

“THE KING IS COLD,” BY STODDARD, NOT BROWNING

By Andrew M. Stauffer

ABOUT A DECADE AGO, I discovered an unknown poem attributed to Robert Browning in two New York abolitionist periodicals, and published an article about it here in *Victorian Literature and Culture*. I made the case that the poem, a dramatic monologue entitled “The King is Cold,” sounds like Browning in ways that suggest either its authenticity or the early familiarity of an American audience with Browning’s style; and I closed the article with the statement, “By bringing ‘The King is Cold’ to light, I hope to encourage further speculation and inquiry as to its place either among Browning’s collected works, or within the larger field of Browning scholarship that includes the study of his American reputation” (469). Since then, electronic databases have automated broad, sweeping searches of periodicals, and now the relevant information is easily discovered: the poem was in fact written by Richard Henry Stoddard, the American poet and man of letters. It was first published under Browning’s name in the *New York News* sometime late in 1857, and was correctly ascribed to Stoddard in *Russell’s Magazine* in December of that year; I found this information by searching in the *American Periodicals Series Online, 1740–1900*. The abolitionist reprintings (in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and the *Liberator*) apparently followed the version in the *New York News*, and the misattribution was perpetuated. Indeed, the poem reappeared in another New York periodical, Munsey’s *Scrap Book*, in 1909, where it was still being given out as Robert Browning’s. “The King is Cold” was also included as Browning’s in William Cullen Bryant’s oft-reprinted *New Library of Poetry and Song*.

In *Russell’s Magazine* for December 1857, the following summary is given of the poem:

One of the French Kings, in the middle of summer, while hunting, is seized with a mortal sickness. He is taken to his palace, when his doctor orders a fire to be hastily kindled, to warm one who is already stricken with the chill of death. The asides are very suggestive. He kindles the fire at first with State papers and letters *des cachet*, thus saving many by destroying the evidence, who would otherwise have been put to death, since they reflected upon the King’s son and successor. The first verse is the picture, the second the doctor’s reflections as he stands looking at the dying King, now insensible from the effects of poison administered by the doctor at the instigation of the Prince. The entrance of the heir is most artistically done, while the line ‘with just such a son to murder you,’ reveals his complicity in the plot. (279–80)

The poem's structure as an historical monologue, its fairly grotesque subject matter, and its stagey asides and rhetoric (including words like "Ugh!") convinced me to take the abolitionists at their word, and take the poem for Browning's work. This seems to have been a recurring feature of its reception, from its *New York News* appearance in 1857 through the 1909 *Scrap Book* reprinting. Stoddard surely knew Browning's work – he edited numerous volumes of Romantic and Victorian verse – and he may well have been trying to approximate Browning's style in "The King is Cold." Stoddard published the poem under his own name in an 1880 complete collection of his verse.

We now have databases like APS online, Readex's *America's Historical Newspapers, 1690–1922*, and the online archives of the *Times* of London and the *New York Times*; new resources are becoming available all the time. As a consequence, we are in a position to trace afresh the publication history of much nineteenth-century literary work. The case of "The King is Cold" serves as encouragement to this project, and as a kind of monitory example of the power of digital searching as set against traditional methods of inquiry, particularly when it comes to locating fugitives. Now that "The King is Cold" has been properly identified, we can place the poem and its mistaken history into the larger discussion of Browning's reception on this side of the Atlantic.

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