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WIT AND SYMBOL:
THE PRIOR'S NIECE AND THE STRUCTURE OF
"FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

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"Fra Lippo Lippi" is one of Browning's most successful dramatic monologues, and the central character is perhaps the most Chau- cerian of his creations. Lippi's immense vitality, his enormous delight in and appreciation of himself and the sensual life, may well remind us, at any rate, of the Wife of Bath. This sensual exuberance is responsible for the predicament in which the painter-monk finds himself at the outset of the poem. But the aspect of his character that is primarily responsible for shaping the structure of the monologue is more reminiscent of Falstaff than of the Wife of Bath. I mean the suppleness of his wit, that keen and crafty intellect which reflects his hard-won understanding of human nature and allows him to extricate himself from an embarrassing situation without slighting in any way his philosophy of life. His monologue becomes an apologia as well as a song of himself, and the main ideas in the brilliant case which he presents are to be found in the significance which he assigns to the woman whom the Prior calls his niece.

Lippi, who is on the defensive throughout, attempts to justify his theory of art as well as his philosophy of life, both of which are drastically opposed to the views of the order to which he is bound. The structure of the poem is built around the manner in which he handles his vindication, and he begins his main line of defense by revealing the straitened circumstances that had led to his becoming a convert as a boy. Thus he defends himself directly. For after all, "You should not take a fellow eight years old/And make him swear to never kiss the girls." (224-225) And he also justifies his conduct indirectly by covertly attacking the hypocrisy of the monastic way of life. Consider, for example, the depiction of his introduction into that life:

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

(93-95)

A similar but more subtle irony is evoked through the four references to the Prior's niece, the key structural device in the poem.

The first reference to the niece occurs when the monks exclaim over the lifelike quality of Lippi's work. One remarks, "That
woman's like the Prior's niece who comes/To care about his
asthma: it's the life!” (170-171) Their praise is abruptly checked,
however, when Lippi's work is deprecated by the learned. The
Prior sums up the objections: The business of the artist is not
to depict reality; rather he is to “give us no more of body than
shows soul!” (188) After remarking further that realism, in en-
gendering wonder, stifles praise to God, the Prior orders Lippi to
erase his work and begin again. Then, strangely enough from the
Prior, comes the second reference to his niece: “Oh, that white
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!”
(195-197)

The third comment on the girl occurs when Lippi, in the pro-
cess of disparaging religious symbolism in painting, observes that
the prettiest face depicted by the artist can express soul either di-
rectly or indirectly; and, while making this point, he refers to the
niece as the Prior's patron-saint:

. . . Take the prettiest face,
The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint. . . .
(208-209)

Finally, when Lippi, to make amends for his indiscretion, offers
to paint a picture, which will include God, the Madonna and child,
angels, and saints, he again mentions the Prior's niece. As Lippi
describes his proposed picture, it comes to life in his mind. He sees
himself appearing out of a corner. Ashamed to be caught in such
illustrious company, he is about to retreat when “a sweet angelic
slip of a thing” (370) interposes and justifies his presence to God.
Then the modest Lippo describes himself shuffling off to some safe
bench behind, not neglecting to clutch the hand of his lovely ad-
vocate, who is, significantly enough, “like the Prior's niece.” (387)
The tone of the remarks about the niece suggests that she is the
Prior's paramour.¹ The first reference to her has a suspicious ring:
The Prior's niece comes “to care about his asthma.” The Prior's
own description of her as “that white smallish female with the
breasts” reflects an attitude which one does not ordinarily associate
with avuncular admiration or affection. And his comparison of her
to Herodias certainly brings to mind the idea of an illicit rela-
tionship.

¹. Boyd Litzinger (“The Prior’s Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi',' Notes and
Queries, VIII [1961], 344-45) has pointed out that Browning's conception of the
Prior's niece was inspired by a minor character in Walter Savage Landor's “Fra
Lippo Lippi,” one of the Imaginary Conversations. See also Litzinger's note in
College English (“Incident as Microcosm: The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo
Why, then, are Herodias and Salome, the mother and daughter, confused? To answer this question we must examine the circumstances which evoked the mixing of references. Just as the Prior completes his theologically grounded denunciation of Lippi’s fresco—“Rub all out, try at it a second time” (194)—his attention is caught by the remarkably lifelike portrait of his niece. The diction and punctuation of the passage that describes his reaction to this part of the painting call attention to several significant changes of tone, which, we may assume, are appropriately dramatized by Lippi. The decisive assurance of “Rub all out . . .” is interrupted by a startled tone of wonder, brought on by Lippi’s skill, which then modulates into an attitude of reflectiveness as the Prior thinks of what the niece represents in his life:

“Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She’s just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say,—.”

(195-196)

The dash signals another emotional turn. The Prior abruptly awakens from the private reverie induced by Lippi’s genius; and realizing the extent to which he has forgotten himself, he exclaims with white-hot anger:

“Who went and danced and got men’s heads cut off!
Have it all out!”

(197-198)

I believe that we are meant to see the confusion of Herodias and Salome as an error born of rage rather than of ignorance. The Prior’s thoughts move from the niece to Herodias for obvious reasons; then, under the pressure of the situation, his mind leaps to the most flagrant example of evil that he can associate with Herodias in order to condemn the painting. He confuses Herodias and Salome in his anger because the girl who was the model for the picture is more in his mind than the biblical characters. Or, to put it another way, the confusion of the Prior’s own private and public characters seems to account for the error.

In this way Lippi manages to suggest that there are single qualities in both Herodias and Salome which make up the Prior’s conception of the woman in the picture. The allusion to Herodias connotes illicit love, but Herodias (as far as the connotation is concerned) was not youthfully sensual; her daughter was, however, and thus the Prior’s idea of the girl he calls his niece, evoked by the picture on the wall, is represented by a combination of the dominant connotative characteristics of Salome (youth and sensual beauty) and Herodias (illicit love).

The significance of Lippi’s reference to the niece as the Prior’s patron-saint is not revealed until the final mention of the niece is
made as Lippi describes his picture. After his justification by the rather earthly angel, he sees himself shuffling sideways

Under the cover of a hundred wings
Thrown like 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! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go
The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.

(379-387)

Since St. Lucy is the patron-saint of those who are afflicted in the eyes, Lippi's point is that where beauty in art is concerned the Prior is blind. And, significantly, there is again in a context which contains a reference to the niece a suggestion of an illicit relationship, this time in Lippi's description of the atmosphere as he hurries away with the "little lily thing." Thus Fra Lippo's sensually beautiful defender in the picture that came to life in his mind is compared to the Prior's niece, who is in turn called St. Lucy and who has been previously alluded to as the Prior's patron-saint, by the devious monk. Two themes are blended, and the Prior's niece, as a rhetorical device, has come full circle. The reference to St. Lucy puts the bow to the knot.

To sum up: The girl whom the Prior calls his niece represents sensual or earthly beauty combined with illicit love. For Lippo she is not only both of these; she is also a symbol of blindness on the part of the Prior (and of his whole order) because he fails to understand the place of beauty in art; and, further, in representing an illicit relationship, she suggests the hypocrisy of the Prior and of the whole monastic way of life.

The prominent part which the niece plays in Lippi's defense and, consequently, in the structure of the poem is determined by the shifting attitudes of the Captain of the Guards. Upon first being accosted by the Florentine guards, Lippi assumes a variety of postures in an attempt to wriggle out of a compromising situation; he simulates, in turn, injured innocence, contempt, indignation, and portentousness. Once his identity has been established and a degree of respect afforded him, he settles on the idea of ingratiating himself with the Captain, who shows himself to be not unsympathetic with the notorious escapades of the painter-monk. Thus the wily rhetorician adopts the man-of-the-world approach:
I saw the proper twinkle in your eye—
"Tell you, I liked your looks at the very first.
Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.

(42-44)

Everything goes well until Lippi makes the mistake of presenting all too clearly the contrast between the nature of his calling and his own character. The idea of the monk's returning after his outing to work “On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast / With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,” (73-74) causes the Captain to lose some of the feeling of rapport which Lippi has been so assiduously cultivating:

You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head—
Mine's shaved—a monk, you say—the sting's in that!
If Master Cosimo announced himself,
Mum's the word naturally; but a monk!

(75-79)

Realizing that he is not out free yet, Lippi alters his tactics and undertakes a line of defense which, as we have seen, involves a vindication of his style of painting as well as his character and which is based in large measure upon his revelation of the stupidity and hypocrisy of his superiors. This section, which, from the standpoint of structure, might be termed the body of the poem, begins at line 80 and concludes at line 335 with another rhetorical error on the part of Lippi, a mistake similar in effect to the reference to Jerome. Carried away with rage after relating how blind and how wrong the monks have been in their evaluation of his art, he cries, "Hang the fools!" (335)

In the conclusion of the monologue (lines 336-392) Lippi alters the direction of his defense once more—again, it seems reasonable to assume, because of his sensitiveness to the reactions of the Captain:

—That is—you'll not mistake an idle word
Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, God wot,
Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now!
It's natural a poor monk out of bounds
Should have his apt word to excuse himself.

(336-337, 340-342)

Thus he adopts a more conciliatory approach by apologizing for his fit of temper and by promising to make amends for his nocturnal indiscretion with a painting. One aspect of this proposed painting presents a striking parallel to the highly dramatic situation
with which the poem began. The opening lines revealed Lippi disconcerted by the bright light of torches as he was making his way cautiously out of a dark alley of dubious reputation. Immediately, as we have noted, he was on the defensive and, after making one false start, proceeded to justify himself brilliantly, if sophisticatedly, by, among other things, covert references to the clandestine relationship between the Prior and his niece. Now, at the conclusion of the monologue, having altered his approach again, he describes the picture which he will paint as penance, a picture in which he plans to appear himself. Out of a corner “As one by a dark stair into a great light” (362) will come the astonished Lippi. He will look for a means of escape. But not for long. His presence will be defended by the angel who looks like the Prior’s niece.

Thus Lippi’s penance becomes a subterfuge for another vindication of himself. In the course of the monologue he asserts, in effect, that he is out of place neither in the dark alley “where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar” (6) nor in the presence of more ethereal beings. The wily monk uses the Prior’s niece as a rhetorical device to justify his being out of bounds by suggesting that it is not he who is the real hypocrite in monk’s clothing. And he plans to create someone quite like her to assert his right to dwell in the presence of God and enjoy the company of angels.

**Vanderbilt**

A number of Vanderbilt faculty members in these departments will be on leave to do research during the present year: W. Paul Elledge (English) will continue study of Byron’s *Don Juan* in England and in this country; William Hoffa (English), on leave in England this fall to do research on the influence of 20th-century music on associationalist-symbolist poetry; Leonard Nathanson (English), on leave in the spring semester for study of *Comus* in relation to Milton’s other early poems; James J. Stathis (English), on leave this fall in order to study Restoration comedy; Earl W. Thomas (Portuguese), who will spend the year in Recife, Brazil, in research and writing on Brazilian language and literature, under a Vanderbilt-Ford Overseas Research Grant; Morris Wachs (French), who will spend the spring semester researching and writing on Diderot, d’Alembert, and others; Harold L. Weatherby (English), who is on leave this fall to work on Newman and the Oxford Movement.