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REFORMATIVE EXTREMES OF BROWNING'S MASKS

Abstract
Robert Browning, a major Victorian poet, is primarily known for his sophisticated use of dramatic monologues and unreliable speakers. He is also noted for featuring idiosyncratic characters from interesting settings, like the Medieval or Renaissance times. There is a lot of subtext, hidden meanings, ideas, allusions and criticisms to be found between the lines of his poems. Readers are often perplexed by these seemingly too eccentric and exotic characters, and this "remoteness" which Browning cultivates can be interpreted as an indirect societal critique of the Victorian era, primarily of gender roles and marital expectations, class mixing, hypocrisy, self-righteousness, delusion, narcissism, the dichotomy of public and private persona and the conflict of idealistic and realistic representations of life. These themes are explored in his best-known poems such as the twins of *Porphyria's Lover* and *Johannes Agricola in Meditation*, then another poetic pair of *Count Gismond: Aix in Provence* and *My Last Duchess*, finally concluding with *Fra Lippo Lippi*, and each specific issue is dealt in their respective poems. If seen through this perspective, this distancing through colourful and alluring, if also strange, bizarre and off-putting characters may entice Browning's readers to contemplate these themes without being repelled or bored if those were put into their modern setting, which would likely make them tediously didactic and mundane. Thus, these poems can succeed in entertaining but also morally elevating us.

Key words: *Browning, poetry, dramatic monologues, Victorian era, repression, desire, reform, society.*

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning, who "is unread and untaught primarily because he is a very difficult poet" (Bloom, 2009, p. xi), has had a mutable literary reputation, especially during his life in Victorian England. His critical appraisal has risen since his death, but, being a very complex and prolific poet, he remains not so well read as his literary esteem might suggest. Readers often feel intimidated by his erudition and allusions, but "[t]hough Browning is a learned poet, cultivated in all the arts, including music and painting, his authentic difficulty emanates from his powers of mind" (Bloom, 2009, p. xi). It is from this mind that Browning conjures forth a vast array of intriguing, exotic and often extreme characters who are most memorably presented in his dramatic monologues for which he is mainly known. These can be confused with soliloquies, most famously found in Elizabethan plays, especially in those of Shakespeare, but there is an important difference:

> A soliloquy, ever since the Elizabethan period, has been understood by its audience to reveal the true inner thoughts of the speaker. A dramatic monologue, on the other hand, is a more complex form of monodrama, for the speaker is presenting him or herself as he or she wishes to be seen by the listener. The reader does not know whether the truth is being told because one cannot see into the mind of the speaker and, therefore, the form allows for ambiguity of meaning. (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 92)

Thus, the dramatic monologue is a persona, a mask shown by the speaker, and the reader is compelled to glance at what is behind it. Praised for their depth and sophistication, these monologues offer a startling and intriguing insight into the minds of a variety of figures, usually coming from the Medieval or Renaissance period. Aside from the multi-layered presentation of colourful characters, both historic and fictional, famous and obscure, and of their often extreme and controversial actions, there is another aspect of some of Browning's well-known poetic monologues worth considering: that of a subtle criticism of contemporary Victorian notions and mores about class division, self-righteousness, gender issues, sense of propriety, repression and the duality of mind and body. Victorian society was complex

and intriguing, and was simultaneously very rigid and conservative but also vibrant, advanced and modern; the term *Victorianism* is an apt description of this society of tremendous changes: "Victorianism remains a living concept in social and political debates, although its meaning is ambiguous: it is used to describe exploitation and class division, sexual repression, hypocrisy, values of hard work and self-help, moral certainties about family life, and a wide variety of arrangements intended to solve public problems" (Mitchell, 2009, p. xiii). Therefore, one of the aspects of these monologues is that they can become masks hiding, to a degree, specific faults of Victorian society. The purpose of these masks is to lure readers into an intriguing setting seemingly removed from their own society, expose the familiar societal flaws and invite them to contemplate their own societal ills in turn. This represents a subtle and artistic way of making the readers more aware of their own times and maybe instil a desire to improve it according to their capabilities. This moral aim would arguably not work nearly as much if Browning expressed these issues in his (near) contemporary Victorian setting, since the readers would likely find it too familiar and would feel jaded and saturated. True, it is very unlikely that this was Browning's intent, since the poems discussed here were published a few decades before the settling of social values which made the Victorian era distinct; or else, he was very prescient, indeed. Still, this interpretation of the poems' didactic masks in relation to Victorian society can be made regardless of the author's intent, with the (hopefully persuasive) arguments presented below. Interestingly, contemporary critics often considered Browning's works to exude typical Victorian optimism, for which he was both praised and criticized, but "[such] misconceptions haunt Browning's work – ironically perhaps, for he was a poet of misconceptions (the title of one of his poems), of failures, of abortive lives and loves, of the just-missed and the nearly fulfilled: a poet, in other words, of desire, perhaps the greatest in our language" (Karlin, 2001, p. 11). The word *desire* can encapsulate his vast and copious poetic works, and the exploration of its potent reach regarding people and their relationships is very effective for compelling readers to look inward and outward with a more penetrating gaze than usual. Due to Browning's elevated use of a

dramatic monologue, the speakers of his poems, in effect, talk to themselves as much to others, unintentionally revealing their repressions, frustrations and other emotions, and this reflects the broader societal problems which begat, or at least exacerbated that negative energy. Conversely, the readers themselves can be inspired to hold an internal conversation with the poems' characters, evaluating them and the environment they exist in, and cannot help but perhaps even subconsciously transfer this contemplation and impression to their contemporary world. Thus, Browning's technique in this regard can be described as "dialogic" and his poems as "double poems" and "[through] this dialogism, the poem becomes a locus of cultural critique" (Martens, 2016, p. 264). Explored here are the twin poems *Porphyria's Lover* and *Johannes Agricola in Meditation*, then another twins of *Count Gismond: Aix in Provence* and *My Last Duchess*, and finally *Fra Lippo Lippi*, each symbolically dealing with a specific Victorian societal issue.

IMPROPER LOVE

Porphyria's Lover (1836) is probably Browning's most anthologized and analysed poem; it is also his earliest dramatic monologue. Amidst a myriad of interpretations, a simple one could be that the speaker's desperate and appalling act is the result of frustrated love and desire, and its warped expression due to repressed emotions, rigid propriety and class system. The problem is the improper love affair between members of the upper and lower social classes, Porphyria and the speaker respectively, where he could be "a servant in love with Porphyria, the daughter of the proprietor" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 1). As is characteristic of Browning's poetry, there are differing interpretations, such as the idea that Porphyria's murderer commits this crime "as a culminating expression of his love and in order to preserve unchanged the perfect moment of her surrender to him" (Loucks, 1979, p. 525-26). Thus, the speaker's motive for murder is "likely to demonstrate for us rather more ingenuity than madness; and it is generally true that extraordinary motives in Browning come not from disordered subconscious urges but, as in Henry James, from the highest

moral and intellectual refinement" (Loucks, 1979, p. 526). However, as it will be shown, there are indications that the former idea is also a viable interpretation, where the murder is an uncontrollable emotional response.

In the beginning, we find the speaker in a cottage in the outdoors, listening to the cold sullen wind which blasts through the elm trees and disturbs the lake, ruining the beauty and serenity of the natural landscape, something which he does not seem to take kindly: "I listen'd with a heart fit to break" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74) as he impresses his mood on this atmosphere. In comes Porphyria as if to restore the ambiance, warming it up not only with the cottage grate but her radiance as well. She takes off the heavy unwieldy clothing, cloak, shawl, gloves and hat, like she was discarding armour to reveal her full beauty. She addresses the speaker, but he does not reply, as if the is too enraptured to speak. Porphyria puts her lover's arms around her waist and his head on her shoulder, her bright, sunny yellow hair covering them. It is obvious that the two were in love, but Porphyria cannot express it fully, as she is "Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, / To set its struggling passion free / From pride, and vainer ties dissever" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74). It seems that social circumstances are preventing her to do so; there is a repression of passion, and he could be of lower social standing, hence the mentioning of pride and vanity; this love would in the eyes of Victorian society be unacceptable. Porphyria's repression of passion seems to have an abrupt, jarring effect on her silent lover frustrated with unreturned love: "A sudden thought of one so pale / For love of her, and all in vain" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74). The speaker tries to justify his realization by convincing himself that she came to him, in a storm no less, for a good reason: she wants him to adore her as she adores him: "at last I knew / Porphyria worshipp'd me" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74). Clearly, he wants to think Porphyria is urging him to do something, to take control of their fate; he is distraught by an intense sense of love, frustration and above all, possession.

Her splendour makes him forget everyone and everything else that impedes their happiness; this ideal moment in time must be preserved forever: "That moment she was mine, mine, fair / Perfectly pure and good"

(Loucks, 1979, p. 74). If we look at the violence of the following act, the speaker seems more consumed with anger, rather than rational reason, however perverse it is; even though he previously "debated what to do" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74). The startling act is the expression of his incredibly heightened and unbalanced state of excitement which takes over; the spellbound speaker makes a strand out of her sunny hair, which he perceives, aptly enough, as a strong feature of her beauty, and winds it three times around her neck, suffocating her. He soothes himself by trying to present this as an almost merciful act: "No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (Loucks, 1979, p. 74-75) and, indeed, the expected sounds of a suffocating victim are not described, as if she went peacefully. This denotes the narrator's unreliable nature, which is to be expected considering how out of himself he really is. He describes her as if she is still alive, losing none of her beauty: "again / Laugh'd the blue eyes without a stain" (Loucks, 1979, p. 75) and carefully arranges her dead body so that her head rests on his shoulder, an imitation of the previous position which brought him such joy. The depiction that follows is congruous with the speaker's image of her: she is not only, in effect, alive, but also happy since that was what she desired all along: "The smiling rosy little head, / So glad it has its utmost will" (Loucks, 1979, p. 75). All of the things which stood in their way are now gone, and they are finally together. The speaker is delighted that her love affects him so profoundly, but it actually fuelled a wicked inspiration to solve all of their problems with one violent act. This sense of joy is unsettlingly exclaimed in the closing lines where he makes the ultimate justification of his deed, the one before the eyes of God: "And all night long we have not stirr'd, / And yet God has not said a word!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 75). In fact, it may go even further than that: "The jolt the reader feels is intensified by the additional irony of the speaker's smug delusion of divinely granted impunity" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 2).

Browning depicts the dangers of repressed volatile emotions and passion, in this case stemming from external factors, like socially proper norms against class mixing. The old class system of English society, though somewhat changed in the Victorian era by the burgeoning middle class of

industrialists and entrepreneurs, was still fairly strict and firmly upheld and the sense of what was proper was one of its central pillars. Undoubtedly, some people were bothered by these artificial obstacles in achieving happiness:

> The classes lived in separate areas and observed different social customs in everything from religion to courtship to the names and hours of their meals. In addition, Victorians believed that each class had its own standards, and people were expected to conform to the rules for their class. It was wrong, people thought, to behave like some- one from a class above—or below—your own. (Mitchell, 2009, p. 17-18)

Browning depicts a protagonist who reacts abnormally to a situation like that, not only criticizing this particular social custom but also warning us with the speaker's extreme and violent act of the depths such frustration and repression can reach. A conclusion can be made then (if we consider the impossibility of two people being with each other simply because of differing social classes as an extreme) that Browning answers that one extreme with another in striving for the reader's attention and, hopefully, contemplation.

A MORALLY UPRIGHT SINNER

Johannes Agricola in Meditation (1836), Porphyria's companion poem, explores delusion, self-aggrandizement, hypocrisy and religious self-righteousness. The eponymous speaker is based on "a sixteenth-century German and founder of the Antinomians, a sect who believed that God predestined a select group of human beings to heavenly salvation, no matter what the quality of their lives, and condemned all others to eternal damnation despite their innocence or good deeds" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 2). This historical reference translates well into the Victorian Era, where smugness and belief that some are meant to be better than others were common in that rigid class society. However, there is a subversion here of a notion that only higher classes could be arrogant. The speaker in the beginning of the poem presents himself as an elevated, contemplative, deep

person who appreciates the high beauty of creation: "There's heaven above, and night by night / I look right through its gorgeous roof" (Loucks, 1979, p. 72). Soon we find out that he has an even greater aim, and that is to return to God as his special, favourite child: "I lie where I have always lain, / God smiles as he has always smiled" (Loucks, 1979, p. 72). The speaker considers himself one of the elect, ordained, or predestined by God to happiness in Heaven: "The heavens, God thought on me his child; / Ordained a life for me, arrayed / Its circumstances every one / To the minutest" (Loucks, 1979, p. 72). As an elect, he is impervious to damnation, and whatever he might do in this life, whatever sin or crime, his blessed nature will negate it. This belief in his inviolable bliss is not his greatest source of pleasure, however; it is in fact looking down on those damned from birth, those reprobated by God, predestined to be doomed in hell: "For as I lie, smiled on, full-fed / By unexhausted power to bless, / I gaze below on hell's fierce bed, / And those its waves of flame oppress" (Loucks, 1979, p. 73). Now comes the interesting part, where a reader could so far expect that the speaker is, through God's will, of the wealthy and arrogant upper class, where his unrestrained ego is not satisfied with mere earthly benefits but also needs this religious dimension as well. However, the actually envious speaker outlines several professions (presumably of his betters), along with symbols of virtue and innocence, who are reprobated; their perceived respectfulness and esteem in a society means nothing when compared to the one of the elect: "Priest, doctor, hermit, monk grown white / With prayer, the broken-hearted nun, / The martyr, the wan acolyte, / The incense-swinging child,—undone / Before God fashioned star or sun!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 73). The speaker concludes by ridiculing, to his mind, the primitive notion that the place in heaven is calculated and bargained by having more good deeds than bad, as if in a transaction; such an idea devaluates the incomprehensible mystery of God's goodness: "how could I praise, / If such as I might understand, / Make out and reckon on his ways, / And bargain for his love" (Loucks, 1979, p. 73). Thus, we can interpret the speaker as perhaps a working-class person who is poor in virtues and humanity, who in his desperation, envy and self-hatred deludes himself into thinking that none of the societal and

personal virtues truly matter since he is one of God's elect. He is further isolated from society by believing in double predestination, or reprobation, which is characteristic of Calvinism, a relatively fringe branch of Protestant Christianity in the Victorian era. Reprobation was accepted neither in the dominant Anglican Church to which most people belonged, nor in the dissenting, smaller Christian groups such as Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, and others (Mitchell, 2006, p. 243-44). Inequality produces spiritual and emotional ugliness in all classes; this extremism of haughtiness and delusion is pollution afflicting society as a whole.

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Count Gismond: Aix in Provence (1842) is a poem with an exotic, medieval French setting in the city of Aix. At first glance, it features a simple story of a lady's besmirched honour saved by a gallant count. Closer inspection, however, reveals Browning's trademark unreliable narrator's dramatic monologue. Indeed, there are many questions hanging about when the story is told, only from the lady's perspective, of course, such as whether or not she really was Gauthier's lover, or if he really confessed he was lying in his final moments, or why she abruptly changes the topic of conversation at the end when her husband arrives: "These and many other questions are possible because of the dramatic form and Browning's subtle handling of it. The ambiguity of meaning makes this poem more complex and psychologically interesting than it first seems" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 92). This ambiguity allows the poem to be interpreted as a critique on gender relations in Victorian times, specifically the unhappiness in marriage and the ignominy of a woman's adultery in the eyes of society and the tremendous consequences such a thing could bring to her, unlike if adultery would be committed by a man.

The poem opens with the Lady's passionate plea to God to reward the chivalric count Gismond, who saved her from count Gauthier's machinations. It happened on a joyful occasion where she "being dressed in queen's array" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59) had the great honour of giving the tournament prize

to a victorious knight, and on her birthday, no less. The lady accuses her cousins of being accomplices to Gauthier's schemes, since they are envious of her beauty on that great day. She disapproves of their insincerity; instead of confronting any issues with her directly, they chose to go behind her back: "Had either of them spoke, instead / Of glancing sideways with a still head" (Loucks, 1979, p. 60). The lady proceeds to describe the happy atmosphere of her dressing up, descending the stairs and being greeted warmly by friends and admirers. Indeed, it is like a scene from a fairy tale. She is supposed to bring the crown to the victor, count Gismond, when the perfect moment is ruined by count Gauthier, who accuses her of having been his mistress the night before, thereby being unworthy to present the prize, or even be there. The phrasing of Gauthier's accusation describes the steps to admonish an adulteress, and it is descriptive of medieval customs of how a woman was punished and shunned by a patriarchal society: "Bring torches! Wind the penance sheet / About her! Let her shun the chaste, / Or lay herself before their feet!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 61). The lady is so taken aback by such a horrid accusation that she does not have the strength to respond: "What says the body when they spring / Some monstrous torture-engine's whole / Strength on it? No more says the soul" (Loucks, 1979, p. 61).

The ideal solution to the calamity emerges in the figure of valiant Gismond, who appears heavenly to her: "I felt quite sure that God had set / Himself to Satan" (Loucks, 1979, p. 61). He charges to confront Gauthier. Her reaction to this is significant, because she finds solace in her champion not questioning her honour in the slightest: "The heart o' the joy, with my content / In watching Gismond unalloyed / By any doubt of the event" (Loucks, 1979, p. 61). Her hero overpowers Gauthier and forces him to recant the accusation, which he does with his dying breath. Gismond kneels before the lady, then embraces and professes his love for her: "For he began to say the while / How south our home lay many a mile" (Loucks, 1979, p. 62). The perfect happy ending from a fairy-tale enfolds, as the crowd rejoices in their union: "So, 'mid the shouting multitude / We two walked forth to never more / Return" (Loucks, 1979, p. 62). Nothing bad happens

to the cousins, who resume their lives, and even Gauthier receives kind words from the virtuous lady: "Gauthier's dwelling place / God lighten! may his soul find grace!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 62). There is also an epilogue of the story, describing the noble nature of their eldest son when the narrative is abruptly stopped and another one is started in a completely different, much less mythical and more mundane tone: "Gismond here? / And have you brought my tercel back? / I was just telling Adela / How many birds it struck since May" (Loucks, 1979, p. 62). Not only the tone of the ending is changed, but it casts a completely different light on the whole poem. Tercel, being a male hawk used mainly for recreational purposes such as hunting, was a routine activity in Victorian England, and is a far cry from giving the award to the best knight in medieval chivalric France. It could be said that the lady's tale of treachery and virtue, with love triumphant in the end, is only wishful thinking, a way to escape dull and mundane life, or a way the mind deals with the repression of showing amorous feelings, or the shame of adultery. Thus, in a suitable reversal, the beautiful maiden of medieval France becomes the ordinary married Victorian woman, count Gismond becomes her lover and Gauthier her husband.

This interpretation may seem far-fetched at first, but if we consider the duties of a married middle-or upper-class woman in Victorian times, which consisted of being formal and proper in expressing love for her spouse and arranging social calls, as the upbringing of children was often entrusted to nannies and governesses, things might become clearer. These social calls were primarily designed to help the husband meet new people, and these contacts would enable him to perhaps expand his business and be more successful. The situation in reality was more complex and varied, but the existence of stereotypes like these shows that this phenomenon of a wife's expectations at home was not uncommon: "The pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home. She preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband's conscience, guided her children's training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action" (Mitchell, 2009, p. 266). Indeed, for Victorian women, their entire lives were encapsulated in marriage:

> Marriage was seen as woman's natural and expected role: it satisfied her instinctual needs, preserved the species, provided appropriate duties, and protected her from the shocks and dangers of the rude, competitive world. In the privacy of the home, her finer instincts—sensitivity, self-sacrifice, innate purity—could have free play. Women had to be kept safe at home; their perfect compliance, obedience, innocence, and refinement would make them too easy to victimize in the competitive public world. (Mitchell, 2009, p. 267)

Boredom and the lack of passion in marriage, or stifled self-expression, would perhaps drive a woman into finding excitement and fulfilment in something or with someone else. Having an affair as a man and a woman was different for each, as was divorce: "The grounds for divorce were not the same for men and women. A man could get a divorce if his wife committed adultery. For a woman to sue for divorce, her husband's adultery had to be aggravated by physical cruelty that was greater than 'ordinary chastisement' or by other extreme circumstances" (Mitchell, 2009, p. 106). The extreme of formality, decorum and reserve between a respectable Victorian couple is met by another extreme of imagining a wholly different life where a knight takes his betrothed into his arms in front of everybody and sails off into the sunset. So, it may be that our heroine was indeed having an affair in the 19th century, hence the irony of chastising her cousins' dishonesty, and that this fantasy life was her mind's way of dealing with the enormous fallout such a scandal would bring to a woman in that time. Adulterous women in Victorian times faced severe social ostracizing and would be referred to as "fallen". This is perhaps why we do not have an explicit denial of the affair by the lady, although she tries to justify that by shock. Her reputation would hence be ruined and she would almost certainly be excluded from the social circles she belonged to. As mentioned before, this kind of situation for a man would be laxer as they could engage in affairs much more freely in this very conservative and patriarchal society. Therefore, the daydreaming could represent a critique of the double standards for adultery.

A DISOBEDIENT ORNAMENT

My Last Duchess (1842) is another prominent example of Browning's dramatic monologue. It is set in Renaissance Italy and the protagonist is most likely based on the historic Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara from an old and respected aristocratic line, and his wife on Lucresia de' Medici, the daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Florence, who died very young and it was suspected in Browning's time that she was poisoned (Woolford, Karlin, Phelan, 2013, p. 197). The poem, like *Count Gismond*, could be interpreted as dealing with gender issues in the Victorian Era, namely, the perception of a relationship between a husband and a wife and things that were expected from each in order to maintain a veneer of civility and reputability.

The monologue rhymes in couplets, as if signifying the Duke's eloquence, and starts with him addressing his guest, inviting him to look at the portrait of his late wife. The portrait is of such quality that she seems alive in it, as "The depth and passion of its earnest glance" (Loucks, 1979, p. 58) of the Duchess is reserved only for Duke of Ferrara, since he keeps the portrait under a curtain. Only on rare occasions, like this one, does he raise it for another's eyes. Her glance is the most striking attribute of the portrait, and the Duke informs his guest that many people wonder how it came to be so expressive, energetic and emphatic. He says that the glance is actually not exclusive to him, and that she is looking the same way at Fra Pandolfo, the painter who made the portrait, but this is probably, he says, because of her excitement about being painted: "such stuff / Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough / For calling up that spot of joy" (Loucks, 1979, p. 58). The Duke seems to casually mention a particular trait of her being easily excited and interested in all sorts of things, followed by that look: "She had / A heart---how shall I say---too soon made glad" (Loucks, 1979, p. 58). The Duke then laments: "Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast, / The dropping of the daylight in the West" (Loucks, 1979, p. 58). He is displeased that he was not the only cause of such joy and enthusiasm, as he deems it proper. He points out her politeness, where she thanked others, but he was not happy with the way she thanked them, noting that same enthusiasm when speaking with him:

"as if she ranked / My gift of nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59). The Duke tries to appear above criticizing such trifles, as he says: "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59), but it is clear that this was more than a hindrance to him. He then says that if one had a way of telling her that was improper, which he claims he did not, and if she listened to those instructions, that would also represent stooping, or going beneath your station, and he was not willing to do so because such things should be obvious and unsaid: "and I chose / Never to stoop" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59). But the Duchess not only would not listen, but actually had opinions of her own and defended her actions: "plainly set / Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuses" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59), something which the Duke thought was extremely unacceptable; not only she did not obey him without question, but actually wanted to be considered his equal. The Duke simply could not tolerate the situation any further: "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. / There she stands, as if alive" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59). Nothing is mentioned explicitly, but the ominous tone is unmistakable; the Duchess faced either imprisonment, or more likely, death, as can be seen in the word *command*: "The sense is ambiguous. Much later Browning said, 'The commands were that she should be put to death,' then added, 'or he might have had her shut up in a convent'" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59). The speaker then lightly changes the subject, talking about the upcoming wedding preparations, and we learn that the guest is a representative of the family whose daughter is to be married to the Duke. The tour continues, and the closing lines are of the Duke showing the statue of Neptune from a famous sculptor: "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 59). This last image summarizes the previous elements of the story, those of "the discussion of art and possessions and the ironical disclosure of the relationship between the duke and duchess" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 90), as he was, in fact, unable to appreciate and tame her unique character: "She was the rarity, which in his cold egoism he was unable to value" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 90).

The Duke's monologue is indicative of his ruthlessness and possessiveness; he considers it his right to control his wife's disposition towards other people, and her affection is to be chiefly his. He views her basically as an object, and that continues even after her death, where she is objectified in a painting to be used at his pleasure. In the Victorian era, married women were often considered little more than property and practically had no legal rights; marriage was viewed as a sacred social contract, the foundation of society. Wives were obliged to honour their contract by pleasing their husbands in their wishes and desires. They were under the legal guardianship of their spouses. In most situations, any property or income a wife may have had was her husband's. A wife was to always be a good and cheerful company to him, and was supposed to lift his mood when he came home weary and stressed from work; in fact, she was often referred to as the angel of the house (Mitchell, 2009, p. 266). Her affection, therefore, was for her husband and children, and she was to be detached and formal in communication with others, as befits a respectable woman. The Duke, like many protagonists of Browning's poems, acts in an extreme manner when his possession is not behaving properly, but this can be connected to the Victorian notions of women's position as primarily good wives and mothers. In fact, there was a prevalent belief that women should not attend universities or engage in intellectual or artistic activities as that would make them ill, their fragile natures could not withstand it. This position was so entrenched that even Queen Victoria herself opposed various movements for women's rights. The situation would get better, however, by the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and The Married Women Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, where women could own their property and wages.

LIFELESS ART

Fra Lippo Lippi (1855) is aptly described as "Browning's most forceful statement upon the relation of art to life" (Loucks, 1979, p. 105), with the eponymous character being "one of Browning's greatest characters and one whom most critics have accepted as expressing Browning's own ideas

about art and life" (Kennedy and Hair, 2007, p. 264). The poem is set in Florence and the speaker is based on the historic and eponymous Italian 15th century Franciscan painter. It presents themes of strict separation of the soul and flesh, idealization and reality, the enjoyment of life's pleasures and the negativity of repressing them. Browning employs an unusual figure of a friar to question these issues, but this may be the extreme by which readers may think about and put them into their contemporary context.

The poem is a narrative of Fra Lippi's address to the guards who apprehend him at midnight for ostensibly suspicious behaviour. He gives an indication of his atypical character by using the very unseemly and blasphemous curse word "zooks" at the beginning of his monologue, it being a reference to hooks, or nails used to crucify Christ. He is dismayed about the arrest and mentions that he enjoys the protection of the most powerful family in Florence, de Medici's. He identifies himself as a monk and painter and insists that there was nothing suspicious about him wandering the streets at such an hour, since he is always bound in a convent: "And I've been three weeks shut within my mew, / A-painting for the great man, saints and saints / and saints again" (Loucks, 1979, p. 106). The dreary work became unbearable and his attention is immediately drawn by the euphonic sounds: "There came a hurry of feet and little feet, / A sweep of lute strings, laughs and whiffs of song" (Loucks, 1979, p. 106). It was peasants singing Flower o' the broom, a popular folk song of that time. Seeing them simply enjoying life, the effect on the friar is immediate: "zooks, sir, flesh and blood, / That's all I'm made off!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 106). He improvises a rope from bed sheets and descends to the street. He lost the singing party and was about to return to his room and the tedious painting of religious scenes such as "Jerome knocking on his poor old breast / With his great round stone to subdue the flesh" (Loucks, 1979, p. 107). The reference to Saint Jerome is based on a part of his life where he as a youth indulged in various pleasurable activities but was feeling quite repentant after. It is significant because it denotes the familiar gulf between the carnal body and its pleasures, and the elevated soul; as already mentioned, this sharp division was one of the things Fra Lippi criticized.

He notes the amazement of the guards that a member of the Church would even think about these matters and proceeds to elaborate and justify this by telling them a story of his life. He was from childhood left as an orphan, and after a while of hard life on the streets was placed by his aunt in the care of the Carmelite Convent; he stayed because it was either that or starvation. He sarcastically remembers his renouncement of his earthly life and his inability to truly comprehend what that meant: "I did renounce the world, / …all at eight years old" (Loucks, 1979, p. 107). He had a propensity for sketching images and figures; the monks recognized his talent and he was soon making frescoes of monks and people at confessions. However, he painted in a realist manner, with deep expressive faces and gestures; they were basically a faithful representation of the situations in life. But his betters did not appreciate this realistic portrayal where people were not moral, idealized depictions of religious lessons and thus not only reproached him for it: "Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true / As much as pea and pea! It's devil's-game!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 109) but clearly posited his sole artistic purpose: "Your business is not to catch men with show, / with homage to the perishable clay" (Loucks, 1979, p. 109). Instead, he should "Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh" (Loucks, 1979, p. 109). A comic but significant moment ensued where they charged him with painting men's souls, although were unable to explain what a soul actually looked like: "It's…well, what matters talking, it's the soul!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 109). The clear objective of religious art was once more reiterated: "Paint the soul, never mind legs and arms!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 109). This distinction vexes Fra Lippi: "Now, is this sense, I ask?" (Loucks, 1979, p. 110). It is basically a question of transforming painted figures into three-dimensional characters by adding a touch of expression, for example with a portrait of a girl: "Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue, / Can't I take breath and add life's flash, / And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?" (Loucks, 1979, p. 110). The ordinary activities that can bring happiness in life are something he yearns for, and also laments that at a difficult time of his life when he was just a child they made him forgo all that: "You should not take a fellow eight years old / And make him swear to never kiss the

girls" (Loucks, 1979, p. 110). He tries to sneak his ideas of art into his works, hoping that some observer could find the elements of real life in them, i.e. both sorrow and joy that it brings: "A turn, some warm eye finds me at my saints- / A laugh, a cry, the business of the world" (Loucks, 1979, p. 111).

Fra Lippi freely acknowledges his rebellious nature and suggests that this ability to enjoy life, emotions and their expression is innate in us as it comes from God: "I always see the garden of God there" (Loucks, 1979, p. 111) and we should not repress it: "The value and significance of flesh, / I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards" (Loucks, 1979, p. 111). It is only natural to appreciate and experience the world, its beauty, wonder and power, as he says, simply because "God made it all!" (Loucks, 1979, p. 111). One must raise an important question and that is whether this earthly beauty and mystery was "To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon, / Wondered at?" (Loucks, 1979, p. 112) and the answer should be easy. By allowing the works of art "To let a truth slip" (Loucks, 1979, p. 112), people might recognize beauty and truth in life that they might have missed otherwise. This echoes the Romantic idea of "lifting the veil of familiarity", especially present in the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley who had a great influence on Browning. Art is supposed to have this purpose of not only pleasing, but somehow educating and reforming as well: "Art was given for that; / God uses us to help each other so, / Lending our minds out" (Loucks, 1979, p. 112). He also lets them in on a plan that he was devising, namely, inserting his likeness into a painting where Virgin Mary and Jesus were accompanied by angels and saints; he would be one of the monks in the background. That would not be inappropriate, argues Fra Lippi, and imagines an angel assuring him that since God gave him the gift of painting in the first place, there would be nothing wrong in finishing his work: "*Iste perfecit opus*" (Loucks, 1979, p. 114), meaning: this one completes the work. By adding himself to the idealized painting of a sacred Christian event, it is as if he is also adding humanity to the ideal image, where he represents not a perfect model of a person, like saints among angels, but simply a man with all his faults and virtues. Appropriately, the defiant friar finishes his monologue with: "Zooks!"

This somewhat extreme medieval friar, who opposes the sacred division of body and soul and, in a sense, embraces a form of reasonable hedonism, and who also speaks against celibacy and idealistic representations of life, could relate to the strict division of mind and body upheld in Victorian times. The ideal of the soul in the poem corresponds to the ideal of a rational Victorian man governed by reason and logic, a view supported by the popular philosophy of Utilitarianism and the strong role of science and technology in everyday life (consider the ironic description of Mr. Gradgrind from Dickens' *Hard Times*). Expressions of overt passion and emotions, singing and dancing, i.e. things of the "body", were liable to be discouraged, as the era was very conservative and morally strict, being in part a reaction to the morally lax Georgian era preceding it, its embodiment being George IV who was infamous for his debauchery. A good example of the dangers of repression was the social taboo of discussing sex, which was usually an unacceptable topic in polite society, but it influenced the proliferation of prostitution. Freely and honestly discussing social taboos like that and addressing human physical and emotional needs and activities (i.e. accepting the "body" part in the body and mind/soul division) would help to restore the balance in Victorian society. In terms of Fra Lippi's artistic theories (where art lifts the aforesaid veil of familiarity, i.e. it helps to illuminate a more realistic vision of life and the important and often overlooked things in it), Browning may have also criticized the popular decorative and gaudy tendencies in Victorian art, featuring excessive ornaments from various influences.

Browning frequently portrays unbalanced, eccentric, downright psychotic, but above all memorable and interesting characters for a specific purpose of compelling the reader to ponder about their background, motivations, acts and context and then hopefully recognize that the issues revolving around those characters are relevant for their own contemporary society. With this frame of mind, the extremes of the characters could correspond to the specific extremes of Victorian society, and their realization may even contribute to social reforms. From the unnamed speaker of

Porphyria's Lover and his reaction to the frustrated love due to class division, to the envious delusion and haughtiness of Johannes Agricola, to Duke Ferrara's possessiveness and objectification of women; from the Lady of *Count Gismond* and her trepidation from the consequences of infidelity and dissatisfaction of married life, to Fra Lippi's rebellious attitude and views on art, body and soul and repression; all of these concerns reflect the Victorian attitude towards social class, envy and complex projection of one's supposed betters, women's rights and their role in marriage, division of the physical and rational and the purpose of art. The Victorian age itself was the age of extremes: unparalleled technological advancement and riches of the British Empire contrasted with the abhorrent poverty in city slums; progressive acts of the abolition of slavery contrasted with the suppression of women and their rights, etc. Still, the era saw many reforms taking place, especially near the end of the 19th century, and it is pleasing to think that the quality of Browning's dramatic monologues may have had some small part in changing readers' attitudes regarding these issues.

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REFORMATIVNE KRAJNOSTI BROWNINGOVIH MASKI

Sažetak

Robert Browning, istaknuti pjesnik viktorijanskog doba, prvenstveno je poznat po svojoj vještoj upotrebi dramskih monologa i nepouzdanih govornika. Također je poznat i po svojim osebujnim likovima i zanimljivim okolinama, poput onih iz srednjovjekovnog i renesansnog doba. Postoji dosta skrivenih značenja, tema, aluzija i kritika koje se mogu naći između redaka njegovih pjesama. Čitatelji su često bili začuđeni zbog ovih, naizgled, previše ekscentričnih i egzotičnih likova, ali postoji potencijalno jako dobar razlog za ovo "udaljavanje" koje Browning njeguje: radi se o neizravnoj kritici viktorijanskog društva, prvenstveno uloge spolova i bračnih konvencija, miješanja društvenih staleža, licemjerstva, samodopadnosti, zablude, narcizma, jaza između javne i privatne ličnosti te sukoba između idealističnog i realnog prikaza života. Ove su teme zastupljene u njegovim najpoznatijim pjesmama poput *Porfirijin ljubavnik* te *Johannes Agricola u meditaciji*, potom *Grof Gismond: Aix in Provence* i *Moja posljednja vojvotkinja* te na kraju *Fra Lippo Lippi*, gdje je svaka specifična tema istražena u odgovarajućoj pjesmi. Svrha ovog udaljavanja, kroz prikaz upečatljivih i primamljivih, ali istovremeno i bizarnih i odbojnih likova, jeste da se čitatelji podstaknu na promišljanje o ovim temama, a da ne budu odbijeni ako bi one bile prikazane kroz njihov vlastiti period, što bi prikaz ovih tema učinilo dosadnim i pretjerano didaktičkim. Sukladno tome, ove pjesme streme zabaviti, ali i moralno uzdignuti svoju publiku.

Ključne riječi: *Browning, poezija, dramski monolozi, Viktorijansko doba, represija, strast, reforma, društvo*.