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ROBERT BROWNING'S
"FRA LIPPO LIPPI" AND THE
PROBLEMATIC OF A MALE POETIC

RECENTLY, GENDER STUDIES IN GENERAL AND VICTORIAN GENDER STUDIES IN particular have turned to what Elaine Showalter characterizes as "serious inquiries into masculine modes of creativity, interpretation and representation" (7). Such inquiry has been particularly invigorated by the model, associated with the work of Eve Sedgwick, describing male-male relationships along the spectrum of the homosocial/homophobic/homosexual. Sedgwick's work has enabled Victorian critics to see conflict between male-male desire and its social interdiction as an important cause of the instability of male identity in Victorian male writers, an issue defended against by the writers themselves, by their contemporary readers, and by the modern (male?) critical tradition. Indeed, one of the dismaying pleasures of reading Sedgwick on The Princess or critics such as Craft (" 'Descend' ") and Sinfield on the Tennyson/Hallam relationship is realizing how much I, like other Victorianists, have resisted seeing the intensity of male-male desire in this poet. Similarly, to see homophobic tensions in Dickens's novels or in Stoker's Dracula is to see the faultlines within what has traditionally been seen as a monolithic Victorian male consciousness (see the discussion of The Mystery of Edwin Drood in Sedgwick, ch. 10; Craft " 'Kiss' ").

This discussion of Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" is not intended to dispute the Sedgwick model, but rather to suggest other, related models or emphases for discussing the anxieties of middle-class manhood at mid-century. For early Victorian bourgeois man, concern about manliness was set not only on the troubled boundary between the homosocial and the homosexual, but also in the competitive arena of work, the marketplace, the male sphere in which manhood judged as aggressive energy and commercial success was tested against other men. There, the middle-class man was judged by the criteria of an entrepreneurial definition of manhood (see Leverenz, particularly the discussion of "entrepreneurial manhood" in ch. 3). As Davidoff and Hall note in their study of the Victorian middle class, the bourgeois

masculine persona . . . was organized around a man's determination and skill in manipulating the economic environment. . . . His puny strength was also pitted against the stern

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course of a more novel destiny, the market. The contrast between such intense self-generated activity and the awfulness of these necessities [supporting his family] could undermine even the bravest confidence. Far from carrying the blustering certainty of the late-Victorian paterfamilias, early nineteenth-century masculine identity was fragile. . . . The mood in which middle class men faced their world was best expressed by a seed merchant . . . [who] bitterly remarked: "I may be a man one day and a mouse the next." (229)

Entrepreneurial manliness, with its emphasis on engagement in the male sphere of work, its valuing of strength and energy, and its criterion of success measured by support of a domestic establishment, generated particularly acute anxiety for the early Victorian male poet. For this definition of male identity conflicted with the ideal of the poet based on a romantic model in many ways constructed to oppose the new economic man. This romantic model valorized isolation from the commercial or male sphere, emotive openness and imaginative inwardness, passivity, and even the drive toward dissolution and death. These discontinuities in gender roles for the male poet are well summarized by Dorothy Mermin: "For the Victorians, writing poetry seemed like woman’s work, even though only men were supposed to do it. . . . Male Victorian poets worried that they might in effect be feminizing themselves by withdrawing into a private world" (67).

Critical discussion of this disjunction between entrepreneurial manhood and the romantic ideal of the poet in the early Victorian age has focused on Tennyson, particularly the early Tennyson. It is a critical commonplace, although like most commonplaces quite accurate, that in his early poetry such as "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Palace of Art" the romantic construction of the poet had become for Tennyson as well as for his readers associated with the "female" (Stevenson; Sinfield, ch. 2). Tennyson’s poetry of the 1830s clearly involves a deep ambivalence about the value of this feminized romantic poetic identity in relation to the entrepreneurial model of manhood, the classic example for the Victorians as for ourselves being the evocatively ambiguous death of the Lady of Shalott.

Although there has been an understandable tendency among critics to focus on, even to valorize, what might be called the female identification of Tennyson (see Gilbert), some recent studies have shifted attention to what Linda Shires accurately describes as Tennyson’s later efforts "to recover a male identity through remasculinization" (269), his attempt to reconcile poetic identity with entrepreneurial masculinity by investing in the masculinist modes of warfare and commerce. Yet, as attractive as a Victorian male quest for the female may be to modern readers (see Knoepflmacher), such an approach to early Victorian male poets distracts attention from what was for the Victorians, and continues to be in our day, an historically crucial strategy for resolving this basic disjunction—the project of situating the source of poetry not in those qualities of isolation and emotional intensity associated with the femi-
nine, but rather in the attributes of entrepreneurial manhood itself, in commercial engagement, energetic activity, and phallic sexuality. This enterprise, continued into the twentieth century, endeavors to construct a distinctively male poetic not in opposition to, but from the materials of, the bourgeois definition of manliness.

The main purpose of this essay is to examine the mid-century effort to create a male poetic by focusing on a major manifesto of this enterprise, Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi." I would suggest that the importance of the poem lies in its proclamation of a poetic whose sources are those that characterize hegemonic Victorian manliness and that its connection or similarity to other mid-century male Victorian writers and artists, such as Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, lies not so much in formalist terms as in the shared effort to create a manly style and even a manly Christianity. "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Pictor Ignotus" and "Andrea del Sarto," marks the formation at mid-century of a male poetic that, identifying creative power with sexual potency, has continued into our own century, particularly in America.

In Lippo, the robustly heterosexual monk producing religiously powerful paintings for the exemplary mercantile patron, Browning dramatizes a constellation of male sexual energy, commercial success, and artistic potency that seems to reconcile artistic achievement with entrepreneurial manhood. But I also want to suggest that as much as the critical tradition has continued to read Lippo as the "successful" artist, Browning's representation of the exemplary manly painter also reveals inherent contradictions within the masculine poetic. In particular, the portrait of Lippo shows how the entry or, in Ruskinian terms, the unfortunate "fall" of the artist into the sphere of commerce generates a debilitating commodification of male energy, both artistic and sexual. Just as Foucault in The History of Sexuality has shown that the supposed liberation of sexuality in our own time has generated new internalized forms of constraint, so Browning turns the whiggish Victorian narrative of male sexual/commercial/artistic liberation upon itself to show that the emergence of the male poet into the supposedly free individualistic activity of capitalism generates new forms for imprisoning male desire.

I

As the manifesto of a male poetic, "Fra Lippo Lippi" is set within a liberationist historical narrative that conflates the emergence of capitalism, the formal development of visual art, and the liberation of male sexuality, all subsumed within the Victorian master narrative of progress. Lippo exemplifies the "successful" artist not merely because he has moved from medieval formalism to a more modern sacred realism. This formal "progress" is also inseparable
from his moves from the patronage of the Church to that of a merchant prince and from the imprisoning male celibacy of the monastery to energetic hetero-
sexual activity. Within the gendered, historicist categories of mid-century aesthetics, this highly sexed artist-monk represents the possibility of creating a popular realist religious art while maintaining a truly "manly" gender identity. Indeed, Browning is writing not only art history and economic history, but also, as a kind of Victorian Foucault, a history of manhood, of male sexuality. (I shall discuss in the final section Browning's similarity to Foucault in ironizing this narrative of sexual liberation and subverting the Repressive Hypothesis that appears to structure these Renaissance artist poems.)

Underlying the conflation of sexuality/art/commerce in "Fra Lippo Lippi" lies a specific Victorian model of male identity—the assumption that manliness depends upon an innate, distinctly male form of energy. 2 It would be tempting, but anachronistic, to apply a Freudian model that sees this energy as essentially sexual, as libido sublimated into other activities such as painting or entrepreneurship. Rather, this model posits a powerful unitary male desire that can find expression in artistic creation, entrepreneurial activity, phallic sexuality, or any combination of these. Within this construction of manhood, then, art-making, love-making, and money-making are valued as signs of true manliness, expressions of natural, God-given male energy.

For other mid-nineteenth-century male poets, the dominant figure for the instability of male poetic identity is the opposition between male and female qualities. Tennyson and Arnold often show the artist as an isolated, enclosed female or feminized male figure observing the activity of the commercial, often sexualized male sphere. These artist surrogates usually carry positive qualities to which the poet is attracted if not wholly committed. The "high-born maidens" of the early Tennyson represent his attraction to a passive imaginative openness. For Arnold, the celibate monks of the Grande Chartreuse embody those traditional values of communal Christianity dissolved by the modern individualist quest for gain, and the speaker empathizes with the impotence of the desexualized monks unable and unwilling to join the progress of the "Sons of the world" (l. 161).

For Browning in "Fra Lippo Lippi," as in "Pictor Ignotus" and "Andrea del Sarto," however, the central trope for the problematic of male poetic identity is the conflict between the imprisonment and the freeing of male energy. Browning's artist poems, like Tennyson's early poetry, also associate the romantic model of poet with the feminine; the unknown painter is figured as a "nun" (l. 48). But for Browning the feminized male poet/artist is not valued. Rather, for Browning the Unknown Painter and Andrea are male artists manqué, emasculated, lacking or perhaps repressing the male energy exemplified in Lippo. Nor does the unwillingness of Pictor Ignotus to engage in commerce convey positive value, as it would, for example, in Ruskin. Instead, in

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Browning’s Renaissance artist poems the escape of the male figure from enclosure to join the commercial and sexualized world of “men” becomes the crucial act of “man-making” (see the discussion of Emerson’s “man-making” words in Leverenz, ch. 2). As liberationist narrative, “Fra Lippo Lippi” represents the male becoming a “man” by rejecting institutional constraints to join the inevitable historical movement toward the expression of male desire in commerce, art, and phallic sexuality.

For Browning, the unknown painter watching furtively from his cloister signifies unnatural sexual repression; his “sanctuary’s gloom” (l. 63) exemplifies the destructive effects on the male psyche of imprisoning male desire. In the poem such desire wells up only to be stifled by external and internal controls. The longing to move from the patronage of the monastery to that of the nation-state, the “Kaiser” (l. 28), or of the art market itself, the “burgh” (l. 30), takes its special value in the text from its identification with this repressed desire, with dream. The feeling “so wildly dear” (l. 40) in this context is more authentic than the less emotive, more conscious “voice [that] changed it” (l. 41), that calls for constraint within the cloister:

Nor will I say I have not dreamed (how well!)
Of going—I, in each new picture,—forth,
As, making new hearts beat and bosoms swell,
To Pope or Kaiser, East, West, South, or North,
Bound for the calmly-satisfied great State,
Or glad aspiring little burgh. (ll. 25–30)

The impulse to emerge from church patronage into the art market finds expression in sexualized terms, in the double-entendre of tumescence; the “I,” imagined by the Unknown Painter as embodied in an easel painting rather than in an in situ fresco, is fantasized as “making new hearts beat and bosoms swell” (l. 27). Indeed, the art-market itself appears to him as orgiastic sexual activity:

Glimpses of such sights
Have scared me, like the revels through a door
Of some strange house of idols at its rites! (ll. 41–43)

The crucial moment for Lippo and the Unknown Painter is escape, or failure to escape, from imprisonment in the cloister, the sign in mid-century artistic discourse of formal backwardness, anti-capitalist economics, and unnatural male celibacy. In the positive reading of Lippo’s career, the flight from the monastery signifies the achievement of the male poetic in representing the artist as entering the male sphere, engaging in heterosexual activity, and, consequently, developing a manly style. For Browning, the rise of realism is identified, then, not only with the rise of the market, but also of the phallus. Emergence into the capitalist order and the shift from symbolic to realist art is set within a personal narrative of sexual liberation represented as the analogous movement from the unnatural to the natural: “You should not take a fellow eight years

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old / And make him swear to never kiss the girls" (ll. 224–25). By associating Lippo with the new house of Medici, Browning connects the artist with what many Victorians saw as the inevitable movement of history toward a mercantile economy. Lippo approaches the condition of economic man as artist, artist as economic man. Unlike “Pictor Ignotus” he has a name, has become an individual unit working for his own economic well-being; he joins a religious community for food rather than spiritual sustenance, and he accepts the Medici patronage for its sensual and economic benefits.³

In representing the exemplary male artist as moving from pre-capitalist anonymity to individual art production Browning is attempting to show that manly engagement with commerce as well as a liberated sexual life are the pre-conditions for a manly style, which Browning associates with a sacred or figural naturalism. The Prior tells Lippo to represent only the transcendental world:

Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men—

Give us no more of body than shows soul! (ll. 182–83, 188)

Instead, Lippo sees that his “business” is not only with “souls,” but with connecting spirit to the occupations of commercial life, the palpable and material world of individual subjects and tangible objects:

folk at church,
From good old gossips waiting to confess
Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,—
To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
With the little children round him in a row
Of admiration, half for his beard and half
For that white anger of his victim’s son
Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
Signing himself with the other because of Christ
(Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
After the passion of a thousand years). (ll. 146–57)

Like many other early-Victorian artists and writers, Browning found in the figural or typological aesthetic a method of connecting the secular world to the transcendental: “This world’s no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely and means good” (ll. 313–14).⁴

The enabling figure for this moralized realism is not a female muse, a figuration that would have resulted had Browning chosen, for example, to use Vasari’s description of Lippo later in life married to a former nun. Rather, Lippo is supported by Cosimo di Medici, a world-historical figure embodying the historical movement toward capitalism. The patronage of Cosimo indirectly suggests the Victorian hope, shared by Dickens and other mid-century males, that art, flourishing under the patronage of latter-day Medici, would
remain within the male sphere. At a banquet in Birmingham where Dickens praised the mercantile, that is male, leaders of that city for encouraging the fine arts, John Forster “proposed ‘The Birmingham Society of Artists’ and praised the ‘merchant princes’ of Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool as the Medici of a new era” (Dickens 158).

Like Dickens and Forster in Birmingham, Lippo is a man speaking to men. He relates his sexual history (which is, of course, one with his artistic and economic life) to the watch, a group who, as males, are permitted to be out in the night streets. And he shows little impatience in pausing on his way from the brothel to sketch for a painting and describe his aesthetic principles (but then artistic production and aesthetic discourse are as much a release of male energy as sex). This monologue indicates Lippo’s rhetorical power, and by implication that of the male poet, to draw upon homosocial ties, upon beliefs shared with other men; Lippo persuades the men of the watch not only to sympathize with his sexual exploits, but to share his aesthetic principles. And yet the bemused sense of brotherhood attributed to the watch is ironized, open to opposing readings of the male poetic. The silent agreement of the watch with Lippo’s aesthetic doctrine may imply that a religious or moralized realism is a truly “manly” art in that it can be understood and valued by men of all classes, including the males reading the text. And yet this scene also presents for ironic contemplation the complicity of men, again including the male reader, in the masculinist double standard implicit in the male poetic, the assumption that men, unlike women, quite naturally need a sexual release for their energies.

Truly at ease with other males, Lippo turns to the transformation of women into works of art. The objectification of the female is, of course, a prominent theme for Browning, and in early poems such as “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” he condemns the potentially murderous power of the male gaze. But here the gaze is valued as the power to transform sexualized vision not only into representation of the body, but to see the “face” as sign of subjectivity, of spirit, of “soul”:

Take the prettiest face,
The Prior’s niece . . . patron-saint—is it so pretty
You can’t discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? won’t beauty go with these?
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 threefold? (ll. 208–14)

But if the text values Lippo’s ability to transform heterosexual desire into moralized and empathetic representation of the female, it also shows the Victorian male imagination as haunted by another vision of the female—the castrating woman embodied in the Salome myth. To Lippo, one man of the watch appears to hold “John Baptist’s head a-dangle by the hair” (l. 34). The

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Prior sees his niece as “Herodias. . . / Who went and danced and got men’s heads cut off?” (ll. 196–97). The Prior’s slippage from the singular to the plural (not “a man” but “men’s”) suggests the poem’s deep anxiety about manliness. Read from another perspective, the text reveals the fear that, within the new mercantile world, masculine potency and entrepreneurial manhood are fragile, endangered, vulnerable to the destruction of the phallus, of the essential male desire that generates the male poetic.

II

For all that Browningesque optimism and “success” that readers from Browning’s time to ours have found in or projected onto Lippo, Browning’s brief history of male desire, like Foucault’s history of sexuality, subverts the Repressive Hypothesis, the Victorian liberationist narrative of manhood. While seeming to show the freeing of male energy with the coming of capitalism, the poem also implies the opposite, that bourgeois manhood and particularly the conditions of art production within a mercantile society generate new constraints upon male desire—the attenuation of artistic energy in marriage, the alienation of this energy by the demands of the mercantile patron, and the commodification of phallic sexuality itself. In “Fra Lippo Lippi,” entrepreneurial manhood is but pre-capitalist imprisonment writ large.

In mid-Victorian male poetry, escape from enclosed space—the tower on the island, the palace of art, the monastery—signifies, however differently valued, the moment of “man-making.” Within that trope, Lippo’s flight from the monastery exemplifies the male artist rejecting the emasculating repression of artistic, commercial, and sexual activity. But “Fra Lippo Lippi” shows another escape, equally crucial to the achievement of manhood, the flight from the palace of Cosimo. In setting the monologue in an all-male zone, Browning suggests that the palace of commerce has become not a palace of art, but rather a new prison. Having rejected the cloister in his quest to become a man, the exemplary male artist must now flee the “banking-house” (l. 99) for the bawdy house in order to preserve his manhood. And the silence of Lippo’s male auditors implies an agreement, or at least an understanding, presumably shared by bourgeois male readers, that male desire may be constricted, as well as liberated, by the demands of entrepreneurial manhood.

For the imprisoned male artist, the demand of the Church for repetitive, unimaginative work has continued under the patronage of the merchant prince. The Unknown Painter immured in the cloister must paint “the same series, Virgin, Babe and Saint” (l. 60). Lippo, free for the moment, tells the men of the watch:
The enervation of these Renaissance artists resonates with Victorian fears about creativity. The continued production of "saints and saints" by both the Unknown Painter and Lippo suggests the concern about serial re-production or mechanical reproduction that, most notably in Ruskin, is the central sign in mid-Victorian aesthetic discourse of uncreative artistic labor. The patron also requires that after returning from the brothel, Lippo must

rise up to-morrow and go work
On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast
With his great round stone to subdue the flesh. (ll. 72–74)

In showing Lippo as an artist forced to paint what he does not practice as a "man," that is, as a sexual being, Browning may be indirectly criticizing the limitation upon male desire set by Victorian public morality, a topic of his poems with contemporary settings such as "Respectability." This disjunction in Lippo's life resonates, then, with other mid-century male writers, such as Dickens and Thackeray, who also seem to have felt the constraint that the respectability demanded by bourgeois manhood placed upon their creative energy.

Although the passage on Jerome has been justly admired for its comic irony, it would not be too solemn to read Lippo's complaint as revealing an inherent contradiction in the male poetic. Lippo has entered the employ of a mercantile patron, a new "Master" (ll. 17, 78, 226), a repeated term that resonates with the Victorian term for mill-owner. Yet under the terms of employment he is compelled to create a product at odds with his manhood, with the sexualized energy that is the very source of artistic potency, of artistic "success."

That a poem about the male artist centers on an excursion to the whorehouse is, I would argue, crucial to the poem's critique of the male poetic. The visit to the brothel is a sign not of "success" as a male, but rather of the difficulty in reconciling male creativity with entrepreneurial society. Within the proto-Freudian hydraulic metaphor underlying Browning's model of male desire, the need for sex with a prostitute suggests that the male artist's labor under mercantile patronage, in "the munificent House that harbours" him (l. 29) does not provide a full release of male desire. The escape from the art workshop would not have been so pressing had his energy been expressed through an artistic practice less occupied with self-flagellating male saints. But within this model, energy must emerge elsewhere, here in degraded, commodified form.

For Lippo, as for Victorian male artists and poets, one strategy for coping with the opposition between sexual desire and the demands of bourgeois patrons and of the art market is to create an art that is duplicitous, covertly

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sexual. In Lippo's masterpiece, the female is represented as virginal, saintly, but is still the object of the sexualized male gaze:

the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say. (ll. 385–87)

In Lippo's trip to the brothel, as in the marriage and the artistic practice of Andrea del Sarto, Browning suggests that a mercantile system may generate the commodification or reification of male desire in both its sexual and artistic manifestations. The coin, the “quarter-florin” (l. 28) that Lippo flaunts, signifies pride in his artistic achievement, but it also connects cash payment for uncreative art with cash payment for loveless sex. That the artist uses prostitution in order to maintain his creative potency signifies degradation in both areas of male life. Indeed, male sexual activity is here reduced to purely utilitarian value within entrepreneurial artistic activity. These trips to the red-light district, then, are as functional for Lippo as for any Victorian businessman. After a night of R&R, Lippo can return to the workplace, refreshed for a new day of re-producing pictures of saints for his “Master.”

Typically the unrepresented response of the male auditors is indeterminate, but the indeterminacy may itself suggest a characteristic Victorian ambivalence about male sexuality. Their decision not to arrest Lippo suggests general male complicity in the belief that illicit sex, a “secret life,” is necessary for the male artist, and for males in general. And yet the sexual double standard articulated by Lippo is simultaneously ironized as a sign of the potential degradation of the emotional life within entrepreneurial manhood.

III

In “Andrea del Sarto,” Browning brilliantly concludes the subversion of the male liberation narrative by showing how a fully formed entrepreneurial masculinity generates its own “mind-forg'd manacles,” internalized imprisonment of male desire. Here Browning dramatizes the artist as economic man creating entrepreneurial structures of feeling that distort and attenuate male energy itself. Even Andrea's awareness of his own desire is set into the ledger of profit and loss: “I know both what I want and what might gain,/ And yet how profitless to know, to sigh” (ll. 100–01, emphasis added). Indeed, Andrea sees his artistic enterprise within a dream of God as the head of a rather large firm and himself as a clerk worried about his pension:

All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self

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T is safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,
Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
(ll. 133–34, 141–44, emphasis added)

Rather than linear progress, then, these three artist poems considered in historical sequence show a pattern of circular return if not decay; the male artist as self-employed producer exhibits the same emotional lassitude as the pre-capitalist cloistered monk.

For this bourgeois male artist, as for Lippo, both artistic and sexual activity have become reified. For both, art production has become a means for purchasing sex. Verbal slippage in Andrea’s monologue indicates that the artist’s work has become only a way of making money, rather than an expression of a powerful, sexualized energy:

If you would sit thus by me every night
I should work better, do you comprehend?
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
(ll. 205–07, emphasis added)

As Andrea del Sarto uses his entrepreneurial ability to purchase the simulacrum of affection, the language characteristically conflates consumer demand and desire:

I’ll work then for your friend’s friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
(ll. 5–9, emphasis added)

Indeed, the identification of sexuality and money pervades the poem, as in “Let my hands frame your face in your hair’s gold” (l. 175), where “gold” refers both to the artistic sense of color and Andrea’s transformation of his wife into a commodified sexual object, a prostitute.

In both poems, then, the representation of the entrepreneurial male artist problematizes the same issue, the commodification of male energy as figured through the purchase of sex. This similar reification of desire in the two artists has been occluded in the critical tradition that has marked Lippo as the “successful” and Andrea as the “failed” artist. My Norton Critical Edition typically introduces “Andrea del Sarto” in the following terms: “Contrasting markedly with the exuberant ‘Fra Lippo Lippi,’ this is Browning’s classic study of moral and aesthetic failure” (Loucks 184). This inability to see the “failure,” the transformation of desire into money in each, may be attributed to the unconscious acceptance by critics and readers of the very male double standard that Browning problematizes in these poems. Critical tradition reads Lippo as exemplifying “normal” male heterosexuality—hearty, aggressive, dominating, predatory—and seems to assume, as willingly as the watch, that the buy-

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ing of sex is a functional necessity for the entrepreneurial male, an “exuberant” overflow of male energy. Andrea is read as having “failed” because the wife rather than the husband is purchasing sex outside marriage. (One could imagine a dramatic monologue in the voice of Andrea’s wife, similar to Angela Carter’s fine prose fiction “Black Venus” narrated in the voice of Jeanne Duval, the object of Baudelaire’s “Black Venus cycle.”)

This displacement of male energy from art to sex, and to sex distorted by commodification, pervades the writing of Victorian male poets. As readers of My Secret Life will recall, the transfer of gold often becomes the substitute for “normal” expression of male desire. The speaker in D. G. Rossetti’s “Jenny” substitutes conversation and cash payment for sex with the prostitute. Indeed, the oft-noted concern of Victorian male writers with the prostitute appears to be a displacement of their own concern with the purchase or commodification of their own sexualized desire under mercantile patronage and within the art market. As Rossetti wrote in a letter to Ford Madox Brown in 1873, “I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned” (2: 1175).

These contradictions in Lippo, the sexy male artist painting lives of saints in the desert after a visit to the whorehouse, point to the fault lines in the effort to join a masculine poetic to entrepreneurial masculinity. Browning shows the entrepreneurial male artist facing a basic contradiction. As “Respectability” suggests, the Victorian code of public morality would “supply a glove” (l. 20), constrain the expression in life and in art of that very desire the artist/poet takes to be the source of artistic power. The result for Lippo, and by extension for male Victorian artists/poets, is an accepted yet “secret” life as a man and a covert representation of this “secret life” in his art, as in Lippo’s reading of the angel wings in his painting as

a spread of kirtles when you’re gay
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! (ll. 380–83)

Like Arnold’s male poet at the Grande Chartreuse, as an historical figure Lippo stands “between two worlds” (l. 85), on the cusp between past and present. More specifically, Lippo stands between and embodies two formations of manhood. He has escaped the pre-industrial feminized cloister for the manly world of commerce, but, unlike Andrea, he is not wholly “fallen” into bourgeois manhood; he is not married, not the breadwinner for a family. No longer under the patronage of the Church, he is supported by a merchant prince, but not yet fully dependent upon market-driven demand. Indeed, the focus on Lippo’s sexual adventure incorporates into his “manliness” the construction of manhood against which middle-class manliness defined itself—

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the earlier gentry association of the true “man” with the rake, the sexual freebooter, with the ideal of “wenching” (Davidoff and Hall 110). Perhaps the idea of “success” in “Fra Lippo Lippi” derives from the poem’s fusion of these two competing forms of manhood, the combination of the sexual freedom of the gentry with the entrepreneurial energy of the bourgeoisie, a fusion displaced into the past that could be desired but never achieved by the proper bourgeois in the nineteenth century.

Browning’s sense of inherent contradiction between the masculine poetic and entrepreneurial manhood is also suggested by his separation in these artist poems of artistic “success” from marriage, one of the defining elements of bourgeois manliness. Just as Browning does not show Lippo as “successful” and married, he does not show Andrea, the “failed” artist, at the moment in Vasari’s account when male passion is strong and he falls in love with a young woman. Rather, Browning chooses to represent the “perfect” painter at that point when marriage and domesticity have attenuated male energy. In Andrea, a moderately successful artist as businessman, who, much like a Victorian R.A., manages with diligent effort to market art commodities in order to support a moderate domestic establishment, Browning links the attenuation of affective life in marriage to the loss of power in art.

However much this dissociation of masculine art from marriage contradicts bourgeois manhood, the strategy is consistent with the need of the male poetic to remove the “feminine” from the creative process. And yet, even in exemplifying a “masculine” art in “Fra Lippo Lippi,” Browning suggests that certain qualities neither he nor his age could associate with the “masculine”—a rich, even “soft” (I. 371) emotive life, a self-effacing relation to others—are necessary to the creation of art and poetry. Since possession of these qualities by the male artist would contradict the very definition of the “masculine” self, they are projected onto an Other, onto the “female.” To perform this ideological work in “Fra Lippo Lippi,” Browning returns to a traditional strategy of poetry written by men, the creation of a female muse separate from the male self, yet a necessary supplement to the work of the male artist. The Prior’s niece as Saint Lucy becomes the male artist’s “light,” his Beatrice, his savior. She “steps” into Lippo’s painting “sweet angelic . . . soft” (ll. 370, 371), bearing the very qualities against which masculinity defines itself. The painting, then, becomes a masterpiece not as the exemplary manifestation of masculine sensibility, but rather as the fusion of the “masculine” and “feminine” into an androgynous vision:

Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
Forward, puts out a soft palm—‘Not so fast!’
—Addresses the celestial presence, ‘nay—
He made you and devised you after all’

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Like the Prior’s niece... Saint Lucy, I would say.
And so all’s saved for me, and for the church
A pretty picture gained. (ll. 370–73, 387–89)

The instability or uncertainty in Browning’s representation of a male poetic appears most clearly in the (ir)resolution of Andrea’s vision of the “New Jerusalem.” Given the representation in this poem and in “Fra Lippo Lippi” of the psychic costs to the male artist of commercial pressures and bourgeois marriage, this vision may be read as suggesting the difficulty of achieving a satisfactory life as a male and particularly as a male artist within the current social arrangements and as displacing the complete satisfaction of male desire from this world to the next:

What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel’s reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover—the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! (ll. 259–65)

Indeed, the most celebrated lines of “Andrea del Sarto”—“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a heaven for?” (ll. 97–98, emphasis added)—suggest that only in an imagined moment in the Renaissance or in the “new chances” of “heaven,” rather than in the Victorian present, can “a man’s reach,” an integrated masculinity, true manhood, be achieved. After all, the resolution of gender anxieties in the afterlife rather than in the life of Victorian society is common in the work of other early-Victorian poets, both male and female. In In Memoriam Tennyson describes a new, rather heterodox ideal of masculinity as possible in a Heaven presided over by an androgynous Hallam (see Craft, “‘Descend’ “). In “To George Sand: A Recognition,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning calls upon “my sister” (l. 7) to endure “in agony” (l. 8) the constraints of gender in this world, “Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore” (l. 13).

And yet this subversion of the male poetic by seeing its attainment as possible only outside history is contradicted by Browning’s characteristic method of presenting the sensibility of a dramatized speaker. Within this ironic mode, Andrea’s inability to realize the male poetic is attributed neither to the social construction of gender nor to contradictions within the male poetic itself, but rather to individual weakness, indeed to a lack of masculine energy: “So—still they overcome / Because there’s still Lucrezia,—as I choose” (ll. 265–66). The male artist’s turn toward heaven is ironized as yet another passive day-dream, another sign of Andrea’s unmanly desire to withdraw from the energetic activity of his age.

If “Andrea del Sarto,” then, indicates the “failure” of the male poetic, it also leaves open the possibility of its achievement to the man of energy, to

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the truly manly artist. "Fra Lippo Lippi" can be seen, and certainly has been seen, as representing this manly artist, but, set just prior to a fully bourgeois society and suggesting the psychic degradation and commodification of creative energy within such a society, the poem undercuts the possibility of realizing this poetic. And even if we see Lippo within a Victorian typological structure as prefiguring the manly artist, Browning's poems about contemporary male life, such as "Respectability" and "Popularity," do not show the historical type realized in present time. As a manifesto for a masculine poetic, then, "Fra Lippo Lippi" suggests the shape of a "manly" art, but cast within Browning's characteristic structures of irony, historicism, and typology the poem represents equally well Browning's uncertainty that the reconciliation of entrepreneurial manhood and poetic practice could be achieved in his own life and in his own age.

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**NOTES**

1 Norman Vance illustrates a number of mid-Victorian concerns about manliness. For the definitive discussion of the art-historical controversies, including concerns about manliness, that form the context for "Fra Lippo Lippi," see DeLaura.

2 See Christ for the suggestion that the possession of male energy is the defining quality of Victorian masculinity.

3 Loy Martin perceptively examines the relation of capitalist ideology to the form of the dramatic monologue and to Browning's deconstruction of the individual subject. I would agree with the reading of these artist poems in the context of a market economy, but in this essay am stressing the connection between this economy and problems of male identity.

4 For discussion of the Victorian figural or typological aesthetic reconciling secular realism with transcendentanism see Susman; Landow.

5 Critics have noted the economic language, but not in the context of gender issues. See Dooly; Martin 141–45.

6 See the reading of this poem as an ironic criticism of the commodification of sexuality in Harris.

7 Although the disjunction between artistic potency and marriage in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" invites speculation about the autobiographical element in these poems, such analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. There has been lively critical controversy concerning Browning's anxiety about his manhood within his marriage. See most recently Haigwood.

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