“Grow Old Along With Me”: Robert Browning’s Conception of Jewish Old Age

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Abstract

Robert Browning often explored the concepts of old age and dying in his poems, and surprisingly enough, some of these most striking poems use Hebraic sources as intertexts. This article will explore Robert Browning’s idea of old age as it is conveyed in “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” “Pisgah Sights,” and “Jochanan Hakkadosh,” three poems in which Browning turns to Hebrew sources to explore philosophical and mystical narratives of aging. Written against the emerging Victorian conception of the elderly subject, these poems merge two forms of Victorian Otherness—Judaism and old age—so as to create an alternative and celebratory vision of the last stage of life. These representations of old age also reflect Robert Browning’s biographical old age, which introduced long-awaited popularity and critical acclaim, and the evolution of his favorite form, the dramatic monologue.

Keywords

literature, humanities, arts and humanities, social sciences, theology, religious studies, Victorian poetry, old age, poetry, religion, mysticism, moral and religious

Studies of the Victorian conception of old age have gained popularity in the last decade or so, reflecting the birth of a new topic in critical studies focusing on the representation of senescence in literature (Mangum, 2011). Yet Robert Browning’s exceptional conception of old age, inspired by Jewish mysticism, has been almost completely ignored, even though these lines from his dramatic monologue “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) are probably some of the best-known lines on old age in the history of English literature:

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith “A whole I planned,

Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!” (Vol. I, p. 781, Lines 1–6)

Yet this is hardly Robert Browning’s only comment on old age. Many of his poems deal with elderly characters summing up their lives and facing death, and surprisingly enough, three of these most striking poems use Hebraic sources as intertexts. This essay will explore Robert Browning’s ideas on old age as they are conveyed in “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864), “Pisgah Sights” (1876), and “Jochanan Hakkadosh” (1883), three dramatic monologues in which Browning turns to Jewish sources to explore philosophical and mystical alternatives to the emerging Victorian conception of old age which focused on physical and mental decline (Mangum, 1999). Thus, Browning’s conception of Jewish old age is a merger of two evolving tropes of “otherness”: the elderly subject, on the one hand, and the Jewish male subject, on the other. The literary representations of both these tropes were undergoing changes as a result of the growing visibility of both Jewish and elderly subjects in Victorian culture, and the consequent struggle of both of these groups for rights in the cultural and political arenas.

Karen Chase’s (2009) seminal study of the conception of old age in Victorian Britain draws on various sources such as newspapers, magazines, parliamentary debates, and literature to corroborate her claim of the “invention of the elderly subject” in the second half the 19th century, a process culminating in the Pension Bill of 1908 (p. 276). As a result of the increasing number of elderly people requiring care, the abundance of

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images of aging bodies, and the emerging discipline of gerontology, Victorian culture acknowledges the emergence of old age as “a distinct stage of life” and a recognized site of social, medical, and political discourse (Zwierlein et al., 2013, p. 1). The literary representations of old age often reflected the sense that the old have become a burden on the younger generation and in the last quarter of a century were also influenced by the image of the aging Queen Victoria, an image tinted by protracted grieving and diminishment of power (Chase, 2009).

The construction of this novel category of old age obviously converged with other social categories, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and class, some of which contained positive representations of old age as well. The anxieties brought about by old age, mainly the fear of helplessness and dying, also manifest themselves in an exploration of other, exoticized, or transgressive images of senescence. One example of a crossing of the accepted Victorian borders of old age is Robert Browning’s positive construction of senescence, inspired by Hebrew sources, which merges two forms of “otherness”: Jewishness and old age. Against the backdrop of the mostly negative literary representations of old age produced by his contemporaries (Woolford et al., 2010, p. 651), Robert Browning constructed a vivid and affirmative image of Jewish old age.

Browning’s images of Jewish old age are contrasted not only with representations of old age in contemporary poetry but also with representations of Jewish masculinity in Victorian culture, most of which contain negative and intimidating traits such as avarice and malevolence (Valman, 2011, pp. 149–150). Scrivener (2011) differentiates between the stereotype of the villainous male Jew and “the benevolent Jew of Romantic writing . . . who is invariably old and sexually inactive, in effect neutered,” a romantic image correlating with Browning’s Jewish old men (p. 6). This is contrasted with the obvious Victorian example of a malicious old Jew in the shape of Dickens’s Fagin, and a less obvious one such as Ebenezer Scrooge, who holds a profession of money-lender as well as a “pointed nose” (Dickens, 1858, p. 2). Grossman (1996) has convincingly shown that Ebenezer Scrooge, despite not being explicitly labeled as Jewish, in fact embodies all the traits of the stereotyped Jew, and even after his “conversion” remains in “isolation” (pp. 51–52). Scrooge’s first name, Ebenezer, vaguely resembles that of Ben Ezra, and indeed, both derive from the same root and have the same meaning in Hebrew: both “Eben” and “Ben” mean “son of,” and Ezer and Ezra mean “help” in Hebrew. “Rabbi Ben Ezra” of 1864 could thus be a foil containing Browning’s intertextual reference to the notorious image of Ebenezer Scrooge, published 21 years earlier. This ambivalent trope of an old Jewish man becomes all the more contentious from the late 1870s onward as a result of the growing number of Jewish immigrants of East European origin who immigrated to England (Bar-Yosef & Valman, 2009, pp. 4–5). In the 19th-century Semitic discourse, most of the representations of Jews in Victorian culture have been likened to “an alien presence of a diseased body” (Sicher & Weinhouse, 2012, p. 1), reminiscent, perhaps, of some of the attitudes toward the aged. Thus, Browning’s insistence on mature Jewish speakers seems to undermine the Victorian narratives of identity and race revolving around “the Jewish question,” which reentered the British political discourse in the 1870s (Cheyette, 1995, p. 53) and which Browning, a self-confessed liberal and philo-Semite (Woolford & Karlin, 1996, pp. 157–158), might have found distasteful.

Browning and Judaism

Browning’s interest in Judaism began in childhood, when he encountered texts of Jewish mysticism in his father’s extensive and eclectic library, which contained approximately 6,000 volumes (Woolford & Karlin, 2007, pp. 5–6). As part of his unusual middle-class education, he became a voracious reader of the quaint, mystical, and cryptic texts in his home library, which included, among other things, works by Renaissance magicians and Jewish philosophers. Browning’s father compiled a couple of volumes which comprise a complete nomenclature of the Old Testament and one which reflects not only his knowledge of the Bible but also an acquaintance with post-biblical Jewish literature (Berlin-Lieberman, 1934, pp. 9–10). Robert Browning studied Hebrew from 1837 to 1840 and returned to it in the 1870s, after Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s death. Elizabeth Barrett Browning also studied Hebrew and knew it well enough to read the entire Bible in the original language (Scheinberg, 2002, p. 70). Both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning incorporated Hebrew into their poems, mostly with a biblical reference, and this practice intensified with Browning’s collections published in his old age: Jocoseria (1883) and Ferishtah’s Fancies (1884). As a result of this interest in Jewish subjects, a rumor concerning Browning’s “Jewish blood” emerged, manifesting itself during his life, but particularly posthumously, in several biographies which bring forth lengthy arguments meant to deny this claim (Manor, 2013). These narratives about Browning’s “Jewishness” divulge the Victorian anxiety revolving around Jewish identity, disguised or exposed, as well as Browning’s rebellious playfulness with these Jewish images, despite the cultural unease they generated.

“Rabbi Ben Ezra”: “The Last of Life, For Which the First Was Made”

“Rabbi Ben Ezra” is not Browning’s first reference to Jewish themes. These appear in some of his early works as well, as in Bells and Pomegranates, a hermetic title based on a Rabbinical exegesis of the garment of Aaron, which was received with dismay by the critics in 1841 (Woolford et al., 2010, p. 885). The figure of Ben Ezra himself, the speaker of “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” already appears in Men and Women’s “Holy-Cross Day” of 1855. Rabbi Ben Ezra was an eminent
12th-century Jewish scholar, born in Spain, who wrote commentaries on the Bible as well as some poetry. His manuscripts, written in Hebrew and translated to Latin, could be accessible to Browning in the British Museum, as well as in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Vatican Library in Rome (Woolford et al., 2010, pp. 650–651). One of his central themes has to do with the dialectic of body and soul, neither embracing celibacy nor rejecting sensuality, but rather recommending a merger of both body and soul in the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom (Woolford et al., 2010, pp. 650–651).

“Holy-Cross Day” relates the Papal decree of 1584 by Pope Paul IV which limited Jews to life in a ghetto and forced them to hear a Christian sermon once a week. While reluctantly hearing the sermon, they chant Ben Ezra’s “Song of Death” (Line 66). This is a fictional narrative (Woolford et al., 2010, p. 549), which prophesizes the redemption of the Jews through conversion and a return to “the Pleasant land” (Line 120):

For Rabbi Ben Ezra, the night he died,

Called sons and sons’ sons to his side,

And spoke, “This world has been harsh and strange;

Something is wrong: there needeth a change.

But what, or where? at the last or first?

In one point only we sin, at worst . . . (Vol. I, p. 708, Lines 67–72)

On his deathbed, Ben Ezra acknowledges that he failed at “one point,” a failure which later in the poem is revealed to be the renunciation of Jesus. Thus, the poem is one which ends with a conversion to Christianity and a reinstatement of Jews in the land of Israel as part of the narrative of Christian eschatology regarding the Second Coming (Ragussis, 1995). This early image of the dying Ben Ezra already consists of two elements associated with Browning’s conception of Jewish old age and dying: the Rabbi is surrounded by “sons, and sons’ sons,” a repetition emphasizing the centrality of the filial relationship and the continuity of the family in the face of death. The first-person plural “we sin” (Line 72) accentuates this collective identity, which might lessen the fear of dying alone. The second comforting element is one which includes a message to the next generation and one which ought to make some actual change in “[t]his world,” an empowering and optimistic vision of continuity and deliverance prior to one’s demise.

Nine years later, Browning returns to Ben Ezra, but this time he relinquishes the conversion narrative and relies merely on the Old Testament, Ibn-Ezra’s commentaries and poems, and his own inventions. His preliminary statement about old age already deviates from the mostly grim Victorian perception of this stage of life: “the best is yet to be” and “the last of life, for which the first was made.” The notion that life is divided into two parts—the first and the last—derives from Ibn-Ezra, as is the phrase “Our times are in his hand,” almost an exact translation of the source (Berlin-Lieberman, 1934, pp. 40–41). Yet there is one alteration made by Browning: The original sentence is in the first-person singular, whereas in Browning’s poem it becomes the first-person plural, in accordance with Browning’s construction of Jewish old age as characterized by the comforting nature of a collective identity. Browning ends the first stanza with the following exclamation:

Youth shows but half; trust god: see all nor be afraid!

This acknowledgment of the fear generated by old age is followed by a narrative which serves as an antidote to feelings of anxiety and despair, common in Victorian narratives:

For thence,—a paradox

Which comforts while it mocks,—

Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:

What I aspired to be,

And was not, comforts me:

A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’ the scale. (Vol. I, p. 782, Lines 37–42)

“A brute I might have been” seems to reflect Browning’s construing of the Darwinian narrative as a divinely spurred process of improvement, as he writes in a letter to F. J. Furnivall in 1881:

In reality, all that seems proved in Darwin’s schemes was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in Paracelsus the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man’s appearance (Part V) . . . But go back and back . . . you find (my faith is constant) creative intelligence, acting as matter but not resulting from it. (Hood, 1933, pp. 199–200)

The feelings of failure associated with old age are diminished by the narrative of the “scale,” ranging from bestial to divine, as that mere aspiration toward divinity is proof of the divine “spark” that “disturbs our clod,” the sensual body (Line 28). This comforting paradox of failure and success is paired with another paradox that lies in the center of the poem, that of the soul and the flesh. In the poem, Browning emphasizes the spiritual advantages of old age in relation to the Jewish idea of the marriage of “flesh” and “soul,” a concept which dominates Jewish thought and is contrasted with
the Christian notion of the soul warring against the body (Finney, 2016, p. 2). Ibn-Ezra’s commentary on the issue of body and soul was that the soul descends into the body so as to learn about the human experience and returns to God after the demise of the body:

Let us not always say

“Spite of this flesh to-day
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!”

As the bird wings and sings,

Let us cry “All good things

Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!”

(Vol. I, p. 783, Lines 67–72)

Browning returns to Ibn-Ezra’s idea of the marriage of body and soul in the final metaphor of the Potter’s wheel, based on a biblical allusion, primarily to Isaiah 64:8, but also to Jeremiah and Romans:

But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

This metaphor is used to reply to Edward Fitzgerald’s pessimism and hedonism in Fitzgerald’s extremely popular Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1859), which frequently returns to this metaphor so as to support his “carpe diem” approach. Browning presents the speaker’s reading of Fitzgerald thus:

Ay, note that Potter’s wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,

“Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!”

(Vol. I, p. 786, Lines 151–156)

The speaker’s rejection of this approach is based on Ibn-Ezra’s idea that the aging body, rather than being perceived as corrupted and decayed, contains the knowledge which transports it to the heavenly sphere:

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp’s flash and trumpet’s peal,

The new wine’s foaming flow,
The master’s lips a-glow!

Thou, heaven’s consummate cup, what needst thou with earth’s wheel? (Vol. I, p. 787, Lines 175–180)

The old body, represented in Victorian culture as site of anxiety and disease, becomes “heaven’s consummate cup”—and this acceptance of the sensual experience of the aging body imbued with the spark of knowledge yields Browning’s position of optimism and faith associated with his conception of Jewish old age.

“Pisgah Sights”: Reconstructing Moses’s Old Age

“Pisgah Sights,” a poem published in Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper in 1877 when Browning was 64, reveals his lifelong interest in the figure of the biblical Moses. There are 14 direct references to Moses in Browning’s work, and many more indirect ones such as the reference to the burning bush in Browning’s “Prologue” to Asolando (1889), written a couple of months before the poet’s death. In his references to Moses before 1876, Browning, as does Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Aurora Leigh, represents him as a trope for the poet (Scheinberg, 2002, p. 91) mediating between God and humanity despite his doubts and his stammer, both mentioned in Exodus. In Sordello (1840, Book III, Lines 790–806), Moses is the “true” poet who strikes the rock to give water to the Israelites in the desert, unlike the “false” poet who supplies his readers with illusions. The core of Browning’s fascination with Moses lies with Moses’s complex and intriguing character in the Old Testament and in the Jewish and Christian commentary. Moses is traditionally considered the most important figure in the Old Testament and the precursor of Jesus in Christian typology, the only person who spoke with God “mouth to mouth,” despite his stutter (Numbers 12:8). Browning’s idea of the poet resembles Moses’s predicament: divine knowledge, on the one hand, and the inability of language to represent it, on the other. In a letter responding to Ruskin’s criticism of the abstruseness of Men and Women in 1855, Browning writes,

I know that I don’t make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. (Roberts, 2005, p. 691)

Thus, Moses embodies the difficulty of the poet as Browning conceives it in both his poems and his correspondence: the human frailties of language, the aspiration toward the divine, and the tumultuous relationship with the readers.

In “Pisgah Sights,” Browning turns his focus to Deuteronomy 34:1–4, in which Moses, before his death,
views the promised land from a summit (Pisgah in Hebrew) but is not allowed to enter it because of his failure to believe that water will emerge from the rock in *Numbers* 20:1–13. The term “Pisgah Sight” was a commonplace in Evangelical hymns, and by the end of the 18th century signified the dying moments of a true believer, associated with divine revelation (Landow, 1980, p. 207). Browning’s representation of Moses becomes more interpretive in “Pisgah Sights”: He questions the accepted reading of the biblical Moses and begins to question and explore the myth of Moses to recreate Moses’s old age, presenting it as reconcilement rather than failure. The embracing acceptance of contradictions and the marriage of opposites takes us back to Rabbi Ben Ezra’s paradox about his own life: “what I aspired to be, / And was not, con-forts me”:

**OVER** the ball of it,
Peering and prying,
How I see all of it,
Life there, outlying!
Roughness and smoothness,
Shine and defilement,
Grace and uncouthness:
One reconcilement.
Orbed as appointed,
Sister with brother
Joins, ne’er disjointed
One from the other.
All’s lend-and-borrow;
Good, see, wants evil,
Joy demands sorrow,
Angel weds devil!
“Which things must—why be?”
Vain our endeavor!
So shall things aye be
As they were ever.
“Such things should so be!”

Sage our desistence!
Rough-smooth let globe be,
Mixed—man’s existence!
Man—wise and foolish,
Lover and scorrer,
Docile and mulish—
Keep each his corner!
Honey yet gall of it!
There’s the life lying,
And I see all of it,
Only, I’m dying! (Vol. II, p. 443, Lines 1–32)

As in “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” Browning ends the poem with a rounded perception of opposites, a concept inspired by 19th-century philosophers and writers, which recurs in Browning’s works and letters (Karlin, 1993, p. 20). The reconciliation of opposites is an integral part of Browning’s fantasy of stoic old age—untroubled by ambition or by the strife and despair he associates with it:

Could I but live again
Twice my life over,
Would I once strive again?
Would not I cover
Quietly all of it—
Greed and ambition—
So, from the pall of it,
Pass to fruition?
“Soft!” I’d say, “Soul mine!
Three-score and ten years,
Let the blind mole mine
Digging out deniers!
Let the dazed hawk soar,
Claim the sun’s rights tool
Thus, the poems tell of a relinquishing of the poet’s prophetic role of mediation between the divine ideas and the audience which he defines in Paracelsus, Sordello, and The Ring and the Book: a cessation of the poet’s predicament which he conceives as inherent to his role. Correspondingly, the form of the poem is relatively simple, with its short lines and a predictable ABAB rhyme scheme. This dramatic monologue, written now that Browning is a renowned and successful poet following the publication of The Ring and the Book (1868), opens up for Browning a conceivable narrative of old age in which youthful “strife” and ambition are surrendered and a more stoic phase of acceptance begins.

“Jochanan Hakkadosh”: The Transmigration of Souls and George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda

Browning’s late collection Jocoseria (1883), published when Browning was 71 years old, takes his hopeful notion of old age further into the mystical sphere. “Jochanan Hakkadosh” (1883), transliterated from the Hebrew epithet Jochanan the Holy One,4 reveals the story of an old Rabbi who is on his deathbed, yet four of his disciples decide to grant him part of their lives to prolong his existence. In a letter to Furnivall, on April 10, 1883, following a misunderstanding of the poem by an American critic, Browning writes about the poem:

The whole is a fiction of my own, with just this foundation,—that the old Rabbins fancied that earnest wishing might add to a valued life. (Hood, 1933, pp. 216–217)

Berlin-Lieberman (1934, p. 61) traces the story back to the Midrash and the Kabbala, in which King David is allotted only 3 hr of life, and Adam decides to give Adam 70 years out of the thousand given to him. In the Zohar, which is the central component of the Kabbala, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph each give the future king part of their lives, just as Jochanan’s disciples do. Jochanan indeed describes himself at the onset of his monologue as “[m]ore luckless than stood David” when fighting Goliath, and this allusion may indicate that Browning was acquainted with this source. The poem begins thus, with an emphasis on the first-person plural:

“This now, this other story makes amends
And justifies our Mishna,” quoth the Jew
Aforesaid. “Tell it, learnedest of friends!” (Vol. II, p. 680, Lines 1–3)

From the very start, the poem underscores communal identity and a shared source of knowledge, intimating an alternative concept of subjectivity, in which Browning’s notions of “love” and “devotion” can cross the borders of an individual existence and even overcome the loneliness of death. In the poem, the contribution of “life” by the four members of the community is made for the sake of communal knowledge and for the attainment of truth, as Jochanan has no “truth” to reveal on his deathbed and therefore declares himself a “failure” (lines 42, 117).

This notion can be traced back to the Kabbala, as well as to George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda published 6 years earlier in 1876, which referred to this mystical Jewish text. Browning had first met Mary Anne Evans on December 12, 1862, when he returned to England following Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s death (Eliot, 2010, p. 197). They met several times and had a mutual appreciation yet did not become close friends. Eliot’s main source of information for Daniel Deronda, and one which was available to Browning as well, was C. D. Ginsburg’s The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature published in 1865. In Daniel Deronda, a certain paragraph brings up the exact same theme Browning chose for “Jochanan Hakkadosh” 6 years later. Mordechai, out of a sense of failure and exclusion, imagines someone who would continue his work:

But he was too sane and generous to attribute his spiritual banishment solely to the excusable prejudices of others: certain incapacities of his own had made the sentence of exclusion; and hence it was that his imagination had constructed another man who would be something more ample than the second soul bestowed, according to the notion of the Cabbalists, to help out the insufficient first—who would be a blooming human life, ready to incorporate all that was worthiest in an existence whose visible, palpable part was burning itself fast away. (Eliot, 1876/1984, p. 406)

In a later passage, the idea of the joining of souls for the sake of “earthly” accomplishment recurs:

In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies until they are perfected and purified, and a soul
liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. (Eliot, 1876/1984, p. 461)

Both Mordechai and Jochanan are wasting away and in search for a young soul to help them complete what they regard as their spiritual mission. Both missions end in success: Mordechai finds a spiritual and physical heir in Daniel Deronda, and Jochanan experiences an epiphany thanks to the four souls which grant him part of their lives.

The opening lines of “Jochanan Hakkadosh,” which constitute the frame of the poem, introduce an authoritative speaker, benefiting from received communal knowledge, and one who relies on this communal religious identity rather than on self-revelation in the search for “truth.” The use of the first-person plural, “our” (Line 2), also alludes to the style of the Talmud, in which a group of Jewish scholars are debating a subject and trying to reach a conclusion. The style of the Talmud, with which Browning was familiar, (Conway, 1904, II, p. 21), is intrinsically dialectic: Various rabbis comment and give examples regarding a certain topic. This dialectic style must have appealed to Browning, because it has similar premises to those behind his dramatic monologues and resembles the structure of The Ring and the Book (1868).

Another characteristic of the Talmud which might have appealed to Browning is the mixture of legend and folklore side by side with philosophical arguments and pragmatic laws.

“Jochanan Hakkadosh” is itself a mixture of legendary material with philosophical and logical arguments, a mixture of legend and truisms which the poem shares with other late works such as Ferishtah’s Fancies and Asolando: Fancies and Facts. As in “Rabbi Ben Ezra” and “Pisgah Sights,” this notion of the relinquishing of binaries serves as a comforting idea in the face of the Victorian anxieties of old age.

The first line of the poem—“This other story makes amends”—refers to the Jewish notion of Tikkun, meaning “mending” in Hebrew, a notion associated with Browning’s fantasy of senescence. The “tikkun” is an order of prayer and study meant to mend failures on the personal and cosmological levels. The source for the idea in the Kabbala, and the philosophy behind it that creation, after an initial “breaking of the vessels” is constantly being mended and improved, and that prayer and study quicken the mending of the world (Bloom, 1975, p. 44). On the personal level, the “tikkun” helps bring about absolution and is related to the transmigration of souls discussed in the Kabbala. Thus, the transmigration of souls can constitute a “tikkun” by helping to have the soul’s flaws repaired. This obviously relates to Jochanan’s prolongation of life by his disciples’ souls, declaring the poem itself as taking part in the process of “tikkun” and corresponding to Browning’s idea of the general development of humanity and its growth toward perfection, a notion which appears in many poems, such as Paracelsus (V, 750–783) and The Ring and the Book (I, 707–719), as well as in an 1881 letter to Furnivall which exposes his teleological misinterpretation of Darwin.

Another major influence on Browning’s construction of Jewish old age as an alternative to the Victorian notion is the term “Mashal,” taken from Robert Lowth’s extremely popular De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum (1753) published in English in 1787 as Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews. Browning owned a copy of this book, which expatiates on the “ineffable sublime” of Hebrew poetry in connection with the term “Mashal” (parable in Hebrew), which according to Lowth, has three levels of interpretation: “the sententious, the figurative, and the sublime” (Lowth, 1787, p. 61). The form of “Jochanan Hakkadosh” corresponds to this definition and contains numerous parables as well as the three parabolic sonnets revolving around Moses which appear at the end of the poem. The “Mashal” is both a lie and the truth—thus containing the acceptance of contradictions and paradoxes which Browning assigns to the cognitive faculties of old age.

Indeed, the poem itself elaborates upon this idea, ending with a recounting of Jochanan’s mystical revelation just before his death. After presenting several arguments against poetry and its false and deluding nature, Jochanan finally has an epiphany:

. . . . how seem
The intricacies now, of shade and shine,
Oppugnant natures—Right and Wrong, we deem
“Irreconcilable? O eyes of mine,
Freed now of imperfection, ye avail
To see the whole sight, nor may uncombine
“Henceforth what, erst divided, caused you quail —
So huge the chasm between the false and true,
The dream and the reality! . . . (Vol. II, p.705, Lines 745–753)

As in “Pisgah Sights,” the vision of the elderly is characterized by the dissolution of binaries and the stoic perception of reality beyond the schisms of “true” and “false.” The poem itself is a bold hybrid product of languages: English and Hebrew, and genres: legends, dialogues and dramatic monologues. In “Jochanan Hakkadosh,” Browning reconstructs Moses’s deathbed epiphany, adding an element of communal lore and collective identity which is contrasted with Moses’s stark solitude in “Pisgah Sights.”

This type of speaker, who assumes a collective identity in the first-person plural, also appears in the third poem of Jocoseria, “Solomon and Balkis,” which is also based on a
Talmudic legend. A third reference to the Talmud in this collection appears in “Adam, Lilith and Eve,” a dialogic poem comprising three different voices of equal power, based on another Talmudic reference. Thus, the Talmud constitutes a major theme in Jocoseria, with three out of the 10 poems of the collection based on this argumentative and rich tradition. Browning’s next collection, Ferishthah’s Fancies (1884), continues the dialogic motif with its mixture of different languages (English, Hebrew, Arabic) and elements of “dream” and “reality” (“Jochanan Hakkadosh,” Line 753), similar to the Talmudic mixture of legend, philosophy, and practicality. The following publication, Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day (1887), is a collection of dialogues, debates, and discussions on topics relevant to Browning’s thought. Looking back at the stark solipsism of “My Last Duchess” (1842), “Porphyria’s Lover” (1842), “The Laboratory” (1845), and “Mesmerism” (1855), among others, the Jewish dialogic style of the Talmud seems to infiltrate Browning’s late poetry and even to influence his conception of the dramatic monologue as it is manifested in his collections published in the 1880s. In these collections, the solitary speaker of the early dramatic monologues dissipates and is superseded by a more dialogic form inspired by the style of the Talmud and characteristic of Browning’s old age.

Robert Browning’s Old Age

The optimistic representations of senescence in the three poems discussed in this article may reflect Robert Browning’s biographical old age. After years of frustration over the mostly hostile criticism of his poetry, in his last decade of life Browning was finally recognized as one of the most unique and intriguing voices of the Victorian age. At a relatively late stage in his career, Browning finally achieved the long-sought success and popularity which he had been desperately striving for since Pauline of 1833. In 1868, at the age of 56, he publishes The Ring and the Book to wide critical acclaim and is presented the following year to queen Victoria. No longer an “abstruse oddity,” Browning is now considered a “Great Poet,” a sage and a religious teacher receiving multiple awards and honorary degrees (Hawlin, 2002, p. 37; Woolford & Karlin, 2007, p. 69).

The founding of the Browning Society in 1881 is the culmination of this process, with Frederik Furnivall, its founder, promoting the idea that Browning is not merely a poet but also a profound thinker (Roberts, 1996, p. 129). Ferishthah’s Fancies (1884), which focuses on a Persian dervish who utters phrases in Hebrew, another unique exploration of maturity, received no less than five editions. During those years, from 1861 when he returns to London a month after Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s death, until his own death in 1889, Browning becomes a gregarious social persona in London, and his reputation as a poet also rises. His lifelong interest in Jewish mysticism thus merges with his meditations on old age. Rejecting the negative representations of old age rampant in Victorian culture, he espouses the Jewish notions of the relationship between body and soul and the transmigration of souls, as well as forms such as the “Mashal” to present a vision of old age juxtaposed with its Victorian manifestations. Thus, the elderly subject and the Jewish subject, both alienated figures in Victorian culture, are metamorphosed into a positive Other embodying Robert Browning’s often idiosyncratic fantasy of Jewish old age.

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2. Ebenezer also means “stone of help,” the name of a stone constructed by Samuel after a military victory in 1 Samuel 7:12.
3. Robert Browning was a liberal Christian, and his parents identified as dissenters and attended a Nonconformist chapel, which meant he could not attend Oxford or Cambridge.
4. In Jochanan Hakkadosh, Browning merges three historical Jewish thinkers who lived and worked in the 1st and 2nd centuries: Jochanan ben Zakai, Jochanan ben Napacha, and the Jehudah “The Holy One” Hanassi, the compiler of the Mishna (Berlin-Lieberman, 1934, p. 55).

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