

BROWNING'S MEN: CHILDE ROLAND, HOMOPHOBIA AND THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES

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"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"

Robert Browning is said, by some accounts including his own, to have composed the famously enigmatic poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," springing from a line from *King Lear*, when he was in Paris in early 1852. He had made a New Year's resolution to write a poem a day: apparently, this was the third of three. Other accounts assert its composition date was a year later, in Florence in early 1853 (Jack and Inglesfield xii ff.) – in either case, Browning was already familiar with the work of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, published posthumously 1850-51. "Childe Roland" first appeared in Browning's 1855 collection, *Men and Women*, a volume which did much to establish his fame. The poem has been read variously over time, but has always defied rational interpretation. The poet himself insisted it had no logical meaning: "[It] came upon me as a kind of dream. I had to write it, then and there, and I finished it the same day, I believe [. . .] it was simply that I had to do it. I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know now" (Jack and Inglesfield 129). All that critics have been able to agree upon, apart from the poem's structure as a perverted kind of quest through a nightmarish landscape, is that it is this very quality of enigma blended with a peculiar strain of gothic horror, that lends "Childe Roland" its continuing fascination. I want to suggest that there may be a connection between certain elements of gothic horror in this poem and Browning's recent reading of Beddoes's works, which are peculiarly rich in that mode; and that there may even be a further connection, in that the mystery or enigma of Browning's poem could well derive from a deeply homophobic response to the intuited presence of homosexual desire in Beddoes himself, thus mixing fascination with horror. My argument, however, will not rest on any attempt to "prove" a line of influence between the two poets, as it is my belief that this would be as difficult as it is unnecessary. Browning's homophobia could have derived from multiple influences in his reading and in his life; but his later response to the mystery surrounding Beddoes's sordid end strongly suggests that it was deeply embedded.

Freud's View of Paranoid Fantasies

Since Freud, dreams have most commonly been interpreted in some degree as a kind of return of the repressed, and it is therefore hard to escape from the tempting illusion that a dream poem might carry a hidden message direct from the poet's subconscious; and if the poet himself was a pre-Freudian, as Browning was, then we generally assume that he was most likely to have been unaware of the import his work might hold for a psychoanalyst. Leaving aside for a moment the troubling notion that we

have only the notoriously unreliable word of an author that his own work was fully formed as a dream, however plausible that claim may appear (compare the case of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," for example), we can ask ourselves the more interesting question, why he would have wished his readers to read it as a dream poem? Possibly because he wanted to give it an enhanced sense of reality, or even of truth-telling, while at the same time being able to disavow responsibility for anything that might prove unpalatable to the reader. Long before Freud, dreams had been read as portents, as subtle purveyors of possibly unwelcome truths; and in one way, this traditional interpretational strategy itself can be read as a trope for the psychoanalytic mode in its reading of the unconscious. This particular dream poem, however, unlike "Kubla Khan," falls into the Freudian category of paranoid fantasy, whether it was ever in reality "dreamed" or not. This is a point I shall return to, when I offer my own reading of the poem at the end of this paper. I will be suggesting that it lies open to interpretation as a poem of "homosexual panic," a term first made useful in literary discussion by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Between Men* 89). Its dream landscape, I will suggest, has the nightmare quality of entrapment in an all-male world which insists upon homosocial bonding as a condition for successful achievement.

I am not arguing that Robert Browning, himself the idol of heterosexual romance ever since his elopement in 1846 with Elizabeth Barrett, was necessarily a man of repressed homosexual desire (although of course, one can never assert with certainty, that he was not); merely that he shared to a strong degree in a widespread cultural phenomenon among Christian countries at the time, namely homophobia. We need to acknowledge, however, that homophobia, or fear of homosexuality, is an extremely powerful emotion, and has led to many marriages.¹ I was first led to such an apparently unlikely – even perverse – reading of this poem, when I began looking at the connection between Browning and one of his older contemporaries; one whom he admired, not so much as Shelley perhaps, but very strongly. The story of the connection between Robert Browning and Thomas Lovell Beddoes is a story which foregrounds Browning's homophobia.

The Story of the Beddoes Box

Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49) is a forgotten poet now, but his work attracted some favourable attention when it was first published in 1850-51,² a year after his premature death at the age of forty-five. The *Oxford Companion* assures us that, despite his obsession with the macabre, the supernatural, and with bodily decay,

¹ John Addington Symonds (1840-93) is a classic example discussed by Morris B. Kaplan. "His election as a fellow of Magdalen College was compromised [by rumour of] his sexual interest in other men [. . .]. The personal crisis provoked by this scandal contributed to the ruin of his health. At his father's direction, Symonds sought medical advice and excruciating 'treatment' to overcome his desires. He threw himself into the project of marriage 'on doctor's orders' (Papa's as well) in the hope of escaping their powerful grip" (270).

² Thomas Kensall edited two posthumous volumes of Beddoes works: *Death's Jest-Book* (1850) and *Poems* (1851). Both were published by William Pickering in London.

“some of his blank verse has undeniable power and originality” (Drabble 78). What it does not tell us, is that this undeniably brilliant man, who was eccentric to the point of real madness, was also almost certainly homosexual.³ His best-known work is the sardonic, swashbuckling neo-Jacobean⁴ drama, *Death's Jest Book or, the Fool's Tragedy*, first published in 1850. This was Browning's favourite, from which he could quote copiously, and is a play whose theme (like that of “Childe Roland”) is betrayal – each man betrays all the others. It is written as a kind of sophisticated pastiche, displaying abundant energy and relish for rich dramatic language and macabre themes of death, interspersed by songs (some quite beautiful lyrics; others comic-grotesque). It has been suggested that there was a particular vogue in the nineteenth century for the writing of pastiche among the homosexual set: George Darley (1795-1846), a member of Beddoes's Bristol circle for a time, was perhaps another example.⁵ That Browning had read Beddoes by the time he composed “Childe Roland” is attested by a letter he wrote from Paris on January 12, 1852 to John Kenyon, where he quotes with familiarity from a poem by “Beddoes.”⁶ If the date of composition of “Childe Roland” were indeed the third of January 1852, and the place Paris, as claimed by both Furnivall and Mrs Orr,⁷ then the conjunction has even greater significance, but even if it were not until 1853, the point still remains that he had read his Beddoes beforehand.

This drama, as well as a further volume titled *Poems*, had been edited (with a certain amount of liberty) by Beddoes's devoted friend and literary executor Thomas Forbes Kelsall. Kelsall was a believer in Beddoes's genius, and was therefore delighted to learn, when he was nearing the end of his own life, that Browning was also a staunch admirer of his hero. In 1868, he managed to persuade Browning to undertake custody of Beddoes's literary remains, with the understanding that Browning would write a substantial critical essay on Beddoes and so promote his future reputation. At the time when Browning agreed to do this,⁸ the true cause of

³ This was first openly acknowledged by Ian Beck in his important article, “‘The Body's Purpose’: Browning, and so to Beddoes,” *Browning Society Notes* 14.1 (1984) 3.

⁴ James R. Thompson tries to divert this critical perspective on Beddoes in his 1990 *DLB* article: “Once superficially classified as a neo-Jacobean [. . .] in reality Beddoes brought to bear the generic authority and ambience of Renaissance drama on early modern experience; the results suggest an author having as much in common with Edgar Allan Poe, Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, and Franz Kafka as with such writers of his own age as Hartley Coleridge, George Darley, and Thomas Hood” (12). Apart from being a couple of centuries out with his ascription of “early modern” to the nineteenth century, he could have a point.

⁵ I am grateful to Dr Robert Dingley for making this fertile suggestion.

⁶ The letter is dated from Paris on January 14, 1852. It is now held in the special collections of Wellesley College.

⁷ Frederick J. Furnivall and Mrs Sutherland Orr both derived their views from conversations with Browning himself. William DeVane supports their judgement. See Jack and Inglesfield (xii ff.) for further information.

⁸ Gosse indicates that a motivating factor at the time, was Browning's hopes (subsequently dashed) of being appointed Professor of Poetry at Oxford. “[H]e said that, if he were chosen, his first lecture would be on ‘The Author of *Death's Jest-Book*, a Forgotten Oxford Poet’” (viii).

Beddoes's death was still unknown, his family having successfully covered it up. Kelsall died in 1872, and his wife then sent all of Beddoes's letters, papers, and unedited poems, packed into a large box, into the care of Robert Browning at 15 Warwick Crescent.

But she added a warning:

I must now ask you to refrain from sudden exclamation should any person be within hearing as you read this – for I am conscious that you will experience a painful shock in learning the fact, that the melancholy end of Beddoes, was suicidal. I think you are quite in ignorance of this [. . .]. (Gosse ix)

The Kelsalls had known for a long time of Beddoes's suicide, and it was only deference to the wishes of the surviving Beddoes relatives that had constrained their speaking of it earlier. It was a particularly distressing story. It had originally been put out by the family that his death was the sad result of an accident, whereby a severe leg injury had become infected, necessitating amputation, but then causing death. In fact, Beddoes died not only by his own hand, but as the result of being abandoned by his companion (lover?), a young baker called Degen, whose ambitions as a stage actor he had vainly tried to help realize through his money and connections.

After Oxford, Beddoes had studied medicine in Germany and, having inherited wealth from his doctor father, and feeling out of place in England, he lived abroad for most of his life.⁹ He published two long poetic works in 1821 and 1822, and began on *Death's Jest-Book* in 1825, but could never satisfy himself that it was properly finished, spending the next twenty-five years tinkering with it. Lytton Strachey, who published a perceptive essay on Beddoes in 1907, maintained that his last addition to it was made, in effect, in the suicide note found pinned to his shirt when he died, in bed in the hospital in Basel where he had first been admitted for slashing his own leg, and where he finally took poison, after the gangrenous leg had been amputated. Strachey quotes from the note, addressed to one of his English friends. "My dear Philips,' it began, 'I am food for what I am good for – worms' [. . .]." (181-82). Strachey remarked to Maynard Keynes, while working on his Beddoes essay, "[I] become daily more persuaded that he was a member of our sect [i.e. homosexual]. What do you think? It occurred to me yesterday that Degen is probably still alive, and we've only got to go over to Franckfort and inquire for a respectable old retired baker, aged seventy-seven, to hear the whole history! Won't you come?" (Holroyd vol. 1, 326).

Strachey was well able to indicate to his friend his own mixture of ease and unease with the subject of Beddoes's homosexuality by joking about it, but Browning,

⁹ It seems fair to presume that his homosexuality was a major factor in his feeling of dislocation. Yet even some recent commentators cannot acknowledge this possibility; for example, Christopher Moylan writes that "Beddoes was [. . .] haunted – by what, one cannot say. Unwilling to publish, isolated from friends and colleagues in England, he spent his adult life in Germany as a suicidal eccentric and political outcast" (187).

thirty years earlier, and inhabiting a very different milieu, apparently found nothing to amuse him at all. Instead, he was appalled at the now extremely unwelcome responsibility he had undertaken while in happy ignorance of the sordid particulars of Beddoes's end. While the *method* of the suicide is macabre enough, it is the *reason* for it that Browning would have found most troubling. He had not personally known the older poet (Beddoes was seven years older than him), so his extreme reaction at the news of the suicide is at first sight hard to account for. Yet he was never able to overcome the strange mixture of disgust and fascination which the "Beddoes Box" came to hold for him.¹⁰ He kept the box more than ten years, for he could bring himself neither to open it for a thorough examination of the contents, nor to part with it; although he knew full well that his young friend and neighbour Edmund Gosse, by no means so squeamish, would gladly have taken it off his hands at any time in order to edit the poems and letters for profit. Clearly there was something deeply distasteful, if not positively repellant, to Browning in the secret of the Beddoes Box. I would like to suggest that this Box contained, for Browning – in both senses of the word "contained" – the dreadful, unmentionable secret of homosexuality. This is why he could never open it, and why it was such a burden to him. "*That dismal box,*" he used to call it (Donner 139). It was a classic locus for homosexual panic.

According to Sedgwick's formulation, "so-called 'homosexual panic' is the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (*Between Men* 89). (Blackmail is meant in this context not literally, but culturally.¹¹) It is possible to understand Robert Browning's extreme fear of homosexuality, or homosexual panic, simply as part of his general prudishness and dislike of improper sexual behaviour; there is no evidence that he was at all strongly sexed himself, and quite a lot that he was not.¹² His prudishness is instanced by his pathological horror of ever being seen by anyone without his clothes on (Miller 105). His horror of male homosexuality may well have arisen merely from a horror of his own knowledge of its existence, which is likely to have come to him comparatively late in life, given that he did not attend a public school, although he was well versed in classical Greek literature. His comparatively sheltered upbringing in the bosom of a doting middle-class family must also partly account for his long-standing innocence about sexual terminology in general, instanced most readily by the well-known case of the nun's twat he introduced into *Pippa Passes* (1841), under the misapprehension that it was an article of nun's head-dress.¹³

¹⁰ H.W. Donner dubbed it the "Browning Box," but I prefer my term, since after all, the box contained the remains of Beddoes, not Browning.

¹¹ "Homophobia is highly specific to the Christian tradition, which is one reason why sodomy is often ascribed to the Jews and Turks" (Norton 123).

¹² "It was only, it seems, under the guarantee of sexual neutrality that [Browning] felt free to accept the privileges of a feminine friendship" (Miller 59).

¹³ "Dr. Furnivall explains that Browning got the word twat from the Royalist rhymes entitled 'Vanity of Vanities,' on Sir Harry Vane's picture, in which he is charged with being a Jesuit. 'Tis said that they will give him a cardinal's hat: / They sooner will give him an old nun's twat.' 'The word struck me,'

Although he was happy to mix with his wife's lesbian friends in Florence and Rome – forming a close friendship of his own with one of them, Isa Blagden, and later also befriending the pair of lesbian poets who wrote as “Michael Field,” even dubbing them his “two dear Greek women,”¹⁴ he may well have found the idea of male homosexuality seen very much in terms of effeminacy (Norton 126), a charge that may have been laid uncomfortably close to his own door. Although his reputation for masculinity must have received a large boost when he accomplished the fairytale elopement with the fragile daughter of a despot (despite the fact it would never have succeeded unless she had organised the train timetable [Miller 127]), it came under threat not long afterwards, especially back in England. For it was common knowledge among his set that he had no money of his own apart from a parental allowance, and unless he could earn by writing, he would have to live off his wife's income. This was a Perseus financially dependent on his Andromeda. His friends were anxious to see him rise above this role by increasing his productivity. Thomas Carlyle urged him to write more poems: “give us a right stroke of work [. . .] go with your best speed” (Jack and Inglesfield xi). It is tempting to see Browning's development of a hyper-muscular poetic style as a reaction to this need to prove his masculinity.

Browning is known to have railed against what he took for evidence of effeminacy in others. About Swinburne, for example, he wrote in a letter, “[Swinburne's verses] are ‘florid impotence’ to my taste, the minimum of thought and idea in the maximum of words and phraseology.” And of D.G. Rossetti: “You know I hate the effeminacy of [Rossetti's] school: the men that dress up like women [. . .].”¹⁵ He was surprisingly conventional in his approach to matters of gender demarcation for one so forward-thinking in many aspects of what we now call sexual politics. For example, in Florence in 1855, when his wife Elizabeth dressed up in male attire along with her sculptor friend Harriet Hosmer and Harriet's lesbian lover, in order to accompany them to a monastery which denied access to women, Elizabeth got carried away with the success of her own male impersonation and – probably high on opium – began to try out the effectiveness of her costume on passers-by in the street outside their house. Browning was horrified at this excessive behaviour and put a stop to the whole enterprise (Forster 298).¹⁶

Browning says, ‘as a distinctive part of a nun's attire that might fitly pair off with the cowl appropriated to a monk’” (*The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, 12 vols, 1898; qtd King et al. vol. 3, 351). King and his co-editors add: “Browning was mistaken – that is, if he was being frank.” I believe he was being perfectly frank.

¹⁴ I.e. Katharine Bradley (1846-1913) and Edith Cooper (1862-1912) published volumes of poems and verse dramas jointly as “Michael Field.” Browning encouraged them, but he also gave away the secret of their female authorship, which infuriated Katharine. He appears to have treated their relationship with indulgence (they claimed to be “closer married” than he had been to Elizabeth, because they wrote together). See Sturgeon for fuller details.

¹⁵ See the letters to Isa Blagden dated March 22, 1870 and June 19, 1870.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Professor Martha Vicinus for drawing my attention to this episode.

The Link between the Homosexual and the Gothic

In writing about the occurrence of "widespread, endemic male homosexual panic as a post-Romantic phenomenon" Eve Sedgwick argues that "it has to do with (what I read as) the centrality of the paranoid Gothic as the literary genre in which homophobia found its most apt and ramified embodiment" (*Epistemology* 186). She defines the paranoid Gothic as manifesting in Romantic novels in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his "double," to whom he seems to be mentally transparent. Sedgwick goes on to remark that:

[. . .] the usefulness of Freud's formulation . . . that paranoia in men results from the repression of their homosexual desire, has nothing to do with a classification of the paranoid Gothic in terms of "latent" or "overt" "homosexual" "types," but everything to do with the foregrounding, under the specific, foundational historic conditions of the early Gothic, of intense male homosocial desire as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds. (*Epistemology* 187)

Diana Fuss describes the process whereby an individual's development of a selfhood which is safely "inside" a cultural formation involves projecting any interior sense of lack onto an "outside" position. In this case, Fuss is writing of the binary opposition in the construction of the two categories hetero- and homosexual; but it can of course, equally well be applied to the masculine-feminine divide. Fuss writes:

To protect against the recognition of lack within the self, the self erects and defends its borders against an other which is made to represent or to become that selfsame lack. But borders are notoriously unstable, and sexual identities rarely secure. Heterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychical proximity of its terrifying (homo)sexual other, any more than homosexuality can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressures of (hetero)sexual conformity. Each is haunted by the other, but here again it is the other who comes to stand in metonymically for the very occurrence of haunting and ghostly visitations. (3)

Hauntings and dreams have a lot in common, and Fuss goes on to comment on a striking feature of many recent analyses of manifestations of homosexuality in literature, which is "a fascination with the specter of abjection, a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as specter and phantom, as spirit and revenant, as abject and undead" (3). To me, this is sharply consonant with the dramatic vision of "all the lost adventurers my peers," seen enveloped in a ghostly "sheet of flame" at the end of Browning's poem "Childe Roland."

Return to “Childe Roland”

This brings us back to the end of the poem with which I began: now let us revisit its beginning. It has been variously interpreted over time, and Browning's own denial of a rational meaning has only fuelled the speculations of his critics. Many have read it as an expression of the triumph of will in the face of failure, perhaps poetic failure. All agree it is full of macabre and sinister imagery, a horrifying Gothic scene, an almost necrophiliac landscape. J. Hillis Miller claims that: “the reader is continually coaxed by the language to experience this ghastly scene as if it were his own body which had got into this sad state” (123). Miller quotes xxvi, a stanza which ends with a strikingly grotesque image: “Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim / Gaping at death.” The significance of this image as a signifier of anal sex (or rape) is of course missed by Hillis Miller, who, like Roland, naturally does not see what he is not looking for.

Harold Bloom speaks of this poem as embodying a quest for love, perhaps of Roland's fellow-knights, his brothers: “. . . the meaning of his quest was still in his search for love. Love of whom? Of his precursors, the band of brothers who, one by one, ‘failed’ triumphantly at the Dark Tower” (167). But to me it reads rather as a profound resistance to the love of his brothers, certainly a disgust: even a horror. Cuthbert and Giles, the speaker's erstwhile intimates are now disgraced [. . .] and for what? a nameless crime. Cuthbert's arm, that used to be linked in his, is now part of a disgusting body, a disgraced body [xvi] [. . .] Giles, the “[p]oor traitor, spit upon and curst” has betrayed his own much-vaunted “soul of honour” [xvii]. “Better this present than a past like that,” says the speaker. There is a deep paranoia operating here, a very tangible fear of contamination.

In this poem, paranoia is largely represented through the landscape, which Roland sees as everywhere out to get him. It is the landscape of Sodom and Gomorrah after the Lord rained brimstone and fire out of Heaven: “And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground” (Genesis 19: 25). One striking feature which most critics have missed, and which I think Isobel Armstrong was the first to note, is that it is an all-male landscape. Men only are its inhabitants. “No women enter the poem except through hints of adultery which may as well suggest homosexual relations” (Armstrong 316). Indeed. All the characters, all these figures, are male. The baby has no mother. Even the blind stiff old horse is masculine – a horse represents lust, and this one has paid the ultimate price, it seems. Old men initiate younger ones into the practices of this evil landscape, this doomed, unhealthy, sterile world. The ghastly grinning old man who “directs” the speaker, is the epitome of a pimp, or of an I-told-you-so figure, one who knows – has always known – what the subject is still in denial about, in horror about, wants to keep himself clean from, but keeps tripping over and splashing through, willy-nilly, in the nightmare landscape. The crippled old man figure can be seen as a sinister “double” to Childe Roland, in the sense that Sedgwick described. It is the old man's knowing leer that the speaker cannot bear. He feels a fool, he also despises the old man for not taking any moral stand, for merely pointing things out,

and despises himself, for following his direction. He would rather not have been told, not have known. Roland has been disillusioned by "brotherly love." The whole chivalric ideal of knighthood has been undermined by dishonour, betrayal, disgrace, and interestingly, by a kind of physical repulsion. None of the horrors committed by the knights is detailed, which allows an aura in keeping with the idea of sexual disgrace. The whole poem is about being forced to face an unpalatable reality. The baby's shriek signifies the death of the new generation, the suppression of heterosexual procreation, already hinted at in the absence of flowers (i.e. women) and proliferation of parthenogenic weeds. Just as Browning thought in his home-educated, his non-public-schoolboy innocence, that a twat was an article of nun's attire, so the idea of Greek love, so familiar to the Eton youth, never crossed his boyish mind. When the penny finally dropped, (when? who knows? – many of his friendships as a young man were with older men of ambiguous sexuality, like John Forster) it was a traumatic moment, and cemented in him the feeling of homosexual panic.

Of course, the famously grotesque landscape of the poem can be read in many ways, as critics have demonstrated. G.K. Chesterton, for example (still one of the most evocative of Browning's admirers) read therein "the perfect realisation of that eerie sentiment which comes upon us, not so often among mountains and water-falls, as it does on some half-starved common at twilight, or in walking down some grey mean street. It is the song of the beauty of refuse; and Browning was the first to sing it" (159).¹⁷ Although it is described as a wasteland, it could be a figure for an urban scene: a sordid city streetscape, the way to the molly-house perhaps, dominated by the dark phallic Tower, which again, like the Beddoes Box, concentrates illogical fears and nameless dreads – the epitome of homosexual panic. The dreariness, the monotony, the blankness, the unhealthiness, the flatness, the dankness – all like a London street at dusk.¹⁸ The gutter contains an aborted foetus. But most powerful of all, this sense of physical repulsion. Another way of perceiving the landscape is as a human corpse, rather than the living body of Hillis Miller's reading. The human figures in the landscape, however, the failed heroes, are the deeply ambiguous representatives of the predicament outlined by Sedgwick: the double bind "of intense male homosocial desire as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds." In this deeply paranoid context, Roland's reluctant quest takes on a necrophiliac flavour, much as Browning's reluctant quest for Beddoes's "remains," later, in his "dismal box" seems to have done. He refused to open the Box. He regarded it with dread, as a source of contamination. It paralysed him into uncustomary inaction. Eventually he let Gosse take it. It had become like a bad dream for him.

I have suggested in this paper that there may have been a link in Browning's mind between Gothic horror and homosexuality when he composed the poem with such a grimly phallic title as "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Always conservative about matters of gender and sexuality, a very slow starter in his relations

¹⁷ I am grateful to Dr Robert Dingley for alerting me to this passage.

¹⁸ Norton writes that the Cripple-gate area of London had for centuries been near the centre of the red light district, and in the eighteenth century was notorious for molly-houses (71).

with the opposite sex, and relatively uninhibited in his early male friendships,¹⁹ Browning's profile in this regard presents nothing out of the ordinary for a Victorian middle-class male of his generation. While not wishing to imply that Browning was homosexual himself, I am certainly aiming to draw attention to the extent that he shared in the dominant cultural paradigm of homophobia. The extent and grip of this fear of the "other" on Browning's psyche may have been far stronger than has previously been noticed, and may indeed warrant the label "homosexual panic." The romantic circumstances of his marriage have served very well to deflect attention from his more conservative side. Yet when we encounter a poem of the enigmatic power of "Childe Roland," every reader instinctively feels that they are somehow in touch with the poet's subconscious. My purpose has been to part the curtains on Browning's private life not out of any merely prurient interest, but in a spirit of wanting to erase barriers that critical prurience of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has put in the way of a wider grasp of possible meanings that might be drawn from the poem. In this way, it can be opened up to new insights, instanced here by Sedgwick's argument that a tradition of homophobic thematics was a force in the development of the Gothic.

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¹⁹ Betty Miller writes of "the curiously deserted landscape of Browning's emotional life in the interval between the publication of 'Paracelsus' and his first meeting, ten years later, with the woman who was to become his wife," although she mentions "the uninhibited warmth of his male friendships at this time" (59).

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