 290–291). Not only is he "meant to love a babe" but does so to common praise. To the extent that he is seen as erring, it is for the "Stupid credulity of the foolish man" (III: l. 190). The "old murdered fool" meets fatherhood "enraptured-much / But puzzled-more" (II: l. 21; IV: ll. 200–201). *Violante*, in contrast, is marked by the alignment of wit with "wickedness"; she is mocked as a "sage"; and her adoptive maternity is a "trick" rather than a gift, from "Eve" not God (III: l. 580; II: l. 547; II: l. 249; II: l. 253). Despite the spouses' joint financial need and their joint benefit from *Violante*'s actions—her "cheat" and her subsequent "reason for . . . owning cheat" (II: ll. 588, 589) in order to restore their wealth—*Violante* loses claim to the maternal role she has filled. Stressing her "flagrant fifty years" and inability to conceive (II: l. 576), *Half-Rome* notes that she "passed off the thing / As very flesh and blood and child of her" (II: ll. 574–575), calling both motherhood and *Pompilia*'s humanity into question. In a cutting phrase that further reduces *Violante*'s love and care for a child to the transactions that brought *Pompilia* into her home and later moves their family to *Guido*'s, *Violante* is labeled "the mock-mother" (II: l. 61, V: l. 1651). *Guido*, justifying his revenge for having unknowingly married the "bastard-babe / Of a nameless strumpet . . . Dirt / O' the kennel!" (V: ll. 770–771, 772–772), even suggests that he might have "paused" in his deadly aims had *Pompilia* or *Pietro*

answered his knock (V: l. 1648); the “mock-mother,” by opening the door instead, sanctions his triple murder.

Adoption, deceit, and even feigned gestational age seem unlikely to provoke quite this level of murderous vitriol, despite the evident ageism and prejudice against humble origins the poem showcases. More clearly underwriting this reaction is the way many speakers insist on annulling any motherhood that includes exchange. Does Violante’s confession that Pompilia is not her birth child mean that she has really “Renounced her motherhood” (III: l. 649)? We hear little of Violante’s motherhood beyond its economics, but what we do hear contrasts starkly with the counterfeit mockery Guido and others describe. Pompilia, calling Violante her “mother,” clarifies: “that’s / Violante, you must let me call her so / Nor waste time, trying to unlearn the word” (VII: ll. 181–183).²⁸ She describes her as a “kind” and tender presence (VII: l. 98, VII: l. 135), a woman who, “with eyes swollen and red enough,” insists that she “wished to benefit all three of us” by marrying her daughter to Guido (VII: ll. 529, 535). After confessing her lie—in order to claim that Guido is not entitled to his wife’s dowry or the wealth she would otherwise have inherited—Violante departs Guido’s home, but apparently not her daughter’s life. Indeed, we see her subsequently as a caregiving figure who fusses about Pompilia getting sufficient rest and support during her postpartum convalescence: “Violante, Pietro, each had given the arm / I leant on, to walk by, from couch to chair / And fireside” (VII: ll. 223–225). Cautioning her daughter to pace herself and helping her to prepare clothing for the new baby, Violante scolds the new mother as well as Pietro:

“Pompilia tires o’ the tattle, and shall to bed:
Do not too much the first day,—somewhat more
To-morrow, and the next, begin the cape
And hood and coat! I have spun wool enough.” (VII: ll. 245–248)

I point to these brief details of Violante as a caring mother and doting, wool-spinning new grandmother neither to negate the horror of a thirteen-year-old girl, “hardly knowing what a husband meant” (VII: l. 410), traded in marriage at a time when Englishwomen’s average marital age was in the upper 20s (though marital age for women in southern and eastern Europe could be much younger, even in keeping with Pompilia’s youth),²⁹ nor to condone the deceptions Violante reputedly practiced upon Pietro and his legal heirs in the name of self-preservation. Instead, I am interested in the way her economic agency—whether

in its most neutral form as “stirring striving” or in its most despised forms as calculated wickedness—appears in *The Ring and the Book* as directly aligned with false motherhood and discredits all other aspects of that role, reducing Pompilia’s relationship to the Comparini as one simply “based on economic motives” (Desaulniers, p. 332). According to the poem’s many speakers, mothers must eschew thoughts and particularly actions about money, even when facing debt, dwindling resources, or, in the unnamed biological mother’s case, death itself.

The poem suggests that economic transactions undermine maternity not simply because they objectify people or encourage deception—though Violante’s financial agency appears to do both—but because such agency threatens larger economic systems that move money through marriage and inheritance. If Pompilia is not the birth child of Pietro, the monetary exchanges on which her marriage is based are invalidated: “Guido’s claim was through his wife, / Null then and void with hers” (II: ll. 596–597). Not only Pompilia’s dowry but her future inheritance would be ceded to her husband, who thus had reason to argue that her “birth [was] legitimate / And all her rights intact—hers, Guido’s now” (II: ll. 731–732). But more than marital wealth is at stake in women’s economic activity. If wives—and, therefore, mothers—can have the economic agency that accompanies economic rights, then property problems compromise even Pompilia’s saintly motherhood, however little Pompilia herself might wish it. Violante’s claims and disavowals of motherhood for economic ends disturb an entire system of inheritance, partly because the system requires knowledge. The specter of illegitimacy makes it difficult to know who the rightful heirs are; Pompilia was born to a prostitute, and despite the law’s dictum that her own son Gaetano must be the son of his mother’s husband (V: l. 2027)—“In wedlock born, law holds / Baseness impossible” (IX: ll. 1324–1325)—other voices in the poem suggest that this is not the case, that Pompilia takes after her biological mother, that Gaetano is the “bastard” son of the priest Caponsacchi who has helped Pompilia to flee Guido (V: ll. 93, 1531), that Gaetano has no father at all (VII: ll. 896–897). Should Gaetano inherit? If so, what is his to inherit? Is Guido entitled to the dowry, to Pietro’s larger wealth, to both, to neither? Can money pass directly from Pompilia to Gaetano? Or must it revert to the heirs who were defrauded by Pompilia’s adoption in the first place?

The answers are still pending for most of the poem. Until Pompilia is found to be innocent of adultery, she “Remains unfit to have and to dispose / Of property which law provides” (XII: ll. 704–705), but what that property is remains unclear even when her “perfect fame” has been restored six months after Guido’s beheading (XII: l. 757). Uncertainty about her son’s inheritance

persists throughout *The Ring and the Book's* framing narrative. Gaetano disappears from the historical record (XII: ll. 780–782), and Browning's twelfth book, in questioning whether the boy favored his father as a "true scion of the stock" or "love[d] his mother" instead (XII: ll. 820, 825), makes character and wealth equally unreliable legacies in this poem; we will never know what Gaetano receives or becomes. But these answers are less important than the questions, which suggest that mothers are dangerous conduits for family property, that an heir who depends on a mother's fortune cannot legitimately inherit it. This problem with inheritance in the poem is compounded by the fact that we see Violante lie and cheat, defraud, and attempt to steal the money that should be passed along: in short, by the fact that her economic actions appear, to most, to be as illegitimate as the birth(s) that become equated with them. Though *The Ring and the Book* represents a wife and mother who must act to protect her own economic interests as well as those of her immediate family, most of the poem's speakers and critics ignore these needs; the conflation of sexual and financial misdeeds suggests instead that when mothers possess economic agency, they disrupt both family relations and property transmission, and money ends up in the wrong hands.

Married women achieving greater property rights meant that more mothers would possess economic agency, so by depicting mothers as a source of financial unrest *The Ring and the Book* offers a vision of married women's property rights at odds with the sympathy toward disempowered wives the poem demonstrates in other ways. This internal tension reminds us that the idea of women's economic agency could deeply trouble even the most sympathetic spectator. By highlighting compassion toward wives alongside suspicion toward mothers, the poem signals the need to look beyond the horizontal axis of marriage as we assess the way married women's property reform shaped mid- to late Victorian culture. At stake is not simply women's economic agency but popular attitudes toward parental relationships and, as we will see, toward institutions as diverse as court systems, attitudes that persisted well beyond the acquisition of wives' limited property rights shortly after *The Ring and the Book's* publication.

Notably, none of the poem's speakers disputes fatherhood's alignment with money or suggests that interest in wealth somehow injures paternal affection. Indeed, financial and familial motivations merge for Pietro, who "craved an heir," and for Guido's lawyer, Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, who proves unable to dissociate his proud paternity from thoughts of his son's potential inheritance, even as he attempts to meditate on Guido's defense. As others have noted, the lawyer's devotion "to home-joy" (VIII: l. 51) is more

than just a distraction from his legal expertise: it highlights the interconnections between private family relations and the public laws that undergird them (e.g., Gilbert, pp. 319–320, 328–329). The most pressing of these, for both Pietro and Hyacinthus, are the laws governing inheritance; the poem pairs “son and heir” together no fewer than thirteen times. Both of these fathers find satisfaction and security in their production of heirs, and both appear kind, if not wise, despite the fact their paternal desire—this “gnawing want” (III: l. 155)—sets their wives’ financial dealings into motion, though the “pains” taken by the lawyer’s wife, unlike Violante’s, seem to be at her husband’s “coax[ing]” (VIII: ll. 1802, 1789). The poem’s problem with property might thus as easily be traced to fathers’ longing for legacies as it is to grasping mothers, but paternal care for an heir appears both natural and laudable in the poem (Desaulniers, p. 321). Alongside Pietro and Hyacinthus, then, Guido seems unnatural. Inverting the lines of inheritance in his own contemplation of a child, he wants to extract profit rather than benefit his offspring, as he asks, “what profit in [a] son” (XI: l. 1885). Gaetano, along these lines, becomes Guido’s “second chance” only as a potential vehicle for Pietro’s money, not because the son himself is a “treasure” (XI: ll. 1846, 1852). Guido sees his son as valuable only for the sake of the property he will help him to accrue. “No right was in their [the Comparini’s] child but passes plain / To that child’s child and through such child to me” (X: ll. 766–767). Horrified by the commodification of this child, the pope summarizes Guido’s position in words that echo the book’s opening image of a golden ring. “[W]hy, the gold is in his curls!” (X: l. 771). This view of inheritance signals the corruption of the whole system and might appear to suggest the larger injury caused by married women’s economic interventions; unnatural fatherhood here presumably follows from Violante’s manipulation of the system. In this way, *The Ring and the Book* nods to popular views that a wife’s economic agency might disrupt not only marriage and motherhood but patriarchy itself. Yet the brief acknowledgment of Franceschini finances reveals additional roots for this disruption. Guido’s father has also failed to provide for his line; having squandered his patrimony, “the purse he left held spider-webs” (V: l. 49). This paternal failing precedes and also necessitates women’s financial actions—not only those we have seen by Violante, who orchestrates the marriage that will restock the Franceschini coffers, but also by Guido’s own mother, who as a widow “held sole sway i’ the house” and practices more traditional “economy” (II: l. 488, V: l. 67). She “Cowered in the winter-time as she spun flax,” while her “brocade-strips saved . . . buy raiment for a year,” a necessary corrective to the empty paternal purse, even though Half-Rome disparages her as a “doited crone . . . Dragon and devil” (V: l. 189; V: ll. 68–69; II: ll. 488, 491).

In its portrayal of a failed system of family finance, then, Browning's poem balances its speakers' criticism of women's unauthorized economic activity—aligned with deception and the diminishment of maternity, femininity, and even humanity—with a larger view of the economic plight of wives and mothers that compels that activity in the first place. Without condoning marital lies or the traffic in teenage girls that makes Pompilia “chattel,” *The Ring and the Book* nonetheless gives voice to the financial plight behind these actions, offering enough detail about the insufficient provisions for Violante, Pompilia's birth mother, Guido's mother, and their children to gesture toward the inadequacy of patriarchal rights and property laws to provide for families, while also allowing more sympathetic experiences of these apparently desperate but clever women to stand, albeit briefly, in tension with popular negative constructions of them. In these ways, the poem makes a powerful argument for reforming the systems of property that lead to their actions. Yet the strongest endorsement it makes for improving married women's property rights comes not through direct representations of women or even of property but through its larger engagement with a dual court system that, like motherhood, is not typically read in terms of married women's property law. In the remainder of this essay, I turn to one more way in which the poem “tell[s] a truth / Obliquely” (XII: ll. 859–860), insisting on the importance of legal reform through its depiction—and rejection—of Guido's privileged second chance.

III. “If Law Sufficed” (XI: l. 509): Two Courts, Two Standards

Browning's poem, as we have seen, enters into Victorian debates about married women's property rights partly in its depiction of economically bereft women with little legal recourse. But on the cusp of changes that would amount to the largest redistribution of wealth in British history, legal reforms were seen as affecting far more than the wives and marriages they most directly addressed. Not only did women's claims to their own wealth appear to threaten maternal care and paternal lines, but they also necessitated larger shifts away from traditional procedures for managing the nation's wealth. A change of this magnitude had the power to shake the whole system. As this essay's concluding section argues, *The Ring and the Book* acknowledges the larger cultural institutions implicated in debates about women's property rights through its lengthy engagement with legal process, specifically through the separate procedures of two courts with two judicial standards for Guido.

After Guido's first guilty verdict in the Roman court of law, he appeals to the pope and other clergy to override his sentence in a religious court. “Law does not touch” him (XI: l. 382), he argues, because he “boasts the clerkly

privilege, / Has taken minor orders many enough, . . . [to] slide . . . inside the robe / Of mother Church” (I: ll. 260–268). This “clerical savour to his layman’s-salt” (V: l. 273) allows him to take advantage of two parallel legal systems based on different principles and processes: “Once the word ‘clericality’ let fall, / Procedure stopped” (I: ll. 271–272). Guido is the only character given two separate monologues, two chances to plead his case to legal and literary audiences alike, a unique opportunity to overturn his verdict.

Dual systems of justice existed in Victorian England as well, and *The Ring and the Book*’s detailed account of Guido’s privileged appeal stages a debate about this aspect of Victorian law. The two-court system of common law and equity featured prominently in nineteenth-century debates about married women’s property. Special financial arrangements in equity, whereby fathers or other male relations might settle separate property on a daughter prior to her marriage, made it possible for some wives to evade some of the common law dictates of coverture. Though such settlements were unavailable to the majority of women and typically benefited future children more than married women (Holcombe, p. 159; Staves, pp. 4, 84), they provided an exception to the loss of married women’s economic agency, and thus gave some commentators a rationale for maintaining the status quo. Campaigners for women’s property rights, in contrast, recognized the injustice of a legal system that allowed concerned families of means to protect their daughters’ separate wealth (in equity) and left other, less-privileged women at the mercy of husbands (and the common law).

Guido’s turning to the pope for exemption from the verdict in Roman civil law in seventeenth-century Italy is analogous to how wealthy fathers, wanting to provide for their daughters’ children, turned to equity for exemptions from English common law in the Victorian period. The pope represents Roman ecclesiastical law in Browning’s poem, not English equity, but the crucial point here is that he also represents a privileged alternative to the more commonly administered civil law. Moreover, British ecclesiastical law was changing during the mid-nineteenth century in ways directly relevant to marital law. Whereas the Anglican Church had previously “exercised exclusive jurisdiction over matrimonial causes,” and ecclesiastical divorce was expensive, divorce became available through other mechanisms, first through even more expensive private acts of Parliament, in the seventeenth century, and then finally, and much more accessibly, through common law in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (Holcombe, pp. 94, 95, 94–98). Significantly, much of the work handled by England’s formerly powerful ecclesiastical court system—particularly that pertaining to marriage, but also such matters as probate—had shifted to secular

courts during a series of reforms begun in the eighteenth century and eventually leading, by 1860, “to the virtual eradication of a jurisdiction the English church had held for centuries.”³⁰

Thus, although Guido’s particular trial is more obviously ecclesiastical than economic, criminal rather than civil, it is the fact of two primary, powerful courts and some of their qualifiers that I want to stress in the parallel I am tracing, the repeated questioning of “If [one] Law sufficed” (XI: l. 509). The poem describes at length the existence of its dual systems for settling Guido’s case, not just by offering multiple and often competing voices of judgment but by calling attention to the two distinct procedures and “two laws, human and divine” (X: l. 1994) within its many monologues. Guido’s clerical “immunity . . . Straight quashes law-procedure” and appears to provide him with a “pretty loophole of escape” (X: ll. 2002, 2008, 2009). These descriptions of Guido’s special treatment echo Victorian property debates both because the law’s default position in each case favors men—in Guido’s case, by granting him access to the clerical profession; for Victorian husbands in general, through coverture—and, more explicitly, because this “pretty loophole of escape” is so clearly tied to social standing, and not available to all (Brown, p. 20).

Just as class status afforded access to equity in nineteenth-century England, it opens up another legal system and series of opportunities for Guido. His rank, having made his church position possible in the first place, also appears to sway the court of public opinion during the trial. When Guido gets his second chance, “Quality took the decent part, of course; / Held by the husband, who was noble too” (I: ll. 272–277). Other members of the nobility—the “responsible,” “quality” audience the poem references—support Guido’s breach of ordinary legal procedure in his appeal to a higher court. But Guido’s opening salvo, with its passive-aggressive thanks to a “considerate” court, suggests that a nobleman should be above common law even without this clerical handicap.

Law is law.

Noblemen were exempt, the vulgar thought,
From racking; but since law thinks otherwise,
I have been put to the rack. (V: ll. 11–14)

This statement calls attention to rank even as it disavows rank’s privileges. Its lineation hints at the possibility of nobility’s exemption from law itself, not merely from torture; the end-stopping comma after “vulgar thought” asks us to pause and briefly take as a complete thought noblemen’s immunity from legal

procedure in general, before we resume the sentence on the following line. Partly on account of his rank, Guido expects to not only justify murder but “Receive . . . the compliments o’ the quality / For justice done” (XI: ll. 268–269), like “Duke Some-title-or-other” (XI: l. 199) who features in an extended comparison with Guido, and whose own sexual misdeeds are excused by his position. In Guido’s monologues the poem aligns a legal double standard both with privileges of rank and with the miscarriage of justice toward women.

A similar double standard existed within the largely inconsistent Victorian judicial system. Guido’s confidence that a second verdict will save him echoes Victorian reliance on alternative court procedures, such as those offered in equity, to protect married women’s wealth. But this judicial double standard came under scrutiny during the composition of *The Ring and the Book* and was abolished shortly after its publication. As I have mentioned, the jurisdiction of divorce had recently shifted away from the ecclesiastical courts. This reorganization, which streamlined divorce law and eliminated costly ecclesiastical legal privileges (Outhwaite, pp. 157–173), was part of a broader restructuring of the British court system. Following an 1867 judicature commission and its 1869 report, the British Courts of Law and Equity were combined in the Judicature Act of 1873 (36 and 37 Vict., c 66). Numerous factors contributed to this unification of the courts. Legal theorists disliked the messiness of having separate bodies of law in general, not only as they applied to married women’s property law, and scholars have seen the reform of women’s rights as “part of a much wider movement for legal reform” in which conflicts between rules of common law and equity would resolve with deference to the latter (Holcombe, pp. 9, 16–17).³¹ But as Lee Holcombe has noted, “by far the most damning criticism of equity was that the protection it afforded with respect to married women’s property was accessible only to wealthy women,” that laws differed for the rich and the poor (p. 46). These attitudes toward women’s property rights contributed to the investigation and consolidation of the courts, and the timing of the first Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 comes in part out of the desire for a more equitable and consistent judicial approach.

Although Guido’s second guilty verdict is one of the historical “facts” Browning retrieved from the “old yellow book” that prompted his poetic rendition of this centuries-old case, the space given to the murderer’s expectations, confusion, and anger give this verdict consequence for our understanding of Victorian judicial reform. When the pope—a representative of justice described as “simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute / With prudence, probity” (I: ll. 1222–1223), and for many critics one of the more credible voices of the poem—“Affirmed the guilt and gave the guilty doom” (I: l. 823), this

condemnation matters for many reasons. It gestures toward the possibility of a universal standard for criminality, confirming readers' sense that spousal murder is equally unacceptable in Renaissance Italy and Victorian England. It suggests that one's legal status should not depend on position or wealth. And, most interestingly for this discussion, it rejects the idea of a doubled judicial system by making it impossible that these courts could yield different results and still appear just. The pope's affirmation of Guido's first guilty sentence unifies two distinct courts through their verdicts. It thus undermines the legitimacy of disparate standards and implicitly endorses a consolidated legal stance.

Embodying what in a different context he calls "parity of procedure" (X: l. 1397), the pope attempts to move beyond the existence of "two laws, human and divine, / [which] Have busied finger with this tangled case" (X: ll. 1994–1995) by appealing to only one in his reiteration of the guilty verdict:

"Quis pro Domino?

Who is upon the Lord's side?" asked the Count.

I, who write—. (X: ll. 2100–2102)

Presented here as the enactment of a unified, divine law, the pope's judgment hints at the wisdom of a single human standard while also gesturing toward both the practicality and greater parity of a unified court system that could eliminate judicial inequities and remove one stumbling block in the way of establishing consistent legal treatment for women's property.

In this way, the poem's engagement with discourses surrounding married women's property law extends its attention to legal systems in general. Its verdict on those systems ultimately supports the case for women's rights just as surely as its rejection of the one-flesh doctrine did in its sympathetic portrayal of Pompilia's marriage. It also serves as a crucial and still needed reminder that debates about married women's property rights had cultural implications far beyond married women alone, and that the Married Women's Property Acts, significant for reallocating the wealth of Victorian men, women, and children alike, helped to shape larger systems of justice as well.

Uniting two disparate court systems into one law here replaces coverture's oppressive attempts to unite men and women's necessarily distinct bodies, souls, and legal protections. As we have seen, the poem repeatedly shows the importance of spouses maintaining their own separate identities and rights. Its framing metaphor reiterates a version of intimacy between husbands and wives that assigns property in accordance with this *two-* rather than *one-flesh* understanding. *The Ring and the Book*, having begun with the narrator's single

golden ring, concludes its twelfth book with two rings, the speaker's "rough ore rounded to a ring" and then placed "outside thine" (XII: ll. 869, 872), a probable reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that maintains the two poets' separate claims to their proximate gold. These rings return us to the material foundation of the poem's many discourses on art, truth, and wealth, but, in contrast with the ring of Book I, they also offer a tentative vision of women's separate estate. The "Lyric Love" addressed in these closing lines retains independent possessive pronouns as well as rights to her own material and poetic property: "Thy rare gold ring of verse" (XII: ll. 872–873). Finally, "Linking our England to . . . Italy" (XII: l. 874) in the poem's understanding of gender, value, and rights, this image reminds us of the developments necessary to articulate and protect women's property as well as the significance of such property not just for individual women and marriages but for nations themselves.

Notes

- 1 Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* [1868–1869], ed. Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2001), p. 763, Book XII: l. 874. Subsequent book and line numbers will be cited parenthetically. For arguments that *The Ring and the Book* questions the efficacy of language (legal, popular, and poetic) and the subjective nature of truth, see E. Warwick Slinn, "Language and Truth in *The Ring and the Book*," *VP* 3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1989): 115–133; Isobel Armstrong, "*The Ring and the Book*: The Uses of Prolixity," in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1969), pp. 180, 182; J. Stephen Adcock, "The Holistic Truth of Memory and Testimony in *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41, no. 2 (2013): 330; Suzanne Bailey, "Somatic Wisdom: Refiguring Bodies in *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Studies* 41, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 586–587; Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790–1910* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 438–439; Amy R. Wong, "Town Talk and the Cause Célèbre of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*," *Modern Philology* 113, no. 4 (May 2016): 553, 560–561, 564; Simon Petch, "Law, Narrative, and Anonymity in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (1992): 312, 320; Michelle Niemann, "Browning's Critique of Organic Form in 'The Ring and the Book,'" *VP* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 449; Patricia Rigg, "Augusta Webster, Dramatic Forms, and the Religious Aesthetic of Robert Browning's 'The Ring and the Book,'" *VP* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 3–4, 12; W. David Shaw, "Browning's Murder Mystery: *The Ring and the Book* and Modern Theory," *VP* 27, no. 3/4 (Autumn–Winter 1989): 88–89, 92, 97; Britta Martens, "Dramatic Monologue, Detective Fiction, and the Search for Meaning," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 66, no. 2 (September 2011): 207–208; Laura Struve, "'This is No Way to Tell a Story': Robert Browning's Attack on the Law in *The Ring and the Book*," *Law and Literature* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 426, 431, 439; and Jennifer McDonnell, "Browning's Curiosities:

- The Ring and the Book* and the ‘Democracy of Things,’” in *Literary Bric-a-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. Jen Harrison and Jonathon Shears (Ashgate Publishing, 2013), pp. 69, 77. On the poem’s legal process and criminal trial, see Katherine Anne Gilbert, “The Politics of Character: The Lawyers and Pompilia in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69),” *VP* 49, no. 3 (2011): 323–327; Struve, pp. 423, 430; Addcox, pp. 333–335; Mary Ellis Gibson, “The Criminal Body in Victorian Britain: The Case of *The Ring and the Book*,” *Browning Institute Studies* 18 (1990): 75, 83; and Ann-Marie Dunbar, “‘Now for Truth!’: Confession and Testimony in *The Ring and the Book*,” *Victorians Institute Journal* 37, no. 1 (2009): 136, 138. For forms and functions of anger, see Lakshmi Krishnan, “Browning and the Intelligent Uses of Anger in ‘The Ring and the Book,’” *VP* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 220.
- 2 For representations of nineteenth-century marriage market circulation and exchange and their divergences from contemporary developments, see also Kathy Alexis Psomiades, “Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions: *The Eustace Diamonds* and Victorian Anthropology,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 93–118. For treatments of Pompilia’s marriage, see, for example, Susan Brown, “Pompilia: The Woman (in) Question,” *VP* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 15–37; Candace Ward, “Damning Herself Praiseworthy: Nullifying Women in *The Ring and the Book*,” *VP* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1–14; Ann P. Brady, “The Metaphysics of Pornography in *The Ring and the Book*,” *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985): 138. For discussions of gendered power and violence, see Gibson, p. 85; Michael Ackerman, “Monstrous Men: Violence and Masculinity in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*,” in *Horrifying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), pp. 127–130; and Melissa Valiska Gregory, “Robert Browning and the Lure of the Violent Lyric Voice: Domestic Violence and the Dramatic Monologue,” *VP* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 503, 505.
 - 3 In addition to the legal ambivalence I am discussing, the “British Public” is depicted in terms of its ambivalence toward the poet (I: l. 1379; XI: l. 835).
 - 4 Standing in for artistic process, the mingling of imagination with fact, and the representation, impossibility, or multipronged nature of “truth,” this ring signifies the circular pattern of the book’s twelve monologues and the memory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning through her “rare gold ring of verse” as well as a favored accessory (XII: l. 873). For example, Mary Desaulniers, “Names and Usury: An Economy of Reading in *The Ring and the Book*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45, no. 3 (Dec. 1990): 318; Slinn, p. 125; Bailey, p. 579; Herbert F. Tucker, “Representation and Repristination: Virginité in *The Ring and the Book*,” in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, ed. Lloyd Davis (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press; 1993), pp. 69, 74, 85; Patricia D. Rigg, “‘Repristination’ in *The Ring and the Book*,” *Browning Institute Studies* 18 (1990): 126; Lee C. R. Baker, “The Diamond Necklace and the Golden Ring: Historical Imagination in Carlyle and Browning,” *VP* 24, no. 1 (1986): 33, 46; Renée Fox, “Robert Browning’s Necropoetics,” *VP* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 465, 481 n.11; Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick, “Introduction,” in Browning, pp. vii–xii, vii, xi; Adrienne Auslander Munich, “Robert Browning’s

- Poetics of Appropriation,” *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987): 69–77. See also Browning, p. 3 n.1, 3 n. 5. For metaphorical uses of gold more generally, see Timothy Alborn, *All that Glittered: Britain’s Most Precious Metal from Adam Smith to the Gold Rush* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 30, 38–40.
- 5 For gold-weighting and the historical loss of value through flexible alloys, friction, clipping, and other means, see Alborn, pp. 37, 80–84, 92.
 - 6 Alborn discusses gold’s “peculiar status as both a marker of value and a valuable commodity” in terms of British national pride in its function, from 1821, as the basis of British currency rather than primarily for ornamental display (pp. 3, 4, 30–31, 75, 145). See, e.g., p. 26 for the British erasure of “gold’s unsavory origins” in general.
 - 7 See Tucker for how “the mysteries of this poet’s faith are bound up like many another Victorian liberal’s with the mysteries of the market” (*Epic*, p. 440).
 - 8 This contrast of British coin for the insufficiently valued “yellow book” echoes earlier British attitudes that Italian “gold” was put to poor use; see Alborn, p. 130.
 - 9 Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 8–9; Kristin Kalsem, *In Contempt: Nineteenth-Century Women, Law, and Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2012), p. 21. Though Brown does not discuss women’s property rights, coverture is an important part of Guido’s justification for assault in her essay (p. 19).
 - 10 Susan Staves, *Married Women’s Separate Property in England, 1660–1833* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), p. 49.
 - 11 Included among the 26,000 signatures on the Petition—indeed, as one of the twenty-four names that “headed” it because they belonged to “those . . . women whose respectability no less than their celebrity would be certain to win favourable public attention to the cause” was that of Browning’s (then far-more-famous) wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. See Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 70; Shanley, p. 33 n.21; and Cheri Larsen Hoeckley, “Anomalous Ownership: Copyright, Coverture, and *Aurora Leigh*,” *VP* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 138, 143–145. For the Brownings’ “mutuality of . . . political opinions” as well as their creative reciprocity and differences, see Munich, p. 69; Laura E. Haigwood, “Gender-to-Gender Anxiety and Influence in Robert Browning’s *Men and Women*,” *Browning Institute Studies* 14 (1986): 98, 113–115; Britta Martens, “‘Hardly Shall I Tell My Joys and Sorrows’: Robert Browning’s Engagement with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poetics,” *VP* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 75–78, 91. For the Browning marriage, see John Woolford and Daniel Karlin, *Robert Browning* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1996), pp. 134, 137–140; for Robert Browning’s own feminist politics, see Woolford and Karlin, pp. 157–158.
 - 12 Melissa Valiska Gregory similarly claims the importance of Victorian explorations of domestic ideology in poetry, not just novels (p. 491). For a discussion of married women’s property reform and Trollope’s fiction, see Jill Rappoport, “Greed, Generosity, and Other Problems with Unmarried Women’s Property,” *Victorian Studies* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 636–660.

- 13 For instance, Simon Petch, "Equity and Natural Law in *The Ring and the Book*," *VP* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 110; Gregory, p. 505; Brown, pp. 20–21; Gilbert, p. 318.
- 14 Some Victorian legislators also believed that the new divorce law made the reform of women's property law unnecessary. See, for instance, Holcombe, p. 109.
- 15 According to Guido, a bride must "Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe" (V: l. 582), and marriage "binds fast wife to husband" (XI: l. 1403). See also, for example, XI: l. 1305 and XI: l. 1216.
- 16 For violent masculinity and Guido's cowardice, see Clinton Machann, *Masculinity in Four Victorian Epics: A Darwinist Reading* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 120–121, 123, 133; Ackerman, p. 129.
- 17 Woolford and Karlin note that the Comparini marriage is associated with a middle-class "norm of marriage as social partnership" (p. 154).
- 18 For example, Alexander Pettit, "Place, Time, and Parody in *The Ring and the Book*," *VP* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 97; Machann, p. 137; Brady, p. 147; Ward, p. 9. Violante is also accused of "silenc[ing]" Pompilia, "prohibit[ing] her speech at various crucial points in her life." See Ellen L. O'Brien, *Crime in Verse: The Poetics of Murder in the Victorian Era* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2008), p. 193. In a brief discussion of character legibility and the Comparini's murdered bodies, Justin A. Sider simply notes that "Violante's moral life, like her body, is there to be read," leaving Tertium Quid's interpretation of Violante—"hers the whole sin"—without further commentary. See *Parting Words: Victorian Poetry and Public Address* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2018), p. 95.
- 19 Pietro receives little individual critical attention, even in discussions of *The Ring and the Book* and fatherhood (e.g., Gilbert).
- 20 Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (web; orig. 1957, reprinted by New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), p. 96; Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, "The Dramatic Monologue," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 71.
- 21 See, for instance, Rappoport, "Greed," p. 643. I address this point more extensively in *Imagining Women's Property in Victorian Fiction* (forthcoming, Oxford Univ. Press).
- 22 This text was reprinted in a number of contemporary articles, including "The Laws of Property as They Affect Women," *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, Vol. 7, Iss. 308 (Feb. 16, 1865): 149, ProQuest document ID 4957445, and in "The Rights of Woman," *The Examiner* Iss. 2508 (Feb. 23, 1856): 122, ProQuest document ID 9669170.
- 23 "Marriage and Divorce," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art* 2, no. 36 (July 5, 1856): 220, ProQuest document ID: 9484506. See also "Art. III—The Property of Married Women," *Westminster Review*, Vol. 66, Iss. 130 (Oct. 1856): 344, ProQuest document ID: 8318953.
- 24 Rappoport, "Wives and Sons: Coverture, Primogeniture, and Married Women's Property," in *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*,

- ed. Dino Franco Felluga, extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* (web, November 30, 2015); Rappoport “Greed.” I address this point more extensively in *Imagining Women’s Property in Victorian Fiction* (forthcoming, Oxford Univ. Press).
- 25 For a view of Violante’s threatening “failure to conform to an ideal of subservient, self-sacrificing motherhood” and “co-optation of her husband’s role” with respect to the marriage market, see Ward, p. 9.
- 26 For a discussion of Pompilia’s Marian claims regarding this birth, see Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 171–173.
- 27 See also Ward, pp. 9–11 on the poem’s “bad” mothers.
- 28 Despite harsh criticism of Violante, Brady acknowledges that the Comparini have brought Pompilia up “in an environment of loving kindness” (p. 147).
- 29 Michael Best, “The age of marriage,” *Shakespeare’s Life and Times, Internet Shakespeare Editions*, Univ. of Victoria, web, April 19 2021, <https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/society/family/marriage.html>; Joanne M. Ferraro, “Courtship, Marriage, and Divorce,” *Encyclopedia of European Social History, Encyclopedia.com*. April 10, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/courtship-marriage-and-divorce>.
- 30 See in particular R. B. Outhwaite, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ecclesiastical Courts, 1500–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 173. Outhwaite discusses earlier reforms that began to strip the court of jurisdiction incrementally—e.g., in 1754 (p. 122), 1787 (p. 125), 1813 (p. 128), 1829 (p. 130), 1832 (p. 144)—but a series of five Acts between 1854 and 1860 (pp. 157–173) worked more quickly to eliminate its long-standing sway as well as its “most profitable forms of business” (p. 172). As Holcombe discusses, the ecclesiastical court did retain certain very limited powers (p. 98).
- 31 Petch also discusses the Judicature Acts and Browning’s poem, though not with regard to women’s property (“Equity,” pp. 105, 110).