

# **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RING AND THE BOOK**

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The significance of The ring and the book by Roy Sherman Stowell

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**ROY SHERMAN STOWELL**

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OF THE RING AND  
THE BOOK**



LITERARY STUDIES

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The Significance of  
The Ring and the Book

By

ROY SHERMAN STOWELL  
(M. A. CORNELL)

NEW YORK  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY  
BOSTON

THE POET-LORE COMPANY

1903

DEDICATED

TO

MARY BLAKESLEE

AND

THOMAS BLANCHARD STOWELL

NEW YORK  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY

*1. Sold, Feb. 1/2, 1815*

NEW YORK  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY

## The Significance of "The Ring and the Book."

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**D**URING the study of this grand poem, I have been impressed with the author's wonderful power of seeing and presenting the same limited group of facts in so many different lights, his ability to grasp and transmit to the reader the varied standpoints from which men of different types and conditions viewed the same sad tragedy. The very length of the poem is worthy of notice, not that a long poem is a remarkable thing or is necessarily a work of art. Other long poems have been written, the twenty-four books of Homer's Iliad number fifteen thousand six hundred ninety-one lines, the twelve books of the Aeneid number eight thousand nine hundred ninety-eight lines, Dante's Divine Comedy and Milton's masterpiece are both works of great bulk, yet "The Ring and the Book" surpasses these in length;



and when we consider that the Iliad is a story of a people; the Aeneid the poetic, traditional story of the foundation of the "Eternal City," the prophecy of a mighty nation and the expression of a people's mythology; when we remember that "The Divine Comedy" is the summation of a heathen theology and that Milton breathed forth in his majestic verse the Puritan's conception of the eternal struggle between Good and Evil, the history of man's fall and his redemption, we realize that these poems are based upon subjects of such vast magnitude as to afford the writer both scope and inspiration in his work.

"The Ring and the Book" on the other hand deals with a subject which seems neither remarkable nor vast: an affair, indeed, which if enacted today would doubtless occupy the attention of the newspapers for perhaps a week, receiving from none more than a page at a time, a few brief columns in all. Important enough so that for one short day it might be uppermost in the thoughts of every intelligent citizen, on the morrow no longer news, in a week's time considered old, forgotten in less

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than a year, referred to simply as so much history, unimportant and in a slight way amusing—that is all to be said. Yet it was just such a subject of minor importance which, like a sudden unexpected stimulus, aroused the genius of the poet's soul to its greatest effort.

Michael Angelo saw an angel in the rough and disproportioned piece of marble which the builders rejected, and produced from it his “David”; Browning seemed to see at a glance a poem, a masterpiece in an old faded book discarded as useless and sold for a “lira” and from it produced “The Ring and the Book.”

The extraordinary length of a poem based upon so unpromising a subject, even the varied presentation of the same theme and the careful attention to minute details which together can alone account for its length do not seem so wonderful to me as the depth of the spiritual truth and the underlying significance to be found in the poem. It took, indeed, a poet to read such wonders between the lines of that old yellow book.

The subject upon which the poem is based is a famous old Roman murder case, the court

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proceedings of which Browning discovered in a square old yellow book, small quarto size, part print, part manuscript.

This is the book mentioned in the title of the poem.

"Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss  
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about  
By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact  
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,  
And brains, high blooded, ticked two centuries since?  
Examine it yourselves! I found this book,  
Gave a lira for it, eight pence English just."\*

This book Browning bought at a second-hand bookstore in Florence, read it almost through on his way home and seemed at once to have seen the possibilities it presented.

By the "Ring" mentioned in the title is meant the perfect work of art which the poet rounded out of the rough ore of the Roman murder case.

It is the purpose of the poem, therefore, to give a concrete illustration of the relation which a work of art bears to mere fact, to show how a piece of art may be produced from unembellished truth, and to prove that art is the revela-

\* *The Ring and the Book*, I 22-28.