Robert Browning

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church"

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews -sons mine ... ah God, I know not! Well —
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since;
And as she died so must we die ourselves,
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.
St Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
— Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.
- Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
Draw close: that conflagration of my church
- What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sinks,
And if ye find...ah God, I know not, I!...
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...

Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both his hands
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst!
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black -
'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripon, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
St Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
And Moses with the tables...but I know
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!
Nay, boys, ye love me -all of jasper, then!
'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve.
My bath must needs be left behind, alas!
One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world -
And have I not St Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?
That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line -
Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!
And then how I shall lie through centuries,
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
And see God made and eaten all day long,
And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!
For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,
And let the bedclothes for a mort-cloth drop
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work:
And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life,

And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,
St Praxed at his sermon on the mount,
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,
And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
- Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.
All lapis, all, sons! Else I give the Pope
My villas: will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,
Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
To comfort me on my entablature
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death -ye wish it -God, ye wish it! Stone -
Gritsone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through -
And no more lapis to delight the world!
Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs
- Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
That I may watch at leisure if he leers -
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

Summary
A fictional Renaissance bishop lies on his deathbed giving orders for the tomb that is to be built for him. He instructs his "nephews"—perhaps a group of younger priests—on the materials and the design, motivated by a desire to outshine his predecessor Gandolf, whose final resting place he denounces as coarse and inferior. The poem hints that at least one of the "nephews" may be his son; in his ramblings he mentions a possible mistress, long since dead. The Bishop catalogues possible themes for his tomb, only to end with the realization that his instructions are probably futile: he will not live to ensure their realization, and his tomb will probably prove to be as much of a disappointment as Gandolf's.

Although the poem's narrator is a fictional creation, Saint Praxed's Church refers to an actual place in Rome. It is dedicated to a martyred Roman virgin.

Form
This poem, which appears in the 1845 volume *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics,* represents a stylistic departure for Browning. The Bishop speaks in iambic pentameter unrhymed lines—blank verse. Traditionally, blank verse was the favored form for dramatists, and many consider it the poetic form that best mimics natural speech in English. Gone are the subtle yet powerful rhyme schemes of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" or "My Last Duchess." The Bishop, an earthly, businesslike man, does not try to aestheticize his speech. The new form owes not only to the speaker's earthy personality, but also his situation: he is also dying, and momentary aesthetic considerations have given way to a fervent desire to create a more lasting aesthetic monument.

Commentary
Poetry has always concerned itself with immortality and posterity. Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, repeatedly discuss the possibility of immortalizing one's beloved by writing a poem about him or her. Here, the Bishop shares the poet's drive to ensure his own life after death by creating a work of art that will continue to capture the attention of those still living. He has been contemplating the issue for some time, as shown by his discussion of Gandolf's usurpation of his chosen burial spot. His preparation has spanned years: he reveals that he has secreted away various treasures to be used in the monument's construction, including a lump of lapis lazuli he has buried in a vineyard. The discussion as a whole reveals a fascinating attitude toward life and death: we come to see that the Bishop has spent so much of his time on earth preparing not for his salvation and afterlife, but for the construction of an earthly reminder of his existence. This suggests that the Bishop lacks religious conviction: if he were a true Christian, the thought of an eternal life in Heaven after his death would preclude his tomb-building efforts. Obviously, too, the Bishop does not expect to be remembered for his leadership or good deeds. And yet the monument he plans will be a work of magnificent art. Thus, as a whole, the poem reminds us that often the most beautiful art results from the most corrupt motives. Again, coming to this conclusion, Browning prefigures writers like Oscar Wilde, who made more explicit claims for the separation of art and morality.

Despite the Bishop's rough speech and dying gasps, this poem achieves great beauty. Part of this beauty lies in its attention to detail and the cataloguing of the various semiprecious stones that are to line the tomb. Natural history provided endless fascination for the Victorians, and the psyche of the period gave special prominence to the notion of *collecting.* Collecting offers a way to gather together objects of beauty without necessarily having to involve oneself in the act of creation. Instead, the collector can just gather bits of nature's—or God's—handiwork. Indeed, this notion of collecting provides

an analog for Browning's employment of dramatic monologues like this one: in their way, they resemble found objects, the speeches of characters he has just "stumbled across." The poems are thus neither moral nor immoral; they just *are.* By taking such an attitude Browning may be trying to move beyond speculations on the moral dangers of modern, city-centered life, focusing more on anthropological than philosophical or religious aspects of existence.

The poem ends with the Bishop's vision of his corpse's decay. The image hints at an underlying commonality of experience, a commonality more fundamental than any social power structures or aesthetic ambitions. While the notion of death as an equalizer may seem nihilistic, it can also prove liberating; for indeed, it relieves the Bishop, and implicitly Browning, of the burden of posterity.

http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/browning/section4.rhtml