My Last Duchess

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,   
Looking as if she were alive. I call   
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands   
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.   
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said   
“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read   
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,   
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,   
But to myself they turned (since none puts by   
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)   
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,   
How such a glance came there; so, not the first   
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not   
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot   
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps   
Fra Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps   
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint   
Must never hope to reproduce the faint   
Half-flush that dies along her throat”: such stuff   
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough   
For calling up that spot of joy. She had   
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,   
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er   
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.   
Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,   
The dropping of the daylight in the West,   
The bough of cherries some officious fool 

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule   
She rode with round the terrace—all and each   
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,   
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked   
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked   
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name   
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame   
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill   
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will   
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this   
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,   
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let   
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set   
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,   
—E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose   
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,   
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without   
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;   
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands   
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet   
The company below, then. I repeat,   
The Count your master’s known munificence   
Is ample warrant that no just pretence   
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;   
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed   
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go   
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,   
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,   
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Robert Browning

1842

**Summary**

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on her disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.” As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behavior escalated, “[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.