

G. E. Lessing, "The Parable of the three Rings"

In days of yore, there dwelt in east a man
Who from a valued hand received a ring
Of endless worth: the stone of it an opal,
That shot an ever-changing tint: moreover,
It had the hidden virtue him to render
Of God and man beloved, who in this view,
And this persuasion, wore it. Was it strange
The eastern man ne'er drew it off his finger,
And studiously provided to secure it
For ever to his house. Thus--He bequeathed it;
First, to the MOST BELOVED of his sons,
Ordained that he again should leave the ring
To the MOST DEAR among his children--and
That without heeding birth, the FAVOURITE son,
In virtue of the ring alone, should always
Remain the lord o' th' house

From son to son,
At length this ring descended to a father,
Who had three sons, alike obedient to him;
Whom therefore he could not but love alike.
At times seemed this, now that, at times the third,
(Accordingly as each apart received
The overflowings of his heart) most worthy
To heir the ring, which with good-natured weakness
He privately to each in turn had promised.
This went on for a while. But death approached,
And the good father grew embarrassed. So
To disappoint two sons, who trust his promise,
He could not bear. What's to be done. He sends
In secret to a jeweller, of whom,
Upon the model of the real ring,
He might bespeak two others, and commanded
To spare nor cost nor pains to make them like,
Quite like the true one. This the artist managed.
The rings were brought, and e'en the father's eye
Could not distinguish which had been the model.
Quite overjoyed he summons all his sons,
Takes leave of each apart, on each bestows

His blessing and his ring, and dies

The sons complained. Each to the judge
Swore from his father's hand immediately
To have received the ring, as was the case;
After he had long obtained the father's promise,
One day to have the ring, as also was.
The father, each asserted, could to him
Not have been false, rather than so suspect
Of such a father, willing as he might be
With charity to judge his brethren, he
Of treacherous forgery was bold t' accuse them.

The judge said, If ye summon not the father
Before my seat, I cannot give a sentence.
Am I to guess enigmas? Or expect ye
That the true ring should here unseal its lips?
But hold--you tell me that the real ring
Enjoys the hidden power to make the wearer
Of God and man beloved; let that decide.
Which of you do two brothers love the best?
You're silent. Do these love-exciting rings
Act inward only, not without? Does each
Love but himself?? Ye're all deceived deceivers,
None of your rings is true. The real ring
Perhaps is gone. To hide or to supply
Its loss, your father ordered three for one.

And (the judge continued)
If you will take advice in lieu of sentence,
This is my counsel to you, to take up
The matter where it stands. If each of you
Has had a ring presented by his father,
Let each believe his own the real ring.
'Tis possible the father chose no longer
To tolerate the one ring's tyranny;
And certainly, as he much loved you all,
And loved you all alike, it could not please him
By favouring one to be of two the oppressor.
Let each feel honoured by this free affection.
Unwarped of prejudice; let each endeavour

To vie with both his brothers in displaying
The virtue of his ring; assist its might
With gentleness, benevolence, forbearance,
With inward resignation to the godhead,
And if the virtues of the ring continue
To show themselves among your children's children,
After a thousand thousand years, appear
Before this judgment-seat--a greater one
Than I shall sit upon it, and decide.
So spake the modest judge.

[translated William Taylor; [Project Gutenberg](#)]