

**WHEAT AND TARES:
A STUDY OF ROBERT BROWNING'S CLERICS**

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WHEAT AND TARES:
A STUDY OF ROBERT BROWNING'S CLERICS

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Bonnie Louise Karrigan

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ABSTRACT

From 1841, with the publication of *Pippa Passes*, until the publication of *The Ring and the Book* in 1868 and 1869, clerics of the Roman Catholic Church run like a skein through the poetry of Robert Browning. Most of these clerics are scoundrels. Browning uses two stock characters, the monk practicing false piety and the worldly bishop, to establish the mode of behavior in the Church.

However, in the general morass of the Church, some clerics emerge as admirable. These clerics adopt some irregular mode of thought or behavior. Fra Lippo Lippi, the errant monk and the consummate artist, disavows the Church's rejection of the world and the flesh. Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi becomes a better priest through a woman's love. The Pope, too, advances unorthodox ideas for a man of his position in the Church, disclaiming the validity of papal infallibility and daring to condemn a former cleric to a public execution. The Pope entertains hopes for a stronger faith in a later age. Browning's representative of this later age is Bishop Blougram, a muted, refined version of the Browning stereotype of the worldly bishop.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning uses the image of the Church as a field overrun by weeds. In Browning's view, the tares and poppies of the Church are the pious, cautious monks and luxury-loving bishops. For Browning, the wheat of the Church is the errant cleric.

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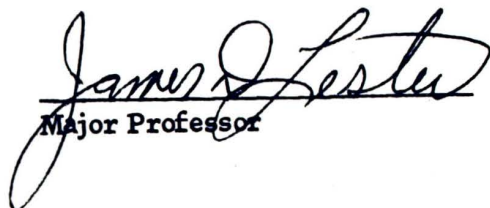
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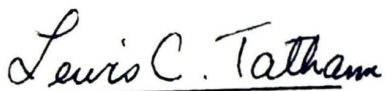
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Bonnie Louise Karrigan entitled "Wheat and Tares: A Study of Robert Browning's Clerics." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

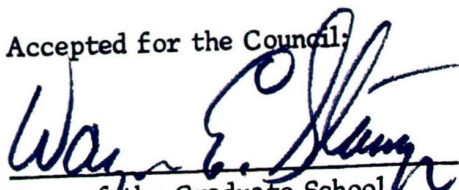

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We have read this thesis and
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1841, Robert Browning published Pippa Passes. In part, this work rose out of Browning's first Italian tour in 1838, a tour on which he visited Asolo, Italy, the setting for Pippa Passes. The date 1841 is significant, both for the beginning of Browning's fascination for Italy (he would entitle his last volume of poems published the day of his death Asolando) and the beginning of his fascination for clerics of the Roman Catholic Church. Clerics--monks, priests, bishops, and even a pope--run like a skein through the work of Robert Browning, beginning with the portrait of the Monsignor in 1841 and culminating in a world of clerics in The Ring and the Book, published in 1868 and 1869.

Despite the attention which Browning devotes to clerics in his poetry, Browning's attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church remains ambiguous. In Christmas Eve, Browning surveys three modes of Christianity prevalent in Victorian England--the Roman Catholic, the Protestant, and the rationalistic. In a vision, the narrator views the midnight mass celebrated at Saint Peter's in Rome on Christmas Eve. He views the mass as the supreme reenactment of the Incarnation, a tenet of Christianity which fascinated Robert Browning. Although the narrator sees the ritual of the mass as excessive, he nevertheless acknowledges: "I see the error but above / The

scope of error see the love" (ll. 649-50).¹

Browning's distrust of the Church is related to his romantic distrust of the institution in general. Throughout his poetry, he speaks out against the various conventions which govern men and women at the expense of their instincts and intuitions. He shows evidence of a distrust of the excessive ritual and rigid dogma of the Church. In addition, he distrusts the Church's asceticism and the false piety which it fosters; he distrusts the Church's penchant for attracting, and retaining, such unsavory characters as the conniving monk of the Spanish cloister, the bishop at Saint Praxed's Church, the world-weary Archbishop Marzi-Medici, and the Franceschini brothers. Yet, despite all the evil which he finds in the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, Browning never, unlike Voltaire, advocates its destruction; and his admirable clerics never leave the Church.

Critics have labeled Browning's clerics "a rogues' gallery"² and "a whole family of cynical worldings."³ For the most part, they are. Yet, among these portraits of fools, lechers, dilettantes, and hypocrites, are clerics whom Browning would have us admire. Not surprisingly, those clerics

¹Citations to Christmas Eve and The Ring and The Book are to The Works of Robert Browning, ed. Frederick G. Kenyon. (London, 1912: rpt. New York: Arns Press, Inc., 1966). Citations to all other poems are to Poems of Robert Browning, ed. Donald Smalley. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1956).

²Charles T. Phipps, "Browning's Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi: Warrior-Priest, Dantean Lover, Critic of Society," English Literary History, 36 (Dec. 1969), 715.

³E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 89.

are the ones who espouse Browning's views on the three great themes which run throughout his poetry, art, love, and religion.

The second chapter examines two of Browning's stock clerics, the monk practicing false piety and the worldly bishop. The third chapter examines the figure of the errant monk, Fra Lippo Lippi, Browning's consummate artist, who rejects the Church's denial of the flesh and the world. Chapter four examines the manner in which another errant cleric, Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi, emerges as a better priest from having profited from a woman's love. Finally, chapter five examines Browning's beliefs about the nature of faith and doubt in light of the words of the Pope and Bishop Blougram.

CHAPTER II

THE MONK AND THE BISHOP

In Robert Browning's scheme of things, monks usually practice a false piety and bishops a devout attention to the acquisition of the things of this world. In The Ring and the Book, Browning juxtaposes portraits of men from two different worlds which make up the realm of the Church. Men in moth-eaten robes kneel on stone floors and finger their beads; men draped in purple and decked with jewels play cards in fashionable salons. Perhaps the clearest division between the life of the monk and the life of the bishop emerges in a vignette from Giuseppe Caponsacchi in The Ring and the Book. In addressing the members of the ecclesiastical court after having been summoned from his relegation to the Civita, Caponsacchi recounts for the court some of the ramblings of his mentor the bishop, a knowledgeable observer of the Church scene. The bishop had sent a "lump of learning" and a "piece of piety" to Rome in the hopes of amusing a jaded cardinal. The bishop gives this account:

Thither they clump-clumped, beads and book in hand,
And ever since 'tis meat for man and maid
How both flopped down, prayed blessing on bent pate
Bald many an inch beyond the tonsure's need. . . .¹
(R&B, VI, ll. 376-79)

¹All citations to The Ring and the Book will be so designated by the abbreviation "R&B."

Men a world apart from the cardinal, the hapless monks fail to grasp that

There's nothing moves his Eminence so much
 As--far from all this awe at sanctitude--
 Heads that way, eyes that twinkle, modified mirth
 At the closet-lectures on the Latin tongue
 A lady learns so much by we know where.

(R&B, VI, ll. 381-85)

In order to reinforce Browning's idea of the acute division existing in the Church, let us examine two representative poems of life in the cloister and life in the cathedral.

Robert Browning first paired "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and "Incident of the French Camp" under the heading Camp and Cloister. It is impossible not to contrast the openness, the potential for gallant action, and the camaraderie of "Incident of the French Camp" with the pettiness and restraints of life in the cloister. Browning measured a life's worth on its intensity rather than on its longevity. The only intensity in the Spanish cloister is the depth of hatred of the unnamed monk for Brother Lawrence.

As he was to do later in "Fra Lippo Lippi," Browning juxtaposes two opposing types of clerical characters in "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." On the one hand, there is Brother Lawrence, a monk who has adjusted well to the confines of monastic life. Tending his vegetable world--his myrtle bushes, his roses, and his lilies--occupies his time.

Brother Lawrence's foil is the unnamed monk, a man who hates the gentle Brother Lawrence and wishes him in hell. Yet, and here Browning comments on the nature of the cloister, the monk must express his hatred in clandestine ways--snapping flower stems and breaking flower pots. He

delivers all threats and imprecations, even though they are directed to an unassuming person like Brother Lawrence, in cautious mutters. An ineffective man whose words never materialize into deeds, he assails the unassuming goodness of Brother Lawrence and attributes to him one of his own visions, a secret vision upon which he has evidently lavished much time and attention:

While brown Delores
Squats outside the Convent bank
With Sanchicha telling stories,
Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs
--Can't I see his dead eye glow. . . ?
(ll. 25-31)

Additionally, his plans for damning the soul of Brother Lawrence include a reliance upon a text listing a litany of damnations, a scheme for slipping a much-perused French novel into the gardening equipment of Brother Lawrence, and a plan calling for the intervention of Satan. With his grandiose plans in a petty world, the monk succeeds only in satirizing himself, for a man capable only of muttering behind the back of gentle Brother Lawrence lacks the capacity for dueling in a battle of wits with Satan.

Yet, if the monk lacks the intuitive, innocent response of Brother Lawrence to the world, he can make one claim to goodness in the monastic scheme of things. Brother Lawrence is less meticulous in his attention to meaningless form and ritual:

When he finishes refection,
Knife and fork he never lays
Cross-wise, to my recollection,
As I do, in Jesu's praise.
I the Trinity illustrate,
Drinking watered orange-pulp--
In three sips the Arian frustrate;
While he drains his at one gulp.
(ll. 33-40)

So attuned is the monk to ritual, that, at the call to evening prayers, he mechanically begins a "Hail Mary" and intersperses another insult before continuing to the next line of his meaningless prayer.

The worldliness, in the sense of a secretive delight in the things of this world, hinted at in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" fairly lunges at the reader in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." While in the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," Browning had juxtaposed two opposing types; in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," he uses two churchmen of the same ilk. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," the two personae, one dying in a garrulous fashion and the other long since dead, are churchmen motivated by their lust for the things of this world. The Bishop's passion for the possession of works of art equals that of another Renaissance man, the sinister Duke of Ferrara. Browning provides a parallel between the greed and pride of possession which the two men equate with the possession of the Duchess and the mistress. The Duke can rank the portrait of his chastened Duchess among his art works; the Bishop implies early in the poem that the mistress represented one more object accumulated at old Gandolf's expense.

Because Saint Praxed was a Roman virgin who selflessly gave her wealth to the poor, the very presence of the woman chasing, materialistic Bishop in her church constitutes an ironic situation. While the Bishop opens his monologue by quoting the Preacher in Ecclesiastes on the brevity of the things of this world, "there is little doubt that the Bishop would thoroughly disagree with the Preacher whose advice to man was to prepare himself for

the day when earthly life must come to resolution. . . ."² After ordering several young men around his bed, the Bishop adopts the same false avuncular stance as that of the Prior in "Fra Lippo Lippi." After the Bishop's abandonment of the use of the title "nephews" for the more accurate designation of "sons," the reader grasps that the Bishop has forsaken his vow of chastity on several occasions. During the course of the Bishop's monologue, it becomes apparent that the mistress was only one of the prizes for which the Bishop had vied with his archenemy Gandolf. The irony emerges again when the Bishop muses:

Peace, peace seems all,
 Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
 And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
 With tooth and nail to save my niche, you know
 --Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
 Shrewd was that snatch from the corner South
 He graced his carrion with, God curse the same.
 (ll. 13-19)

None of Browning's other bishops was to ever approach the overt materialism of the Bishop at Saint Praxed's Church. The Bishop's sole concern for life after death revolves around the tomb which will house his remains. Gandolf has a tomb of onion stone; the Bishop insists upon peach blossom marble. The material and the sensual dominate the Bishop's description of the precious stone which he wants to repose with him inside his tomb:

Bedded in stone of rotten fig-leave soft,
 And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
 Some limp, ah God, of lapis lazuli
 Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
 Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast. . . .
 (ll. 40-48)

²George Monteiro, "The Apostasy and Death of Saint Praxed's Bishop, "Victorian Poetry, 6 (Spring 1968), 211.

Even in his vision of a life beyond this one, the Bishop devotes scrupulous attention to the gratification of each of his senses:

And then how I shall lie through centuries,
 And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
 And see God made and eaten all day long,
 And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
 Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!
 (ll. 80-84)

The Bishop's mind leans toward descriptions which combine images that, by their juxtaposition, create a grotesque effect. At this point, it is interesting to note the Bishop's description of the frieze for the prospective tomb, a description characterized by a Renaissance mixture of the Christian and the classical, the saintly and the obscene:

The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
 Those Pans and nymphs, ye wot of, and perchance
 Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
 The Savior at his sermon on the mount,
 Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
 Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
 And Moses with the tables . . . but I know
 Ye mark me not. (ll. 56-63)

The classical references to the items on the frieze lend insight into the character of the Bishop. Classical literature abounds with myths depicting the lechery of the satyrs, and Pan ranks as the greatest satyr of them all. The thyrsus, a vine-covered staff with a pine cone on its tip, is the traditional attribute of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, and his roving band of satyrs. For the Bishop, life has been something of a bacchanalian revel.

Although he is materialistic and sensual, although he lacks a concern for his spiritual life which one might hope to find in a prelate of the Roman Catholic Church, the Bishop does not emerge as a totally despicable figure.

By the end of the poem, he has become pathetic. Deserted by his sons, the old man remains, contemplating the possibility of a gritstone tomb, meditating on his past mistakes, uncertain of the boundary between life and death, and willing to tilt one last time with his old foe:

Well go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
 But in a row: and going turn your backs
 --Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
 And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
 That I may watch at leisure if he leers--
 Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
 As still he envied me, so fair she was!

(ll. 119-25)

Through Browning's portraits in the early monologues and in The Ring and the Book, the false piety of the monk and the worldliness of the bishop emerge as the orthodox modes of behavior operating within the Church. Although they sin, they sin with a certain air of discreetness. Note that, although the monk takes a covert pleasure in viewing the girls by the convent bank and in reading the notorious French novel, he remains in good standing in the cloister through his meticulous attention to form and ritual. Although the Bishop emerges as condemned in his own words, of a gallery of sins--lechery, envy, greed, theft, and possible arson--he has taken care to keep them secrets. In effect, the mass of Browning's monks and bishops stand condemned of secretive, skulking modes of behavior.

CHAPTER III

FRA LIPPO LIPPI, THE ERRANT MONK

The subject of art ranks as one of the three great themes which run throughout the poetry of Robert Browning. It is the Renaissance artist for whom Browning displays the greatest affinity, for Browning exhibits a special kinship for the exuberance, the humanism, and the diversity of the Renaissance era. Browning's greatest artist of an era characterized by great artists emerges as Fra Lippo Lippi, a man who is, at the same time, a spiritualist and a sensualist, a monk and a bon vivant, a man of God and a man of the world. Like the other clerics whom Browning would have us admire, Fra Lippo emerges as a man with little patience for the asceticism, the tradition, and the dogma of the Church. Fra Lippo Lippi, the errant monk, emerges as Browning's ironic spokesman for this theory of the nature and function of art and the artist.

Browning had experimented earlier with the figure of the cleric with an appreciation for art. The Monsignor in Pippa Passes is chronologically Browning's first clerical character. Although not a creator like Fra Lippo, the Monsignor nevertheless had recognized the excellence of the work of Jules, the sculptor, and had attempted to advance the work of the young man. In the mouth of this reformed worldling, Browning put the words of his doctrine of imperfection, the belief that excellence and merit lie in the striving for, rather than the attaining of, the goal. The Monsignor comments

on the young man's decision to turn from sculpting to the untried field of painting:

Foolish Jules! and yet, after all, why foolish? He may--probably will fail egregiously; but if there should arise a new painter, will it not be in some such way, by a poet now, or a musician (spirits who have conceived and perfected an Ideal through some other channel), transferring it to this, and escaping our conventional roads by pure ignorance of them. . . . (Pippa Passes, "Night," ll. 45-50)

With Fra Lippo, the churchman as critic blooms into the full-fledged and, in Browning's eyes, the consummate artist.

The misbehaving churchman is a stock character for Browning. The figure of Fra Lippo Lippi is no exception. The worldliness hinted at in the monk's images of Dolores and Sanchicha and in his thorough knowledge of the notorious French novel is confirmed in the person of Fra Lippo Lippi. Like the unnamed monk of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," Fra Lippo is a member--if not one in good standing--of the cloister. Like the unnamed monk, Fra Lippo remains unable to subdue his longing for the Church's forbidden fruits of the world. Unlike the unnamed monk, Fra Lippo prefers, not a mean, skulking obedience to the regulations of monastic life, but a frank enjoyment of the life beyond the walls of the cloister.

The initial impression of Fra Lippo Lippi is an unfavorable one. Nabbed by the authorities after a night on the town, Fra Lippo begins a sentimentalized narrative of the difficulties of a monk who has spent grueling weeks painting "saints and saints / And saints again" (ll. 48-49). On the morrow Fra Lippo must return to the taxing work of painting Saint Jerome, an ascetic whose views on mortifying the flesh are diametrically opposed to

those of Fra Lippo Lippi. Shrewdly playing on the sympathies of his captors, Fra Lippo renders a version of a childhood characterized by poverty and want. His only recourse was the monastic life, a life devoted to poverty, chastity, and obedience, precepts which Fra Lippo flagrantly violates. However, Browning would have us admire these flagrant violations; for churchmen who profess these vows with the greatest amount of fanfare violate them in less obvious ways. Fra Lippo slyly describes a monk practicing his brand of asceticism:

"So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father
 Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refecton time--
 "To quit this miserable world?"

(ll. 93-95)

At the age of eight, Fra Lippo, of necessity renounces the world in word, if not in deed.

It is during the crisis centered about the future of the boy who shows no propensity for books that Fra Lippo is assisted by the Prior, who recognizes both the talent of the youth and the opportunity for upstaging the art produced by a rival order. Yet, the patron clashes with his protege, for in their differing viewpoints merge the central issues of the poem, "the conflict between the ascetic and the sensual, the traditional and the real realistic. . . ." ¹ The Prior objects to the younger monk's open glorification

¹Boyd Litzinger, "Incidents as Microcosm: The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" College English, 22 (March 1961), 409.

Your business is not to catch men with show,
 With homage to the perishable clay
 But lift them over it, ignore it all,
 Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
 Your business is to paint the souls of men--
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke . . . no, it's not . . .
 It's vapor done up like a new-born babe--
 (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
 It's . . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
 (ll. 179-87)

The Prior, with his inability to "forget there's such a thing as flesh," provides an implicit satire upon himself when he demonstrates more than a spiritual interest in the young woman, euphemistically called his niece, who appears in one of Fra Lippo's paintings:

Oh, that smallish female with the breasts,
 She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say, --
 Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off.
 (ll. 195-97)

Fra Lippo, the errant monk, emerges as the spokesman for Browning's doctrine of anti-asceticism when he notes:

For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
 I always see the garden and God there
 A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
 The value and significance of flesh,
 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.
 (ll. 265-69)

The Prior, the staunch upholder of the traditions of the Church, proclaims the sharp division between the body and the soul, pontificates on the evils of the flesh, and secretly indulges in the pleasures of the flesh. By contrast, Fra Lippo, who appears to lead a dissolute life, succeeds in reconciling the claims of the two into a vision which recognizes the

integrity of God's creation. Fra Lippo frankly acknowledges the beauty of the Prior's niece and asks:

Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?
(ll. 212-14)

Fra Lippo continues by exploring the possibility of the Prior's claim of the existence of beauty without the intervention of God:

Or say there's beauty with no soul at all--
(I never saw it--put the case the same--)
If you get simple beauty and nothing else,
You get about the best thing God invents:
That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
(ll. 215-20)

In order to measure Browning's admiration for Fra Lippo, it is necessary to contrast the monk with Browning's portraits of other artists. One of Fra Lippo's fellow artists is Andrea del Sarto, the ironically termed "faultless painter." Browning had become interested in the life and works of the painter when John Kenyon had asked Browning to secure for him a portrait of Andrea and his "serpentine" wife Lucrezia painted by Andrea himself. Unable to find the painting, Browning had composed the poem "Andrea del Sarto" for Kenyon.²

Of his craft, Andrea notes that "A common grayness silvers every-thing" (l. 35) and that "All is silver gray / Placid and perfect with my art" (ll. 98-99). Despondent, Andrea perceives that, about his life and work,

²W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin. The Life of Robert Browning (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966), p. 200.

"autumn grows, autumn in everything" (l. 45). Andrea's passivity and despondence contrast markedly with the aggressiveness, the vibrancy, and the promise of ongoing creativity found in Fra Lippo's work. Andrea would despair about life: "So free we seem, so fettered fast we are" (l. 51). Fra Lippo would rhapsodize:

--The beauty and the wonder and the power
The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, --and God made it all.

(ll. 283-85)

Although the monk of "Pictor Ignotus" lived one hundred years after Fra Lippo, he still belongs to the Prior's favored medieval school of Brother Angelico and Brother Lorenzo, the school of painting the soul and dispensing with "the perishable clay." Like Andrea, the unknown painter-monk acknowledges the genius of Rafael and asserts that he shared with him a spark of the greatness of being able to depict on canvas the passion, the hope and the rapture of each face. After glimpsing the fame which his talent could bring him, he worries about the dangers which that fame could bring to him. Unlike Fra Lippo, who instinctively embraces life and finds his genius in depicting the beauty of that life on canvas, the unknown monk shuts himself away in the safety and the accompanying sterility of the cloister. Like the work of Andrea del Sarto, the work of the unknown painter has become mechanical and sterile:

. . . monotonous I paint
These endless cloisters and eternal aisles
With the same series, Virgin, Babe and Saint
With the same cold calm beautiful regard. . . .
(ll. 59-62)

Images of decay populate his mind. His works slowly "moulder" and "die" on the damp walls of the churches. Although he recognizes the failure of his art, his last words question the validity of realism, the doctrine so enthusiastically espoused by Fra Lippo.

In his "Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley," Robert Browning discusses his conception of the three types of artists. Since Browning uses painting as a metaphor for the creative process, his statements about the nature and function of the poet are applicable to Fra Lippo Lippi.

According to Browning, the subjective poet reproduces the truths of his own soul in the search for the ideal. The objective poet reproduces "the phenomena of the scenic universe"³ and "the manifested action of the human heart and brain" of the external world. As might be expected, the highest type of artist is the artist who combines the functions of the subjective and objective artists and "enables the common man to see with the eyes of the poet." Of this rare artist, Browning writes:

There is a time when the general eye has, so to speak, absorbed its fill of the phenomena around it, whether spiritual or material, and desires rather to learn the exacter significance of what it possesses, than to receive any augmentation of what is possessed. Then is the opportunity for the poet of loftier vision to lift his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details and recording the universal meaning. (p. 337)

Fra Lippo Lippi, Browning's unconventional monk, emerges as Browning's consummate artist. In questioning the members of the watch

³Citations to the essay are to Robert Browning, "Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley," Victorian Poetry and Poetics, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968), pp. 335-40.

about their appreciation of nature, he voices a theory of art which embodies the function of the poet who combines the skills of both the subjective and objective poets:

For don't you mark? We're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see
 And so they are better, painted--better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 God uses us to help each other so,
 Lending our minds out.

(ll. 300-06)

Thus, ironically, Fra Lippo Lippi, who, like another cleric Giuseppe Caponsacchi, seems to turn to the world the face of "a fribble and a coxcomb," emerges as Browning's supreme portrait of the artist. Although the traditionalists in the Church would have us believe that he is merely a dissolute man, Browning would have us believe that he is a man who uses the body for a clearer recognition of the existence of the soul and of God. Fra Lippo is not worldly in the sense of having an excessive concern for the pleasures and possessions of this world, but worldly in the sense of appreciating this world as God's creation. Above all, Browning pays tribute to the errant monk as the rarest of artists, the individual capable of compelling mankind to appreciate this world by making us view it with the eyes of the artist.

CHAPTER IV

GIUSEPPE CAPONSACCHI, THE ERRANT PRIEST

Love which defies the conventions of society and the lady in distress are common themes in the poetry of Robert Browning. In the epilogue to "The Statue and the Bust," Browning, speaking without the mask, condemns "the unlit lamp" and "the ungirt loin," the restraint in the face of convention which keeps the lovers from acting on the strength of their intuitions. Critics have also noted that the lady in distress forms a prototypical situation in the poetry of Robert Browning. "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" find the woman falling prey to unbalanced minds. In The Ring and the Book, Browning combines the themes of unconventional love and the lady in distress, applies them to the love existing between a married woman and a priest, and fashions the situation into both his supreme statement on love and a commentary on the stagnation rampant within the Church.

Critics have devoted much attention to Browning's life-long interest in the related myths of the Greek mythological hero Perseus and the Christian hero Saint George, patron saint of England, Aragon, and Portugal.¹ This interest can be traced to Browning's boyhood rescue of Caravaggio's

¹For a full discussion of the origin of Browning's interests in the myths and the use of the myths in The Ring and the Book, see William C. De Vane, "The Virgin and the Dragon," Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966), pp. 96-109.

"Andromeda" from its place among paintings by Dutch realists in his father's library. Browning labeled Caravaggio's work "the perfect painting." Parallels can be drawn between the situation of Pompilia, imprisoned in the dismal Franceschini house in Arezzo by the despotic husband, and the virtual imprisonment of Elizabeth in the bleak house at 50 Wimpole Street by the tyrannical father. Both women are delivered from their domestic tyrants by the knight in shining armor, in the first instance, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and in the second, Robert Browning.

Browning provides ample evidence that we are to view Caponsacchi as a composite Saint George-Perseus figure. Before examining the manner in which Browning develops the relationship between the legendary heroes and the priest, let us first examine the character of Caponsacchi before that first view of Pompilia. Shoved into the Church, not, like the Franceschini brothers, "because o' the piece of bread one gets there," but to carry on a tradition of devotion to the Church established by a saintly great-uncle, Caponsacchi entertains initial doubts about the strength of his resolve to serve the Church. However, with the aid of a cynical bishop who advises him to provide for one world a fashionable priest, Caponsacchi lays to rest his doubts and becomes "a courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames," "a courtly Christ," and, in his own words, "a priest, coxcomb, fribble, and fool." A master at the game of tarocs and a skilled composer of madrigals, the early Caponsacchi's most redeeming quality seems to have been the recognition of Dante as a better poet than Marino.

Browning established a number of parallels between Caponsacchi and

the two legendary heroes. He went to such lengths that, after taking care to ascertain the stage of the moon on the night of the departure from Arezzo by securing a copy of De Morgan's register of lunar risings and settings over the centuries, he changed the date of the flight from April 29, 1697, to April 23, 1697. Thus, Browning altered a fact from the source book The Old Yellow Book in order that the rescue of the maiden might fall on the feast day of Saint George.²

Browning would have the reader judge the value of a character's perceptions of right and wrong by whether he views the rescue of Pompilia as similar to the Saint George-Perseus myths or to be the flight of Helen and Paris. In Book I, when Browning, speaking without the mask, dispels all doubt as to the innocence of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, he sets the scene for the arrival of Caponsacchi. Describing Pompilia as the victim in an obscene rite, he melodramatically, but sincerely, describes the arrival of Canon Caponsacchi:

The clearing of a cloud, a cry, a crash
 Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i' the dust the crew,
 As, in a glory of armor like Saint George
 Out again sprang the good young beauteous priest
 Bearing away the lady in his arms
 Saved for a splendid minute and no more.

(R&B, I, ll. 583-88)

Caponsacchi, addressing the members of the ecclesiastical court, berates the men who had carefully "relegated" him to the Civita:

I rise in your esteem, sagacious Sirs,
 Stand up a renderer of reasons, not
 The officious young priest would personate Saint George

²A. K. Cook, A Commentary Upon Browning's The Ring and The Book (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920), pp. 64-65.

For a mock Princess in undragoned days.
 What, the blood startles you? What, after all
 The priest who needs must carry sword on thigh
 May find imperative use for it? Then, there was
 A Princess, was a dragon belching flame
 And should have been a Saint George also?

(R&B, VI, ll. 1769-77)

Pompilia relates a conversation during which Canon Conti, the fun-loving young priest and relative by marriage to Guido Franceschini, turns down her request for aid and, instead, with a surprising amount of insight for one who presents so flimsy a facade to the world, advises her:

Our Caponsacchi, he's your true Saint George
 To slay the monster, set the Princess free,
 And have the whole High Altar to himself:
 I always think so when I see that piece
 I' the Pieve, that's his church and mine, you know:
 Though you drop eyes at notion of his name.

(R&B, VII, ll. 1323-28)

The Pope, in pronouncing the ultimate judgement of the poem, calls Caponsacchi "noble scapegrace" and his "warrior-priest." The Pope, drawing a detailed analogy between his priests and knights, views the priests as potential soldiers of Christ. The Pope chronicles the failure of his priests to meet the onslaught of evil in the person of Guido, against virtue, in the person of Pompilia. His "irregular noble" priest jumps forward "In mask and motley." The Pope proclaims: "Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight, / That so he may do battle and have praise" (R&B, X, ll. 1191-92).

The myth of Perseus and Andromeda provides the classical counterpart to the Christian myth. Perseus, armed with the winged sandals and winged cap of Hermes, rescues Andromeda from the hideous sea monster. Pompilia ironically comments on Guido's nature through a reference to a tapestry in

the Franceschini home. Told by her mother that a cavalier would come to call, Pompilia elicits the definition of cavalier from a friend's comment that the young man on the tapestry "With wings at head, and wings at feet, and sword / Threatening a monster" (R&B, VII, ll. 391-92) was a cavalier. Guido materializes, not into the knight, but into the dragon.

The highest form of love for Browning is that in which the lovers transcend the mortal barriers of time, space, and speech and experience love through an intuitive understanding which brings about a merger of the lovers' souls. This is for Browning "the moment," the instance of perfect communication which dissolves the mortal screen existing between two people. Let us here compare the reactions of Caponsacchi and Pompilia upon seeing each other at the theatre and note the effect which the vision has upon Caponsacchi's conduct as a priest. Caponsacchi describes the experience in distinctly spiritual terms, comparing his state before and after viewing the lady, "young, tall, beautiful, strange, and sad" to the time

when, in our cathedral once,
As I got yawningly through matin-song,
I saw facchini bear a burden up,
Base it on the high-altar, break away
A board or two, and leave the thing inside
Lofty and lone: and lo, when next I looked,
There was Rafael! (R&B, VI, ll. 400-06)

So profound is the vision for Caponsacchi that it transcends the barriers of time:

That night and next day did the gaze endure,
Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes,
And not once changed the beautiful sad strange smile.
(R&B, VI, ll. 434-36)

Pompilia instinctively recognizes the innate goodness of Caponsacchi. Taken to the Carnival for the express purpose of tempting someone with her presence, with Guido crouching behind her, Pompilia sees Caponsacchi for the first time. She muses:

So I said 'Had there been a man like that,
To lift me with his strength out of all strife
Into the calm, how I could fly and rest.'

(R&B, VII, ll. 998-1000)

Pompilia recounts her feelings when Caponsacchi appears below her balcony. As in their first meeting, time seems to have been suspended:

So was that minute vouchsafed me, so
The manhood, wasted then, was still at watch
To save me yet a second time: no change
Here, though all else changed in the changing world.

(R&B, VII, ll. 1412-15)

So intense is the depth of their communication that speech becomes unnecessary. Caponsacchi describes Pompilia during the flight to Rome:

In the determined morning, I first found
Her head erect, her face turned full to me,
Her soul intent on mine, through two wide eyes.
I answered them.

(R&B, VI, ll. 1199-202)

Later, Caponsacchi asserts that they communicate without words: "I answered the first look" (R&B, VI, l. 1306).

It is useful to examine here Browning's image for purity, the "white light," which he uses as the symbol for an absolute or an ideal. Caponsacchi continues to describe Pompilia in spiritual terms. He describes her movement through the darkness to the waiting carriage:

When the ecstatic minute must bring birth,
Began a whiteness in the distance, waxed
Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near,
Till it was she: there did Pompilia come:
The white I saw shine through her was her soul's,

Certainly, for the body was one black,
Black from head down to foot.

(R&B, VI, ll. 1138-44)

Pompilia uses the image of the white light to proclaim the goodness of Caponsacchi:

The glory of his nature I had thought,
Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth
Through every atom of his act with me:
Yet where I point you, through the crystal shine,
Purity in quintessence, one dew drop,
You all descry a spider in the midst.

(R&B, VII, ll. 921-26)

Throughout the poem, Caponsacchi describes Pompilia in religious terms. She has a "snow-white soul" and a "crystalline soul" which enable her to recognize the purity of his intentions. The Madonna becomes a favorite image in his description of Pompilia. The first sight of her brings to mind Rafael's Madonna. In asserting that the love letters came from Guido, he maintains that he instinctively knew that such letters from Pompilia would be as incongruous as a scorpion crawling out of the mouth of the Madonna. She becomes, for Caponsacchi, "Our Lady of all the Sorrows." Asserting that he touched her only once, when she fainted at Castelnuovo, his feelings at the time were the same as when "we priests carry the paten."

Both realize that the world misinterprets the flight from Arezzo and the nature of their love, viewing them as a half-sordid, half-comical escapade between a married woman and a priest. In effect, Browning says that the world, for the most part, fails to recognize truth and purity. Caponsacchi, in a frenzied mode of speech which contrasts markedly with the polished rhetorical pronouncements of Guido, cries out to the court:

The glory, I say,
And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still say I,
Who, a priest, trained to live my whole life long
On beauty and splendour, solely, at their source,
God,--have thus recognized my food in one,
You tell me, is fast dying, while we talk,
Pompilia,--how does lenity to me,
Remit one death-bed pang to her?

(R&B, VI, ll. 120-27)

God, Caponsacchi maintains, initiated their love and their flight for safety:

--That when at the last we did rush each on each,
By no chance but because God willed it so--
The spark of truth was struck from out our souls--
Made all of me, desried in the first glance,
Seem fair and honest and permissible love
O' the good and true--as the first glance told me. . . .

(R&B, VI, ll. 1812-17)

In order to aid Pompilia, Caponsacchi has had to rely solely on his intuition and to disregard the institution of the Church. Before seeking Caponsacchi's aid, Pompilia had exhausted her means of working through the Church, having met Browning's two extremes, the cynicism and world-weariness of the Archbishop and the pious concern and later discretion of the monk. In order to act decisively, Caponsacchi realizes that he must dissociate himself from the caution and stagnation which characterize his Church. Symbolically, as well as literally, he sheds the cassock for the "laic dress" and sword and prepares to act nobly, but, in the eyes of the Church, erratically.

Browning would have us judge the worth of the various characters in The Ring and the Book by the recognition or lack of recognition of the goodness of Pompilia. Caponsacchi has intuitively realized this goodness and has risked the scorn and derision of his fellow clerics and the world beyond them

to save this virtue. For Caponsacchi, the love of a woman has transformed him into a better priest, one who, on the road to Rome, would scorn his earlier attempts to gain the favor of a cynical bishop and would rebel at the thought of translating De Raptu Helenae for the sake of advancement in a cardinal's entourage.

By virtue of its position in the poem and the nature of its speaker, Browning would have us view the Pope's opinions as the ultimate in human wisdom. Innocent XII summarily condemns the inertia of his cautious archbishop and his sheltered monk. Only Caponsacchi, the erstwhile coxcomb and fool, has dared, in his mask and motley, to take on Guido the dragon. He has emerged as the Pope's Saint George, his sole "soldier-saint" in an army of worldlings and recluses. The Pope commends Caponsacchi's decision to act on the strength of his intuitions and to move beyond the stagnation and inertia of the Church which he heads. Caponsacchi has distinguished himself in the eyes of the Pope, if not in the eyes of the world, by acting without the care and discretion of the general clergy. He has acted, in the clerical world of The Ring and the Book, nobly but erratically.

CHAPTER V

THE POPE AND THE BISHOP

Religion ranks as the third great theme which Robert Browning explored in his poetry. Since Browning explored this theme numerous times in a career which spanned fifty years, this paper will limit its scope to the religious beliefs expressed by two Catholic clergymen, Pope Innocent XII and Bishop Sylvester Blougram. Although the characters are representatives of different historical eras, they both express ideas and beliefs about the nature of faith and doubt. In his monologue, the Pope worries that his reign has been characterized by a "torpor of assurance" in faith. He hopes that the new age will bring back a faith mixed with doubt and thus introduce an element of danger to faith. Bishop Blougram, speaking a century and a half later, emerges as a man who seems to have applied the test of doubt to his faith. In reality, he is little more than a subtle version of the Browning stereotype of the bishop.

At the opening of his monologue in The Ring and the Book, Pope Innocent XII proves himself to be, in the tradition of Fra Lippo Lippi and Giuseppe Caponsacchi, an unorthodox cleric of the Roman Catholic Church. As the spiritual and temporal head of the Roman Catholic Church, he rejects in the first one-hundred fifty lines of his monologue, the doctrine of papal infallibility. Drawing upon an account of the enmity existing between two popes, Formosus and his successor Stephen VII, Innocent XII relates a particular sordid episode from the papal past. The Pope recounts, in a

story reminiscent of the enmity existing between Saint Praxed's Bishop and Gandolf, the manner in which Stephen had disinterred the body of Formosus, conducted a mock trial, passed judgment, and thrown the corpse into the Tiber. Innocent recounts the vicissitudes in papal judgment which had honored, at various times, the claims of both Formosus and Stephen and, in effect, renders the doctrine of infallibility on the part of his predecessors or, on his part, untenable.

Having disposed of the doctrine of papal infallibility, he turns his attention to the judgment which he must render on a former member of his clergy and to the general condition of his clergy. The Pope finds the conduct of Guido Franceschini all the more reprehensible because Guido had begun life armed with all the virtues which should have placed him in good stead:

I see him furnished forth for his career,
On starting for the life-chance in our world,
With nearly all we count sufficient help:
Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,
A solid intellect: the wit to seek,
Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal
To deal with whatsoever circumstance
Should minister to man, make life succeed.
(R&B, X, ll. 400-07)

At his trial, Guido had worked to establish his family's tradition of long service to the Church. An ancestor had served in the Crusades. Guido had implied that his family's present genteel proverty was a result of a policy of giving generously to the Church. Guido had called to the court's attention the fact that his two brothers continued to serve the Church. Most important, Guido asserted that the Church owed him mercy because he had served the Church faithfully for thirty years.

In reviewing Guido's claims of the devotion of the Franceschini brothers, the Pope finds them rapacious men. Paolo is the "fox-faced horrible priest"; Girolamo, the youngest, is a hybrid, a combination of his brothers' craft and violence. The Pope categorically rejects Guido's claim of devotion to the Church. Guido has served himself rather than his Church. The Pope calls him "religion's parasite." In sentencing Guido to a public execution, the Pope again establishes himself as one of Browning's unorthodox clerics, for the custom of the day meted out mercy rather than justice to misbehaving nobles. Ultimately, the Pope bases his decision to condemn Guido on the wisdom of his intuitions about good and evil. Should he die that night, the Pope says he had rather God judge him on having sentenced Guido to death than on having let him live.

Andrea del Sarto feels autumn in his life and work; the Pope feels winter in everything. The Pope continues in a vein about the corrupt condition of his clergy. He condemns the apathy and the caution which so characterized the behavior of the archbishop and the monk in dealing with Pompilia's plight. Even his more judicious clerics exhibit misguided behavior in the form of a doctrinaire approach to religion at the expense of more urgent matters. In citing the disagreement of Dominicans and Jesuits in China over the proper Chinese term for God, he proclaims:

So have I seen a potentate all fume
 For some infringement of his realm's just right,
 Some menace to a mud-built straw-thatched farm
 O' the frontier, while inside the mainland lie
 Quite undisputed for in solitude,
 Whole cities plague may waste or famine sap:
 What is the sun crumble, the sands encroach,

What if he looks on sublimely at his ease?
 How does their ruin touch the empire's bound?
 (R&B, X, ll. 1605-13)

From the ranks of his clergy, he can find the actions of Caponsacchi to praise. Yet, even in this brave deed, he can find cause for sorrow. So rampant is the corruption and the stagnation of the Church which he heads that Caponsacchi had had to work outside the institution, to exchange the clothes of the priest for "the laic dress" and sword.

The Pope manifests Robert Browning's fondness for the Greek dramatist Euripides. The dramatist, through the mind of the Pope, maintains that, in his era of darkness unaided by the light of Christianity, he and his fellow Athenians demonstrated Christian virtues. After the age of Euripides, the light of Christianity blazed so brightly in the darkness that the early Christians could scarcely fail to see clearly. During the Pope's reign, the light of dawn has waxed into the blazing light of high noon. Having surveyed the past and the present of his Church, the Pope looks to the future of the Christian faith and his Church. The Pope comments on a faith tempered by doubt and hopes that the future age, the age of Bishop Blougram, will usher in a stronger faith:

What if it be the mission of that age,
 My death will usher into life, to shake
 This torpor of assurance from our creed,
 Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring
 The formidable danger back, we drove
 Long ago to the distance and the dark? . . .
 (R&B, X, ll. 1852-57)

The Pope would find it more difficult to condemn the behavior of a Blougram than he would a Marzi-Medici, for Bishop Blougram is more adept

at twisting words and disguising motives. "Bishop Blougram's Apology" ranks as Browning's most subtle portrait of a man of the Church, as well as the only one set in Victorian England. So subtle is the portrait that Cardinal Wiseman, Browning's model for Bishop Blougram, in reviewing the poem for the Roman Catholic journal Rambler would write: "If Mr. Browning is a man of will and action, and not a mere dreamer and talker, we should never feel surprise at his conversion."¹

Part of the ambiguity of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" lies in the Bishop's appropriation of arguments used previously by the Pope and espoused by Browning, and the Bishop's use of these arguments in twisted ways. These arguments lie primarily in the view of life as a journey towards a goal and in the relationship of faith and doubt.

The basis of Browning's omnipresent doctrine of imperfection lies in his belief that life is a journey towards a goal. Since man is finite, he may strive towards, but never attain perfection in any form on earth. The real value of an act lies in the striving, for attaining the goal would lead to stagnation.

Both the Pope and the Bishop express this idea in their monologues. The Pope states: "This life is training and a passage" (R&B, X, l. 1410). Later in his monologue he proclaims: "Life is probation and the earth no goal / But starting point of man" (R&B, X, 1430-37). The Bishop expresses

¹The Life of Robert Browning (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966), p. 202.

the idea in a more indirect way, with the omnipresent ship's cabin metaphor suggesting the nature of life as a journey; Blougram, revealing his materialistic nature, concentrates on furnishing the cabin as comfortably as possible. Chiding Gigadibs, the Bishop states that he can admire his taste in furniture--the India screen, the piano-forte, and the collection of Balzac novels--while realizing that they detract from the comfort of the cabin.

Browning holds a view as to the salubrious nature of doubt, which also relates to the idea of life as a striving towards a goal. Browning believed that an absolute certainty of God's will would make a life devoted to Christian piety an inevitable occurrence devoid of the element of striving and, consequently, without value. Phillip Drew sums up Browning's view: "He develops his argument as so often subsequently by reasoning that God could not possibly reward or blame us for doing something 'when we can't but choose.' Therefore He puts before us a faith that has some uncertainty in it and uses this as a touchstone of true belief."²

The Pope had based his hopes for a stronger Christianity, Church, and clergy on a faith which would "re-introduce doubt" and "destroy the ignoble confidence which destroys faith." Bishop Blougram misuses this belief, just as he does the view of life as striving towards a goal. He readily acknowledges that his faith is mixed with doubt. Yet he effectively moves his position away from that of Browning and the Pope with a cynical

²Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning: A Critical Introduction (London: Methuen and Co., 1970), p. 206.

observation of his use of doubt:

With me, faith means perpetual unbelief,
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.
Or, if that's too ambitious, here's my box--
I need the excitation of a pinch
Threatening the torpor of the inside-nose
Nigh on the imminent sneeze that never comes.
"Leave it in peace," advise the simple folk:
Make it aware of peace by itching-fits,
Say I--let doubt occasion still more faith.

(ll. 666-75)

Ultimately, Bishop Sylvester Blougram is merely a muted, refined version of the Bishop at Saint Praxed's Church. They manifest the same quest for material possessions. Their aims are identical, a single-minded quest for the pleasures of the world while using the Church to attain them.

Bishop Blougram tells Gigadibs:

Of course you are remarking all this time
How narrowly and grossly I view life,
Respect the creature-comforts, care to rule
The masses, and regard complacently
"The cabin," in our old phrase. Well, I do.

(ll. 764-68)

Saint Praxed's Bishop seeks a lavish tomb; Bishop Blougram seeks a comfortable cabin.

Saint Praxed's Bishop's monomania about the tomb forbids his speaking directly about his opinions of Catholicism, although we may infer that he is overly critical of an institution which has brought him such a profusion of, to use Blougram's term, "creature-comforts." Blougram tells Gigadibs of the qualities which attract him to Catholicism:

Well now, there's one great form of Christian faith
 I happened to be born in--which to teach
 Was given me as I grew up, on all hands,
 As best and readiest means of living by;
 The same on examination being proved
 The most pronounced moreover, fixed, precise
 And absolute form of faith in the whole world. . . .
 (ll. 301-07)

It was this dogmatic approach to faith which had so repelled the Pope.

Sylvester Blougram adopts no life style which might offend other churchmen as Fra Lippo does. He takes no course of action which leads him away from the safe code of conduct of the Church as Caponsacchi does. Unlike the Pope, who rejects the doctrine of papal infallibility, Blougram cannot bring himself to reject the most preposterous miracle of the Church, fearing that the much-praised doubt might topple the faith which has brought him such a comfortable life. One cannot imagine this smug, self-satisfied man dispensing with tradition and popular opinion and daring to sentence a noble to death as the Pope does. No irregular thought or deed has upset the tranquillity of Bishop Blougram's life. Innocent's hopes for a more militant upholder of the faith are, in Sylvester Blougram, sadly misplaced.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

So diverse is the world of Browning's clerics that it becomes impossible to categorize it neatly. Browning does not manifest a fascination for a particular place in the hierarchy; for he deals with monks, priests, bishops, and a pope. He does not manifest a fascination for a particular order as James Joyce does for the Jesuits. Nor does he manifest a fascination for clerics living during any one era. Although many portraits are drawn from various ages of the Renaissance, other portraits are drawn from the late seventeenth century and Victorian England.

In The Ring and the Book, Browning makes use of a recurring image of the Church as a field overrun by weeds. This imagery grows out of a heresy which plays a role in The Ring and the Book. Molinism is a seventeenth century heresy which stresses the importance of a direct intuitive knowledge of God and the value of private judgment over dogma. In light of these views, let us note Browning's comments about the grain and the weeds. Half-Rome describes a priest earnestly seeking a cardinal's favor as the two look upon the gruesome display of the bodies of Pietro and Violante Comparini:

He did the murder in a dozen words;
Then said that all such outrages crop forth
I' the course of nature, when Molinos' tares
Are sown for wheat, flourish and choke the Church. . . .
(R&B, II, 11. 173-76)

--Lord and a Canon also, --what would you have?
Such are the red-clothed milk-swollen poppy heads
That stand and stiffen 'mid the wheat o' the
Church!--

(R&B, II, ll. 938-40)

Caponsacchi informs the court that the Church has instructed him that the duty of a priest is to "labour to pick tares / And weed the corn of Molinism" (R&B, VI, ll. 151-52). Taking Browning's work as a whole, one would take the position that, for Browning, the tares and poppies of the Church are the pious, cautious monks and the luxury-loving bishops. For Browning, the wheat of the Church is the errant clerics, Fra Lippo Lippi, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and Pope Innocent XII.

Fra Lippo Lippi, realizing that a true artist must use his senses to explore God's world, rejects the traditional Church views of the negation of the flesh and the denial of the world. Fra Lippo realizes, as the unknown monk of "Pictor Ignotus" has realized too late, that a mechanical reproduction of Madonnas fails to constitute art. For Fra Lippo, the highest goal of the artist is to awaken the sensitivity of people to God's world.

Caponsacchi must be classified, with Fra Lippo Lippi, as an errant cleric. He shows every inclination of falling into the trap of the luxury-loving clergy. A "bishop in the bud," before meeting Pompilia, he has led a spiritually shallow life. He shows to the world, as Fra Lippo does, the face of a fool. Unlike Fra Lippo, who shrewdly gives the impression of being a fool, Caponsacchi is a fool before he meets Pompilia. It is the vision of Pompilia, which he finds so like a Rafael Madonna, and the ensuing love which

he feels for Pompilia, which turn him into a better priest, more aware of the existence of good and evil and more prepared to act to protect good from evil.

The Pope, too, must in a less spectacular way, be classified as an errant churchman. He categorically rejects the papal claim to infallibility, relying instead on the strength of his intuitions about right and wrong. He comments on the stagnation of the Church which he leads, condemning those two variations of his stock characters, Archbishop Marzi-Medici and Fra Romano. He rejects tradition, popular opinion, and Guido's claim of long service to the Church with the decision to execute Guido Franceschini.

In his monologue, the Pope links himself to the problems of Victorian England, taking Browning's view that a faith tempered by doubt is a stronger faith. The Pope expresses his hope that the ensuing age will usher in a stronger, more militant faith. The Catholic cleric entrusted with that stronger faith is Bishop Sylvester Blougram. On the surface, he seems to have adopted the views of Browning and the Pope, for he regards life as a journey and praises faith tempered by doubt. Ambiguous as no other clerical portrait is, Bishop Blougram is, in reality, a muted, refined version of Saint Praxed's Bishop. Both are versions of the Browning stereotype of the worldly, cynical bishop. Bishop Blougram uses a variation of Saint Praxed's Bishop's approach to life. For Saint Praxed's Bishop, the tomb must be lavish; for Bishop Blougram, the cabin must be comfortable. For Bishop Blougram, the Church is good because she has provided him "power, peace, pleasantness, and length of days." The Bishop makes no irregular judgment

which might disturb the voyage of that ship.

So widespread is the corruption in Browning's version of the Church that any virtue shines forth very brightly. The comment of one critic on the behavior of Caponsacchi applies also to Fra Lippo Lippi and to the Pope. In Browning's view of the men of the Church, to act spiritually is to act irregularly.¹

¹Leslie M. Thompson, "Regular and Irregular Deeds in The Ring and the Book," Papers on Language and Literature, 3 (Winter 1967), 85.

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