Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"

Browning was fascinated by the glorious, yet corrupt, culture of Renaissance Italy. "My Last Duchess" exemplifies the dramatic monologue he often used, with blank verse somewhat in the manner of Shakespeare serving as a vehicle for the character's thoughts. It is set in Italy and presumably spoken by Alfonso II d'Este, 5th Duke of Ferrara (1533-98) who married Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, the daughter of Cosimo I de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Alfonso was 25 and Lucreza 14 at the time of the marriage which united the prestige of his family with the wealth of hers. After two years. however, he left her and her death a year later is thought to be the result of poison administered on his instructions. Afterwards he married Barbara, daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I, and it appears to be Nikolaus Madruz, chamberlain of her brother Ferdinand, the Count of Tyrol, who arranged the marriage to whom the Duke is speaking in the poem. Browning's method was to read his way into a given historical period—often with an emphasis on troubled marriages and especially those of famous Renaissance painters as in his poems "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto"— both much longer than the one given here.

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 to 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 my self 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, 't was 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, 't was all one! My favor at her breast,
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!

Agnolo Bronzino's portrait of Lucretia de' Medici—painted in about 1560—which is believed to have inspired Browning's poem.

Oscar Wilde wrote of Browing: "He is the most Shakespearean creature since Shakespeare. [...] His sense of dramatic situation was unrivalled [.... As] a creator of character he ranks next to him who made Hamlet. [...] The only man who can touch the hem of his garment is George Meredith. Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose." (*Critic as Artist*, 1890.)