

45. BROWNING'S THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB AT
SAINT PRAXED'S CHURCH, 76-79, 98-100

In Robert Browning's poem "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" the dying bishop's main rival in his struggle for the power which he sought to attain as a befitting mode of life had been his predecessor, Gandolf. For this reason he tried to play down the latter's significance when Gandolf died. Although Gandolf had already chosen the best position in the church for his sarcophagus, he had to leave its execution to his successor who, driven by a desire to revenge himself, selected as material a "paltry onion-stone" (line 31) and for the epitaph, in keeping with the poor quality of the stone, he drew on the late Latin of Ulpian, who, having lived at the turn of the third century A.D., was already removed from the golden age of Latinity, "marble's language" (line 98).

In this connection Frank J. Chiarenza, (*Exp.*, 19, Jan., 1961, 22) has tried to explain the meaning of lines 79 and 99-100 of the above poem. He considers the phrase "my masters" (line 79)—the meaning of which is rather elusive—to be a transliteration of the Italian word *maestri* which refers to the "craftsmasters," the "skilled workmen hired to design the tomb and execute the inscription." In reply to their question as to whether Ciceronian Latin would not be more appropriate for the inscription, the new bishop answers disparagingly: "Ulpian serves his need!" (line 79).

This utterance is in need of some elucidation since it is obvious that the bishop wishes to imply by it that, while the late Latin of Ulpian does not satisfy his own demands, for some reason which he does not define, it is quite adequate to satisfy those of Gandolf. We are able, however, to deduce this reason from lines 99-100. Here the phrase "our friend" does not refer to the "master craftsman," as Chiarenza maintains, but to Gandolf himself who once even used the Vulgar Latin form *elucescebat* and thus, as far as his Latin was concerned, disqualified himself in the eyes of his successor. Hence the bishop considers the choice of late but not Vulgar Ulpian Latin for the inscription on Gandolf's tomb to be considerably more than the latter properly deserved: "Ulpian at the best!" (line 100)

Chiarenza's interpretation of lines 99-100 whereby he maintains that the "friend" referred to is the "master craftsman who has ques-

tioned the poor choice of the Vulgar Latin form" may be refuted on the following grounds. Were the *maestro* who had been charged with the execution of the sarcophagus to have taken offense at the form *elucescebat*, then it would necessarily have had to be part of the Ulpian inscription. But the verb *elucescere* is much later than Ulpian. The first recorded uses of the infinitive *elucescere* are not to be found until Hieronymus (died 420 A.D.) and the Vulgate (cf. *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Vol. V, Leipzig, 1931-1953, s.v. *elucesco*: "formae in —sco leguntur ab Hier. et Vulg., eodem tamen sensu quo 'elucere'"). What's more, the *maestro*, in contrast to the bishop, would have hardly considered the form *elucescebat* to be unworthy of incorporation in the epitaph of a *bishop's* tomb, since several instances of it are to be found in the Vulgate.

The new bishop, for his part, seized on the fact that his predecessor, Gandolf, had used a Vulgar Latin form to allow himself to take belated revenge on Gandolf. The interjection in line 99 ("—Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?") and the ironical reference to Gandolf as "our friend" serve in addition as emotional expressions of both his scorn for Gandolf and his sense of triumph.

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