UNIVERSITY OF AGDER

"I will make an Eve"

The Construction of Gender in Robert Browning's *Men and Women* (1855)

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This master's thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the University of Agder and is therefore approved as a part of this education. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.

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Towards DN 1900: new poetic voices for the industrial age

The past is gained, secure, and on record.

(Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, March 1st 1845, Browning & Browning, 2009, p. 56)

(Rain, Steam and Speed: the Great Western Railway (1844), Turner, 2012)

It is a point of some curiosity that the earliest surviving recording of a human voice belongs to Robert Browning. Uncertain, forgetful and apologetic, the aging poet recites *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix* (1845) to a party of guests at the home of his close friend, the artist Rudolf Lehmann. This moment – the evening of 7th April 1889 – was captured for posterity on an Edison cylinder phonograph by Edison's British representative, George Gouraud. The recording exists to this day, digitised, enhanced and, crucially, stored in innumerable locations around the world. It is this last observation that bears witness to an

enormously significant change in the manner in which cultural records are transmitted, stored and read, the origins of which swept across Europe and America during the latter years of the nineteenth century. German media theorist Friedrich Kittler characterises it as the point at which one distinct discourse network, which he labels *DN 1800*, becomes another, *DN 1900*. In the case of the former, written texts – poems amongst them – "provided the central archive for the storage of all cultural data" (Johnston in Kittler, 1997, p. 4) and represented "the translation of a silent and wordless nature, language […being] invested with spiritual powers whose thematization provided the basis of romantic poetry and hermeneutics" (Johnston in Kittler, 1997, p. 5). Kittler identifies, in DN 1900, the invention of the phonograph, together with film, as the specific conditions on which the break in a former synthesis was based; the hand, eye and consciousness were separated, and the hallucinatory, maternal voice of the poet's words ceased to enrapture the reader where formerly "words [had] trembled with sensuality and memory" (Kittler, 1997, p. 40). Browning's meeting with this important transitional moment, in Lehmann's dining room, was thus a symbolic turning point in the history of poetic language in which he appeared a seemingly uncertain – perhaps even unwilling - participant.

Men and Women, published over three decades prior to this phonographic recitation, is something of a liminal collection in which Romantic synthesis, "sensuality and memory" (Kittler, 1997, p. 40) appear on the threshold of a new fragmented, industrialised Victorian cultural landscape. Isobel Armstrong suggests that this is a feature of all poetry of the period; that the Victorian poem was "on the way somewhere. It is either on the way from Romantic poetry, or on the way to modernism. It is situated between two kinds of excitement, in which it appears not to participate" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 1). In *Men and Women*, there is evidence to suggest that these "two kinds of excitement" were, to Browning, intimately connected with his construction of gender identity. Whilst it is perhaps rather simplistic to suggest that the Romantics represented a "female" to the Victorian industrial male, it is nonetheless interesting

to consider Kittler's suggestion that the transcendental powers of written language implicit in Romantic poetry were at least in part the product of another specific, tangible historic moment. Kittler believed DN 1800 to have been predicated upon distant memories of the female, maternal voice, which was imbued with extra significance for poets of the nineteenth century in part because of its unique mode of transmission. Kittler traces this back to the phonetic methods of learning literacy first instituted by Heinrich Stephani in Germany around 1800 and which spread widely afterwards. John Johnston summarises Kittler's thoughts about its consequences in the following way:

> […] one no longer decyphers [sic], but seems to hear what is written as an inner voice. It is moreover, a voice one has already heard, a variant of the voice that emanates from the mother's mouth in the hazy depths of childhood.
>
> (John Johnston in Kittler, 1997, p. 12)

The implication is that the cultural framework of Romanticism had a political basis – an educational philosophy – and that the subsequent transition to Modernism was in turn the result of another historically contingent movement, this time of scientific or technological progress. The mechanics of industrialisation became, in a sense, the death knell of Romantic subjective sensibilities and heralded a new scientific, objective reality. If we take Kittler's arguments to their natural conclusions, it is even possible to suggest that the entire literary landscape of the Romantic, Victorian and eventually Modern poets was created by these tangible technological advancements that, at least figuratively, ended with the removal of this mother's voice from the poetic imagination.

Browning's role in this transition was a significant one, not least because his conception of the dramatic monologue specifically fostered a degree of objective removal from the inward subjectivity of the Romantics. *Men and Women*, published first in 1855, is literally a collection of men and women – voices separate from the independent presence of the *poet* Browning. The attempt to separate poet and persona so completely, as will be argued later, was a difficult task

both for Browning himself and for his Victorian readers, who were unaccustomed to what might be characterised as the monologue's awkwardly deliberate, constructed fragmentation of poetic personality and reception. Previously, as M.H. Abrams suggests, Romantic poets tended to see "literature as an index to temperament" (Abrams, 1971, p. 241). By providing a poetic platform for at times quite unpredictable, disparate men and women – domestic abusers, murderers, obsessive lovers and neurotic painters – Browning essentially problematised the inseparability of poet and poetry and in so doing reconstructed the moment at which, as Kittler implies, the synthesis was broken between the creator and the creative material in DN 1900. The underpinnings of Browning's new objective poetry were then, in essence, not dissimilar to the larger forces at work in society as a whole, which centred around the separation of mechanical processes and human labour. Central to these developments, as we shall see, was the female labour force at work and, perhaps conversely, the feminine model of morality at home.

This thesis will take as its point of departure the intricate processes, influences and consequences of Browning's construction of gender in *Men and Women*. Chapter 1 will address the opposition between subjective and objective poetry as Browning conceived them. It will also assess the implications of the dramatic monologue both for the representation of women and in defence of poetry as a medium. In Chapter 2, Browning's fascination with the ideals and images of the Renaissance will be examined and an attempt made to trace the extent to which the Mannerist style and sensibility affected his representation of female constructions. The concept of the "gaze" will be central in this respect, implying that *Men and Women* is, in effect, predominately a collection of men looking *at* women. Chapters 3 and 4 will address different aspects of masculinity. The former will centre on the idea of the male hero, developed simultaneously from ancient myths and changing contemporary attitudes. The latter will examine the potentially sinister consequences of resultant crises of masculinity in the form of

domestic violence and threat. In this final chapter, the extent to which these difficult subjects defined Browning's dramatic monologue form will be addressed as we return to the central question of the opposition between subjective and objective poetics. In so doing, the thesis will attempt to demonstrate how *Men and Women* seems to embody two ostensibly incompatible poetic positions for Browning: on the one hand as the devoted husband and lover and the chivalrous champion of women; on the other, as the violent, objectifying patriarchal aggressor who will stop at nothing to silence the emergent female voice. The co-existence of these extremes suggests that Browning's construction of his disparate men and women was a complex and at times contradictory operation appropriate to, and perhaps an inevitable result of, new Victorian social and industrial realities.

Chapter 1

Masculine objectivity and the dramatic monologue

Love, you saw me gather men and women,
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth, - the speech, a poem.

(One Word More, Browning, 2010, pp. 610-611, ll. 129-132)

Browning, as he demonstrates in the biographical poem, *One Word More*, was a devoted husband who held the opinions of his famous wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (hereafter referred to by her initials, E.B.B.), in the highest esteem. She was, as he rather unabashedly phrased it in this, the most personal of his poems, his "moon of poets" (Browning, 2010, p. 614, l. 188). Alongside E.B.B. in Browning's estimations was his greatest idol, Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose poetry cast him in the role of a "seer" - one whose personality is not separate from his poetry but instead "the very radiance and aroma" of it (Browning in Houghton & Stange, 1968, pp. 336-337). What the two share is a clear interest in the *subjective* human experience – an experience that Browning himself rejected in no uncertain terms. For him, this kind of poetry belonged to the past where poets worked until "the world […was] found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions […], the straw of last year's harvest" (Browning, 1981, p. 1004). These rather disdainful comments perhaps betray the strength of Browning's feelings on the subject. However, in general, his rejection of Romantic, subjective poetry had to be achieved subtly, without bombast or hostility so as not to damage his own marriage or cast doubt upon the extent of his admiration for the predecessors he so admired (Haigwood, 1986, p. 98).

Browning's conception of a new kind of poetry, the *objective* poetry of the dramatic monologue, is rather different to Shelley's or E.B.B.'s, being concerned with "the manifested action of the heart and brain" (Browning, 1981, p. 1001). This is poetry perhaps more suitable

to the social and literary discourse of the age; industrialisation brought with it intimations of reification inherent in new production methods, where a new working class lost its autonomy and essential humanity as a result of the individual worker's position as a disenfranchised subordinate in the economic system. These views, expressed most explicitly by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (1867) and *The Holy Family* (1845), mirror how the dramatic monologue – the culmination of Browning's philosophy of objectivity – by nature incorporates disembodied, disparate voices separate from the poet's own personal identity. Poetic voices, like factory workers, are not necessarily party to the intentions, motivations and vagaries of the owner or poet – in fact, the system works best precisely because they are kept separate.

Nevertheless, although Browning's objectivity appears to have grown seamlessly out of such political interpretations of industrialisation, his own definition does appear to be rather simple – if not simplistic – in a purely historical-literary context. Criticism of the early nineteenth century engaged frequently and eloquently with the subjective-objective corollary, resulting in disparate and often polemic conclusions. For Browning, poems defined by the inaction of the interior personality on the one hand and the action of the intellect on the other, are easily distinguished; the former is subjective and the latter objective. According to Coleridge, however, "objective" poetry was a purely historical label, separating classical poetry and drama from all subsequent forms. Coleridge was as categorical in his assessment as Browning was in his, believing that "It is this inwardness or subjectivity, which principally and most fundamentally distinguishes all the classic from all the modern poetry" (Coleridge cited in Abrams, 1971, p. 242). Coleridge went on to suggest that, in the case of Shakespeare, "there is a subjectivity of the *persona*, or dramatic character" (Coleridge cited in Abrams, 1971, pp. 242-243), which again contradicts Browning's positioning of his dramatic poetry as inherently objective by nature. Browning's contemporary, John Keble, was more extreme still,

denouncing poetry not "tinctured with the character and leanings of the poet as by some mysterious aroma" as "absolutely not poetry at all" (Keble, 1912).

The cultural climate that gave rise to such vehement disagreements also included the then infamous literary standoff between followers of Schlegel and Schiller, who differed as to whether Shakespeare was a subjective or objective playwright. This context was, nevertheless, symptomatic of the great project of Romanticism in all its different cultural representations. M.H. Abrams suggests that the ambiguity implied by the terms used "greatly complicates the story of the romantic attempts to use literature as an index to temperament" (Abrams, 1971, p. 241), which was after all the very epitome of Coleridge's poetic philosophy. These are, in other words, *all* Romantic critics, despite their differences, whereas Browning was not only of a different persuasion, but also of a different historical moment entirely.

It is not unreasonable, given this context, to suggest that Browning's simplistic binary opposition between subjective and objective was something more than a lack of intellectual sophistication, and was rather an inevitable consequence of his cultural proximity to Kittler's newly emerging DN 1900 category. This, as we have seen, implied the physical separation of hand, eye and consciousness and the gendered act inherent in silencing the maternal voice that was the very bedrock of the Romantic sensibility (Kittler, 1997, p. 40). These were also material realities closely allied to contemporary political and historical moments: specifically, the technological advances of cultural storage mechanisms revolutionised from and beyond the onset of industrialism. The sense of fragmentation initially resulting from industrial processes and later spreading through different cultural channels allowed for a more unambiguous material separation between the poet and the persona. Browning, as a pioneer of the dramatic monologue, was acutely aware of the difficult ethical dilemmas associated with this kind of separation. In more recent literary and popular culture, the nervous critical reception to works that similarly blur the boundaries between cultural product and authorial presence only serve

to demonstrate how experimental Browning's poetry was in this respect, and how difficult it is to make such separation.[1]

Pictor Ignotus: integrity and market economics

The painter poem, *Pictor Ignotus*, sketches the specific historically contingent material awareness of this newly emerging discourse network explicitly. In a sense, this is a poem about the tensions between artistic integrity and the necessities of market economics, which clearly locates it closer to DN 1900 than DN 1800. This poignant poem, the title of which literally means "painter unknown", pays tribute to an artist's principled failure. Equating his abilities with "that youth's" (Browning, 2010, p. 227, l. 1) – most likely Raphael's – the painter has rejected the flattery and falsehood seemingly necessary to achieve commercial, secular success. There are moments of biting satire, which epitomise his contempt for the moneyed classes and the subservient role that the artist is compelled to assume before them:

> These buy and sell our pictures, take and give,
> Count them for garniture and household-stuff,
> And where they live needs must our pictures live,
> And see their faces, listen to their prate,
> Partakers of their daily pettiness,
> Discussed of, - "This I love or this I hate,
> "This likes me more and this affects me less!"
> (Browning, 2010, p. 230, ll. 50-56)

The apparent bitterness of these lines is far removed from any sense of artistic transcendence or martyrdom, and the persona immediately gives way to despondency and self-destructiveness in the following lines where "My heart sinks as monotonous I paint / These endless cloisters and eternal aisles" (Browning, 2010, p. 231, ll. 58-59). Browning's artist, perhaps like Browning himself, seems caught between two extremes – idealism and commercialism – and although his choice has fallen upon the former of the two, he seems neither convinced, comforted nor elevated by it. We can at least assume, as is also the case, for example, with the

[1] We might consider, for example, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) or, in music, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' album, *Murder Ballads* (1996), both of which require us to separate creator from creative material.

generic wife figure in *Any Wife to Any Husband*, that Browning is attempting with his use of the possessive pronoun "our" (line 52) to achieve some wide level of applicability for creative artists in general. Given the solitary nature of the painter's cloistered existence and the structurally imposed solitude of the dramatic monologue which frames it, this attempt to reach out to a shared group – the conspiratorial "our" – suggests even more strongly that Browning is aiming to extrapolate a localised meaning into a larger context. The microcosm of *Pictor Ignotus'* sorry existence is thus extended to encompass the macrocosm of the Victorian poetic role, which exists at another important crossroads between idealism and commercialism.

An interesting subtext, as Woolford, Karlin and Phelan have pointed out, is the rather fascinating similarity that lines 55-56 make to a letter that Browning received from his wife on 24 May 1845:

> I do myself justice, and dare call things by their names to myself, and say boldly, this I love, this I hate, this I would do, this I would not do, under all kinds of circumstances.
>
> (E.B.B. cited in Browning, 2010, Correspondence x 234-5)

Browning prefaces the lines that appear to mirror this letter with the word "Discussed" (line 55) and sets out the reference as a direct quotation. It seems, therefore, that this is no coincidence and that both Browning and E.B.B. were aware of the tensions between them – the "discussion", after all, shares the same conceptual base as the debate between "subjective" and "objective" poets. For Browning, this liminal moment was simultaneously a literary and a private battle, and in this context his wife proves to be an inspiration, even where their views diverge radically.

Tracing the root causes of the tensions that Browning chose to represent will always be speculative; assuming them to be biographical is still more so. However, there is undoubtedly a sense that this monologue is rooted in primarily Victorian, rather than Renaissance, suspicions about utilitarian commercialism. Ironically, Browning also rejected, as we have seen, the abstract idealism of Romantic subjectivity, which in turn suggests that *Pictor Ignotus*

embodies simultaneously an heroic ideal and a stark warning from history. It is important to emphasise, as the above passage from *Pictor Ignotus* illustrates, that for the professional poet, it is the *material* lack of recognition – commercial failure – that is the external catalyst for these internal fragmentations. For the demoralised painter, this culminates in the recognition that commercial success is a form of prostitution leading to the contamination of art, whereby he is forced to question whether "Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth?" (Browning, 2010, p. 231, l. 72). For the Victorian poet, the cruel utilitarianism of the new industrialism contextualised intrinsically similar artistic doubts, and was doubtless exacerbated by the dismissive remarks of those like the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who claimed in *The Rationale of Reward* (1825) that "prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry" (Bentham cited in Richards, 1988, p. 6). *Pictor Ignotus* symbolises the difficult choice that the poet is forced to make between integrity and success. Browning appears to suggest that it is impossible to own both.

The Last Ride Together – a meeting of subjective and objective poetry

Browning's exposition of the subjective-objective opposition is rendered particularly sensitively in "The Last Ride Together", which constructs the transition between the two forms of emotional exposition as a linear event. The implication here is that the representation of objective experience is privileged and in a sense "arrived at" – in other words that the subjective is rejected in favour of the objective in the period *following* reflection and concentrated introspection. The opening lines of the poem accordingly embrace subjective emotion as the initial position, inflating the lover's passions and rendering female beauty through the hyperbolic appropriation of nature:

> Conscious grew, your passion drew
> Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too
> Down on you, near and yet more near,
> Till flesh must fade for heaven was here! –
> Thus leant she and lingered – joy and fear!

Thus lay she a moment on my breast.
(Browning, 2005, p. 115, ll. 28-33)

The context here is a male lover reflecting on the breakdown of a relationship. If we take this to also comprise a veiled reference to Browning's rejection of subjective poetry, the process of the persona's gradual empowerment might serve as a barometer for Browning's own increasing confidence in his break from Romantic tradition. In the first stanza, it is clear that the lover is passively impotent; a brief motion "Thus leant she and lingered" (l. 32) is seized upon with "joy and fear!" (l. 32). This exaggerated and unjustified hope encapsulates a typically subjective emotional experience of the lover-poet and is reinforced by Romantic natural imagery – "Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too" (l. 29). By stacking as many conventional, recognisable Romantic images into his hyperbolic expressions of admiration, the persona treads a fine line between reconstructing the powerful subjective experience of unrequited love on the one hand and signposting a comic, ironic, parodic interpretation on the other. Laura Haigwood suggests that Browning's ironic perspectives provided a stark contrast to the earnestness of E.B.B.'s sonnets. Irony, she suggests, was something of a characteristic of *Men and Women* as a whole, allowing Browning to distance himself from the sincere self-surrender of Romanticism. Furthermore, the title of the collection refers explicitly to flesh and blood people, and therefore implies "that he stands for a poetry grounded in 'men and women' rather than in 'dreams'" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 102). In these senses, the poem is already on its way away from Romanticism.

The Romantic suns and moons recede after the third stanza to be replaced by "grounded" poetry of realism and pragmatism – "Still one must lead some life beyond" (l. 92), he admits. This is a specifically male privilege. As Haigwood remarks, in E.B.B.'s sonnets "the speaker scarcely hints of a life or an identity for herself beyond the fulfilment of her love; for her, love *is* life" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 104). The final stanzas of Browning's poem suggest transcendence beyond the relationship – indeed any relationship – as the lover reflects on

eternity and questions the nature of fate, future and happiness where "Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride" (l. 101). The vehicle for the persona's thoughts is the dramatic monologue, and this is a significant factor in the shifting balance of power in the relationship. Whilst initially the persona's female lover holds his fate in her hands - "My mistress bent that brow of hers" (l. 12) in response to his request to join her for the eponymous last ride - she is later structurally silenced by virtue of her position as the monologue's addressee. The gesture described here, together with her movement to lay upon his breast at the end of the third stanza, are but rare glimpses of her physical presence, and her passivity is emphasised by the increasingly aggressive rhetorical questions posed by the persona. Only one such question is to be found in the opening three stanzas – "Who knows but the world may end to-night?" (l. 22) – in contrast to the four in stanza four, two in five, and five in six. This accumulation is reflective of the aforementioned shift in power – now it is *he* who is in control, through the rhetoric of the poem itself. The role of persona, in effect, becomes a tool of masculine aggression.

The persona's assertiveness in this poem is at its height in the four relentless questions at the start of stanza six, marking perhaps the final fulfilment of the poetic transition from subjective to objective:

> What hand and brain went ever paired?
> What heart alike conceived and dared?
> What act proved all its thought had been?
> What will but felt the fleshly screen?
> (Browning, 2005, p. 116, ll. 56-59)

The reference to the separation of hand and brain in line 56 is somewhat telling, especially when considering Kittler's theory - that DN 1900 marked the breakdown of the close relationship between consciousness and the writing process through the technological advancements of (Browning's) age (Kittler, 1997, p. 40). The divorce of body and spirit or consciousness is accordingly portrayed as a manifestation of increased empowerment: the lover

embraces "some life beyond" (l. 92) based entirely on a rhetorical acceptance of heaven's rewards, which are impossible to achieve simultaneous with bodily – sexual – union. So much is implied after the exploration of various noble failures – the statesman (l. 62), soldier (l. 64), poet (l. 67), sculptor (l. 78) and musician (l. 83), whose hard work result in nothing more than "The flag stuck on a heap of bones" (l. 63).

The prevailing despondency, particularly at the midpoint of this poem, is perhaps reflective of Browning's own fears about his lack of achievement as a poet. This theme recurs regularly in *Men and Women* (as we saw, for example, in *Pictor Ignotus*), together with the apparent implication that poetic and sexual failure are somehow commensurate. *The Last Ride Together* is by implication a poem about both unrequited love *and* the subjective-objective transition: for the lover (as for the poet), Browning returns to a common conceit: that success in life must result in eternal failure, "Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?" (l. 98). It is a triumphant reversal, as the lover turns his misfortunes into a philosophical (albeit Pyrrhic) victory.

Despite all of this aggressive rhetorical bravado, it is nonetheless pragmatic diplomacy, rather than triumphalism that is the prevailing argumentative position assumed at the end of the poem:

> What if we still ride on, we two,
> With life for ever old yet new,
> Changed not in kind but in degree,
> The instant made eternity […]
>
> (Browning, 2005, p. 117, ll. 106-109)

The tone is conciliatory and the premise – "The instant made eternity" (l. 109) – not overtly hostile in the context of poetry either, excluding neither the subjective nor the objective as admirable in principle. Furthermore, in framing his reflection as a question in these lines, the persona avoids further confrontation whilst simultaneously asserting his new philosophy on

love and poetry as a change "not in kind but in degree" (l. 108). Objectivity is finally achieved subtly, as the lover distances himself from his own emotion and reflects on a life *beyond* love. This kind of reflection was, according to Haigwood, seemingly impossible for E.B.B. Her subjective experience of love provides the *only* available perspective, from which critical distance "irony, deflation, and the speaker's own increasingly philosophical understanding of his loss" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 103) are entirely absent. For Browning, in contrast, these elements fundamentally underpin the objective style.

A gendered opposition

It is important, when examining Browning's appropriation of the objective poetic viewpoint, to emphasise that none of this would have been possible without further very specific conditions in which gender plays a pivotal role. On the one hand it is possible to argue that Romantic subjectivity - or the "post-classical", if we prefer Coleridge's formulation - is inherently feminine in the sense that it is predicated upon the "sensuality and memory" (Kittler, 1997, p. 40) of the mysterious maternal voice from the poet's childhood. On the other, one can argue more pragmatically that the vast majority - if not all - historical discourses and practices in Western literature have been dominated by masculine perspectives and the male gaze. Subjectivity, it can reasonably be maintained, is not *female* subjectivity at all, but is rather a product of the historically contingent literary practices selected, consciously or unconsciously, by the individual poet: textual and intertextual influences, linguistic norms and the effects of prescient political or social concerns on the act of creative production. This particular line of reasoning suggests that a poem is a material witness to the cultural priorities of its particular context. Thus, if we continue to use Kittler's terminology, we can arrive at the somewhat Marxist-inflected conclusion that poems become historical deposits of stored cultural data used by society to influence its members and maintain or create normative behaviour or values.

Browning's construction of female identity in his objective poems is, in light of such considerations, not a neutral act, but rather one of enormous power and social significance. The role of women in society was oddly contradictory. On the one hand, as economic historian Maxine Berg proposed, "It was the female not the male workforce which counted in the new high-productivity industries" (Berg, 1991, p. 138). According to Berg then, the industrial revolution was, materially and commercially, a "female" movement that, judging by the aggressively repressive patriarchal response, formed part of a somewhat uncomfortable and emasculating reality for men. Susan Zlotnick agrees that the response to industrialism was defined by a belligerently masculine discourse, and that this "was rooted in a sense of endangered class and gender power" (Zlotnick, 2001, p. 15). The danger, it would seem, lay in the practice and fulfilment of entirely new material realities; production and employment were increasingly part of the female domain, and the possibility of lasting gender role reversals was open for perhaps the first time in British history, at least on a mass scale.

If Bentham's utilitarianism was one aspect of this new male, defensive discourse, Browning himself, it might be argued, also contributed. This argument is most convincing when seen in the context of his dismissal of the aforementioned implicitly feminine Romantic "shadow of a reality, [and…] sentiments diluted from passions" (Browning, 1981, p. 1004). E.B.B.'s success as a poet, her seniority in years and her practical role in their elopement must have added to his sense of endangerment, although, as extracts from their correspondence suggest, Browning did not appear to be overly concerned about his submissive role as an apprentice:

> […] see your corrections…and understand that in one or two instances
> in which they would seem not to be adopted, they are so, by some modification
> of the previous, or following line.
> (Browning & Browning, 2009, p. 258)

Despite this, Browning's construction of the female voice and his representation of male-female relationships in the dramatic monologues appears to be fraught with tensions between

two poles – masculine and feminine respectively. On the one hand, perhaps responding indignantly to Bentham's remarks, he emphasised the place of a new kind of poetry that implicitly supported the repressive masculine response to a gendered social revolution. On the other, the fair-minded Browning, in deference to his wife's poetry and the Romantic discourse network of which it formed a part, voiced his preferences whilst maintaining his respect for 'feminine' poetics. The relationship between these two poles will be assessed in the following section.

Any Wife to Any Husband: language, representation and masculine bias

Assessing whether Browning the repressor or Browning the husband was ultimately triumphant in *Men and Women* is, as it turns out, a task made rather simpler by the nature of the evidence available. If we can permit ourselves to use the terms somewhat loosely, the answer emerges both quantitatively and qualitatively. As regards the former, the power structures inherent in the dramatic monologue as a literary genre are overwhelmingly one-sided constructions: addressees or subjects are structurally denied dialogic parity and are relegated to passive status through their enforced silence. The entire rhetorical framework of the poem – form, subject, occasion, language and perspective – is "constructed" by the persona, whose power over the direction of the poem is absolute. With this in mind, we can observe how only a fraction of the personae in *Men and Women* are, in fact, women (notable examples being *A Woman's Last Word* and *Any Wife to Any Husband*). The cumulative – and therefore quantitative – result of this is that the collection becomes, more correctly, "men: on women" – the male gazer, who by implication objectifies the female body and intellect, is overwhelmingly situated in a position of privilege.

A "qualitative" answer, so to speak, can be found in the nature of the poetic language used to construct the female voice as Browning conceived of it. It seems that, as in the case of *Any Wife to Any Husband*, Browning was at pains to de-emphasise the specificity of the

monologue and instead to present a generalised representation of gender roles, as the title implies of both persona and addressee. This "everywoman" addresses herself to every man, and in so doing suggests that the behaviour and language represented in the poem is both normative and representative. There is, like in *The Last Ride Together*, a clearly linear sense of progression in the logic and structure of the poem. The initial female position is of limited empowerment, where the speaker is confident enough in her own individuality to believe that she might have a tangible physical effect on her husband commensurate with loyalty – "I have but to be by thee, and thy hand / Would never let mine go" (Browning, 2005, p. 49, l. 7-8). The poem then advances to a position where she gives him free licence to do, in effect, exactly as he wishes. "Love so, then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst / Away to the new faces" (ll. 85-86) she allows him, pardoning his inevitable failure to remember her after her death, whilst simultaneously assuming that he will prove irresistible to a multitude of women. In all of her imaginings of his future conquests, there is a similar sense of plurality; it is inconceivable that, once he does stray from her memory, he will not hesitate to pursue – successfully – a range of different women. This is a privilege that is not afforded his potential female conquests, whose (plural) response is only to him – "Such the look and such / The smile he used to love with, then as now!" (ll.101-102). There is no multitude of men. This group of imagined women will be in awe of him in the future, just as she is in the present.

These imaginings are fevered projections of a reality that has not yet come to pass, and consequently also reflect the persona's agitated internal state when faced with death. This serves as a reminder that Browning viewed subjective poetry as characteristic of the female domain. In constructing the subjectivity of a projected persona, Browning artfully reconstructs a mode of expression that he clearly assumes to be an accurate representation of female psychology. What is perhaps most revealing about how Browning constructed this female voice is that she never establishes herself apart from her husband. The male prerogative – the right

to an individuality separate from others, and especially other women - is notable by its absence here. In contrast, as Haigwood notes, the male persona of *By the Fireside* establishes his "clear, independent sense of himself" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 105), only turning to his wife to confirm his musings – "My own, confirm me!" (Browning, 2005, p. 43, l. 121). It is a momentary concession before he continues, seemingly unaffected by her unheard (and therefore inconsequential) response.

In *Any Wife to Any Husband*, this mode of representation is confirmed by the wife's effortless acceptance of a higher emotional status for her husband:

> And yet thou art the nobler of us two.
> What dare I dream of, that thou canst not do,
> Outstripping my ten small steps with one stride?
> I'll say then, here's a trial and a task –
> Is it to bear? – if easy, I'll not ask –
> Though love fail, I can trust on in thy pride.
> (Browning, 2005, p. 54, ll. 115-120)

The husband is elevated both morally – he is "nobler" (l. 115) – and physically – his "one stride" (l. 117) dwarfing her "ten small steps" (l. 117). This particular image is compelling as it symbolises the extent of the gulf between them, and is confirmed by the dominance of subjective experiences – this is a world, after all, of the imagined future – literally "subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality" (Browning, 1981, p. 1004), or at least on a reality yet to come. We have already established by implication that Browning considered subjectivity somewhat frivolous, at least in some respects, and it is therefore telling that this is the poetic mode which he makes available for "*any"* wife. The existence of a hierarchy in which women are subordinate to men suggests that Browning used his poetry to provide an emotional and aesthetic framework for the promotion of explicit patriarchal social and moral values.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how Browning could have avoided such gender bias completely. Feminist criticism since the late 1960s provides a number of perspectives on this particular point that range from the practical to the utterly impenetrable. In the former group,

Dale Spender argued that language itself is inherently – normatively – masculine, serving as an instrument for the preservation and expression of patriarchal values (Spender, 1980). Toril Moi also provides a pragmatic assessment, acknowledging that language reflects, challenges or reinforces "patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms" (Moi, 1997, p. 122). At the other end of the scale are the French feminists of the 1970s. Amongst them, perhaps most famously, was Hélène Cixous, whose fascinating, mysterious and ambiguous conception of an *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1997) provides the counterpart to Dale's description of patriarchy in practice. In her 1975 essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous appears almost wilfully obtuse:

> It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing […] this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded […] it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system.
>
> (Cixous, 1997, p. 353)

Here, she appears to deny the male poet any access to the feminine mode. If this *is* true and self-evident, it is hardly surprising that Browning tended towards the objective construction of the female presence – observing women from a masculine standpoint was, in effect, the only thing he could reasonably be expected to do.

In his rarer attempts at assuming the role of a female persona, as here in *Any Wife to Any Husband*, Browning's assumption that women will naturally and freely accept subordinated positions is unsurprising, and is consistent with masculine rather than feminine objectivity. Thus, when the wife claims "thou art the nobler of us two" (l. 115), she is voicing male assumptions. The transgressive, independent will that Cixous describes – the "feminine practice of writing" and the cognitive processes behind it – is, in contrast, so far removed and even superior to the masculine discourse of the "phallocentric system" that no male poet could possibly enter into it. If such an attempt *is* made, as here, the result is an unavoidably incomplete representation of feminine psychology. Browning's apparent awareness of this

might well explain why he tended to avoid female personae wherever possible. His generalised, first person depictions of normative female attitudes were profoundly affected by what he *perceived* to be the female role, submissive by nature and subjective in expression - ""Love so, then, if thou wilt!" (Browning, 2005, p. 49, l. 85). Such freedoms, it seems, are the male prerogative.

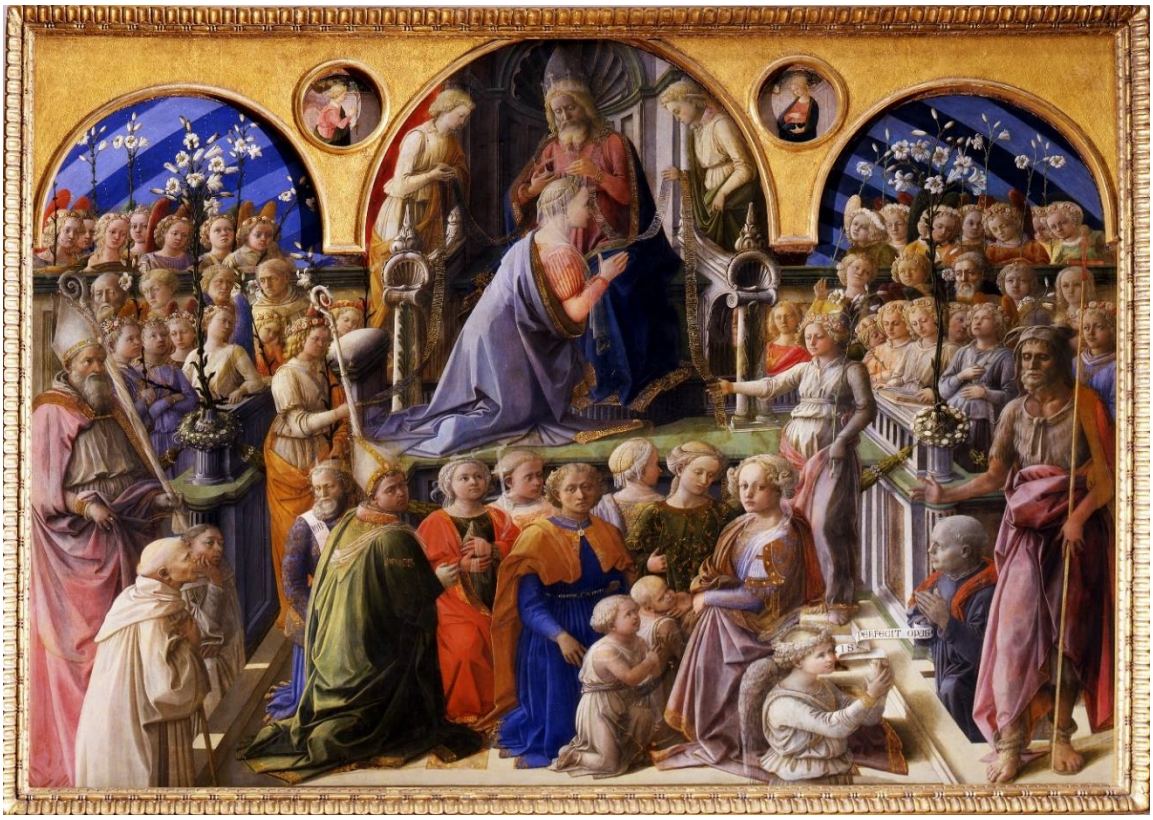
The emergence of masculine insecurities

It is hard to imagine that Browning, in his eagerness to construct strong, dominant males, submissive women and androcentric domestic moral norms, should nevertheless willingly betray feelings of inadequacy, impotence or insecurity. It would be easy to assume that such "weaknesses" were tantamount to treachery in the context of such a clear-cut masculine discourse. However, there is a danger in assuming that Browning was indifferent to the problems of a confrontational approach. Browning, let us remember, idolised his wife who was, it is hardly contentious to point out, a woman. Furthermore, it is also somewhat presumptuous to assume that he was unaware of the dangers of generalising powerful and complex emotional responses and applying them indiscriminately to an entire sex. Haigwood suggests that a key characteristic of Browning's masculine approach to love and marriage was the use of a "more ironic perspective on love in *Men and Women* to put right what more Romantic depictions of love – including especially his wife's sonnets – get wrong" (Haigwood, 1986, pp. 102-103). Bearing this in mind, it is not without the bounds of reason to suggest that *Any Wife to Any Husband* is, in fact, a satirical, or at least opaque, title.

The difficulty with the dramatic monologue as Browning imagined it lies in the fact that separating poet and persona is often a complex and speculative process. It is with this in mind that the tools of psychoanalysis prove useful as we endeavour to unearth the potential meanings behind the tensions and inconsistencies of the poet's psychological representations. Browning's internal life is structurally hidden from view in the dramatic monologue – in

embracing objectivity, Browning deliberately avoided the subjective, first person "sentiments" (Browning, 1981, p. 1004) of the poet. The monologue perspective became, therefore, a place of hiding behind the persona. The consequence was that his own personality was resolutely *not* "the very radiance and aroma" of the poem as it had been for the subjective, Romantic "seer" (Browning in Houghton & Stange, 1968, pp. 336-337). This effort to bury potential personal issues imbues any instances of disclosure that we might indeed discover with particular potency and perhaps biographical relevance, as here in these lines from *Fra Lippo Lippi*:

> Out of a corner when you least expect,
> As one by a dark stair into a great light,
> Music and talking, who but Lippo! I! –
> Mazed, motionless and moon-struck – I'm the man!
> (Browning, 2010, p. 505, ll. 362-364)



(Incoronazione della Vergine (1441-1447), Lippi, 2011)

The mischievous artist cannot help but gleefully step out from the shadows and reveal himself triumphantly as a physical presence within his own painting. Like Lippi, Browning seems desperate to reclaim the subjective 'I' and to ensure that he is not, in a sense, "written out" of

his own poems. In these lines, Lippi reminds us of his name, that he is indeed "I!" (l. 363) and, as if to make doubly sure that it is not lost on the listener, concludes with the childlike exclamation "I'm the man!" (l. 364). Woolford and Karlin note of Browning's theory about the originality of composition that "He was extremely reluctant to admit anything approaching a biographical interpretation of his work" but that, based on the numerous biographical parallels and conscious moments of reflexivity in his work, the "obvious objection to this theory is that it is ridiculous" (Woolford & Karlin, 1996, p. 4). Woolford and Karlin cite Browning's palpable irritation and defensiveness when questioned about such interpretations as evidence that disengaging the persona and the poet was in reality no simple task. Indeed, it seems, Browning was unusually keen to maintain this difficulty.

The interplay between poet and persona is naturally of interest to psychoanalytic critics, as we have already suggested. The sense of joyful relief with which Lippi describes his emergence from his art mirrors the inevitability of the surfacing of the *id.* Similarly, this important symbolic moment reflects the implication that the true poet – Browning himself – will *always* reveal himself if one only knows where to look. The careful construction of disparate voices in the dramatic monologue will then function as a form of concealment. However, as D. W. Winnicott noted, "In the artist of all kinds, one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 185). Winnicott continues, describing this tension as "a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 186). For Browning, this potential "disaster" proved too risky a possibility to allow, so that the moments where he seemingly – momentarily – leaves the persona behind, can reasonably be assumed to coincide with genuine aspects of his vulnerability and the almost therapeutic need to put them into (poetic) words. Lippi's triumphal moment, at any rate, must needs symbolise something in Browning, if only because

it is based upon an historical record – Lippi's painting – in which the artist really *does* emerge from his own work.[2] Were this emergence to represent something less personally significant, it is unlikely that the poet would have chosen a moment of disclosure that had been attested to so explicitly elsewhere and thus serves as a heavy-handed "sign-post." It seems that artistic oblivion was as real a fear for Browning as it was for Lippi, and E.B.B.'s success, perhaps even allied to the emergence of a new female potency in society, proved a powerful catalyst for his various attendant insecurities.

The attempt, in this chapter, has been to show how Browning's construction of female identity in *Men and Women* was profoundly affected by contingent historical circumstances. On the threshold between Kittler's two discourse networks, DN 1800 and DN 1900, Browning respectfully rejected the subjectivity of the Romantic mode which was still influential for his contemporaries, including E.B.B. His attempt to create new objective poetry, culminating in the dramatic monologue, formed part of an aggressively patriarchal Victorian discourse epitomised by Jeremy Bentham's writings on utilitarianism. Thus, this collection of men and women is really a collection of men observing women, interspersed with representations of women passive and malleable in character. Whilst Browning was in awe of his wife and respectful of her work – indeed considering her to be a mentor and accepting her corrections with humility and obedience – there is nevertheless a clear masculine bias evident throughout. Gender roles are resolutely traditional, and both the form and language of the poems function as power structures which support an important Victorian project: that emotional and aesthetic values be constructed to support the dominant masculine discourse. The cultural background is reflected in two particular ways; firstly, being in many respects a 'female' revolution, industrialism marked a transformation of society that must have been unsettling for a male

[2] The painting in question, *Incoronazione della Vergine* (1441-1447), shows not only the work's commissioner, Francesco Maringhi alongside the text *ISTE PERFECIT OPUS* ("this one finished the work"). As Giorgio Vasari confirmed, Lippi, in his Carmelite robes, emerges from the left of the painting (Vasari, 1998).

poet. This feeling was doubtless compounded by the disorientation of the separation of mind, consciousness and the physical writing processes, which Kittler locates firmly within DN 1900, which was itself a result of contemporary technological advances. The result for Browning was a tension between a desire to keep his voice well hidden within the structural confines of the dramatic monologue, and triumphal emergence, like that of Lippo Lippi at the corner of his painting, in a way that perhaps mirrors and reflects the surfacing of the *id.* This "sophisticated game of hide-and-seek" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 186) also revealed another side of the fear of being forgotten – as the "unknown painter", *Pictor Ignotus*, exemplifies: that artistic integrity *has* to be commensurate with commercial failure. Conversely, this kind of noble defeat is also the hallmark of poetry with no "use" – hence it is no better than Bentham's "game of push-pin" (Richards, 1988, p. 6) – unthinkable in this new utilitarian age where poets had to justify their own position, in Browning's case by giving his work objective, "scientific" parameters. It was a difficult balance.

For Browning, relatively unsuccessful as a poet before the publication of this collection, tensions emerged from behind the masks of his personae, and women – at least the ones over which he had control in his poetry, were a natural outlet. Browning could – and did – silence, domesticise and pacify his women. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ekphrastic poems of the Renaissance, which are the subject of the next chapter. In these poems, as we shall see, the male gaze is mercilessly and powerfully directed at the female body in a way that implies the relative ease with which an essentially gender-neutral literary philosophy – objectivity through the dramatic monologue – can in its application result in *objectification*. The male persona – the male gazer – becomes, at this point, a vessel for the promotion of a conservative, patriarchal discourse reflective of historical and social contingencies. Browning's new kind poetry had become, perhaps inadvertently, a political idea.

Chapter 2

Constructing Renaissance women

Open my heart and you will see,
Graved inside of it, "Italy."

(*"De Gustibus-"*, Browning, 2005, p. 253, ll.43-44)

Browning the Mannerist

At the window of the *piano nobile* apartment in the *Casa Guidi*, the Brownings' Florentine home, Browning stood within a few hundred metres of many the settings and artworks which would directly comprise around a third of the poems in *Men and Women*, and were otherwise his most obvious and lasting inspiration. For Browning, the Italian Renaissance colourfully embodied certain "universal truths" (Korg, 1983, p. 109), and provided rich material that not only inspired and energised him, but which also formed part of hitherto unexplored territory for his literary contemporaries. A. Dwight Culler attributes Browning's love of rather unusual sources to his entirely unregulated educational background: the only major Victorian poet without a university education, he nonetheless had a formidable capacity for learning and "no tutor to hold him back and tell him it was not 'customary' for youths to read books of which their betters had never heard" (Culler, 1985, p. 185).

Browning embraced Renaissance Italy in a way that few other expatriate poets have, before or since. Jacob Korg notes that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was astounded by Browning's knowledge and experience of Italian art, which was "superior to that of anyone he had ever met, including Ruskin" (Korg, 1983, p. 100). Italy was Browning's refuge following his marriage to Elizabeth; it remained an artistic refuge until his death. The result was an original and compelling parallel cultural world in which Browning could situate his dramatic figures and allow them, especially those inspired by the Mannerist movement, to synthesise with a similarly anxious, fragmented and transitory cultural moment - Victorian industrialism. In the

previous chapter, Browning's immediate cultural context was compared to Kittler's *DN 1900*, and was characterised by an aggressive and pervasive utilitarian discourse framed by gender insecurity and artistic anxiety. Mannerist art, which as we shall see was a profoundly influential reference point for *Men and Women*, occupied a liminal position in between the harmonious ideals of the preceding High Renaissance and the exuberant and ornamental excesses of the Baroque. Mannerism is generally agreed to have stretched from around the time of Raphael's death in 1520 until the latter years of the sixteenth century, although, as John Shearman suggests, there is something artificial about the common conception that it was a reactionary movement, providing a sharp contrast to the glorious artistic achievements of the previous era. He suggests rather that it was "a logical extension of some of the latter's own tendencies and achievements" and indeed, conversely, that the High Renaissance "was itself deeply marked by the strains of growth and change" (Shearman, 1967, p. 49).

The productivity of Mannerist artistic sources for Browning suggests that he was convinced by the relevance of the parallels he drew between the two eras. The sixty year period of sixteenth century Italian Mannerism has generally met with an unfavourable critical response not entirely dissimilar to the reaction Browning and his contemporaries faced in their own time and subsequently. As we have seen, Bentham's dismissal of poetry as a "game of push-pin" (Richards, 1988, p. 6) epitomised the general utilitarian scepticism towards poetry; Harold Bloom later went further, looking back on the Victorian period in particular as one paralysed by a sense of its own inadequacy after the achievements of the Romantics. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom provides a psychological perspective on the vague, self-conscious liminality of poetry that Armstrong located "between two kinds of excitement" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 1) – Romanticism and Modernism – which is in essence commensurate with the struggle of the son under the shadow of the brilliant father. Bloom acknowledges that influence, or, as he terms it, "poetic misprision" (Bloom, 1997, p. 7), is inevitable, but that

strong poets (only Tennyson from the Victorian period, in his estimation) tend to use it for better rather than worse. For these figures, the battle is between equals – the meeting between Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads – and is essentially productive. Browning was, by implication, one of the "weaker talents [who] idealize"[3], whereas "figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves" (Bloom, 1997, p. 5).

The Mannerists have, for their part, been variously characterised as crude and derivative; next to the glories of Raphael and Leonardo, their work tends to pale into insignificance, at least according to critics of the period. Amongst their most vocal early opponents were Lodovico Dolce (1557) and G.P. Bellori (1672). Dolce describes four aspects of art: decorum, design, colour, and the raising of passions and affections (Dolce, 1968, p. 23), all lacking or poorly rendered in Mannerist art. Michelangelo bears the brunt of Dolce's ire for his dazzling but soulless design (Dolce, 1968, p. 91) and his exaggerated imitation (Dolce, 1968, p. 176). However, M.R. Maniates suggests that these rather venomous criticisms were most likely written to appease the influential patron Pietro Aretino, who seems to have been particularly hostile to the Mannerist movement (Maniates, 1979, p. 20). Dolce, like Bentham, thus probably had an agenda which fuelled his criticism of the works in question. Nonetheless, in each case, whatever the root causes of their hostility, the criticisms that they expressed were part of a background of intellectual rhetoric that negatively affected the way that Mannerist art and Victorian poetry respectively have been perceived.

[3] Browning's tendency to "idealize" Shelley approaches sycophancy in *Memorabilia.* Here, the persona's comically melodramatic response to one who had met the great poet, "But you were living before that, / And you are living after" (Browning, 2010, p. 554, ll. 5-6), is seemingly derided by the interlocutor, perhaps with good cause. It is apparently based upon an actual incident in a London bookshop where Browning responded similarly to a stranger who had also once met Shelley (Browning, 2010, p. 553). This suggests, then, that irony can be ruled out and that *Memorabilia* in fact faithfully represents Browning's feelings on the subject.

Mannerism and emasculation

If it is at all possible to draw any coherent conclusions from the critical responses to Browning's contemporary cultural climate on the one hand and to his Mannerist sources on the other, it might suffice to speculate that both involve the "emasculation" of art. In the case of the Mannerists, Dolce focuses on two aspects in particular; firstly, the sense that style has taken precedence over substance. Secondly, that imitation of other works of art is commensurate with a lack of creative independence or efficacy. Both of these aspects contravene important principles of "masculinity" as it was conceived historically, and which will be the focus of the next chapter. Creativity, the artistic equivalent of industrial productivity, has traditionally existed within the male domain, not least in the masculine figure of the God of Genesis, whose words "spoke" the world into existence. Furthermore, whilst male involvement in the arts was questioned and to an extent deliberately emasculated by masculine utilitarian rhetoric in Victorian England, it is clear that the patriarchal social system also consciously subordinated and silenced women's contributions to recorded history. This took place even at a time when women were becoming more prolific with the rise of the novel; we might consider, for example, "George" Eliot, who found it necessary to use a male pen name in order to achieve a degree of artistic freedom.

In this respect, R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is a useful perspective, centering on the removal of women from positions of leadership and creative independence, where "the configuration of gender practice […] embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell & Connell, 2005, p. 77). Thus, as was presumably Dolce's implication in the Renaissance, the imitation of other works of art is itself an act of subordination undermining the characteristically male aspiration to the aforementioned creative independence and self-reliance. These elements are also, significantly,

key components of Ronald F. Levant's summation of consistently visible tendencies in the development of ideas about masculinity, including those of the Victorians (Levant & Kopecky, 1995).

Dolce's other criticism of Mannerism, that style supersedes substance, resembles Robin Lakoff's assessment of the hierarchy of male and female linguistic codes, where lexical choices available to men and women vary and are reflective of patriarchal power structures. Two examples from his seminal essay on the subject, "Language and woman's place" are particularly pertinent when looking at Browning's Mannerist style. Firstly, fine colour distinctions (for example between mauve and purple) are available to women but not to men, ostensibly because they are considered to be trivial and superficial, and therefore not inherently masculine (Lakoff, 1973, p. 49). Secondly, forceful language (specifically the use of expletives) is discouraged within the normative framework of girls' education, because it opposes the kind of domestic ideals of ladylike behaviour that, as we shall see, were important political tools for successive patriarchal societies including those of the Victorian era and Renaissance Europe. This, according to Lakoff, is a form of social control exercised "to keep her [the woman] in a demeaning position, to refuse to take her seriously as a human being" (Lakoff, 1973, p. 47). Thus, Browning's male personae, such as the performer of *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, might assail us with images of "red" (Browning, 2010, p. 371, l. 13) and "gold" (l. 44) - but never lavender and magnolia. Similarly elsewhere, Lippo Lippi swears at the guards - "Boh!", "Zooks" (Browning, 2010, p. 485, ll. 18, 23) and "Ouf!" (l. 50) - in a manner that is presented as rather endearing. What these examples serve to prove is that, whilst Browning was a consummate linguistic stylist to the point of virtuosity, he was also a consciously masculine one. The relationship between style and gender, though, is complex. Browning's patriarchal bias in the microcosm of the poems in question is often undeniable, but interestingly, and perhaps contradictorily, the foregrounding of style (by implication over

substance) left Browning open to accusations of the kind of "triviality" that Dolce and specifically Lakoff identify as "feminine" linguistics.

The predominately stylistic focus of Mannerist art, it appears, was commensurate with the emasculation of the artist for Dolce, and this interpretation is lent some conceptual weight by the etymology of the word *mannerism* itself. Derived from the Italian *maniera*, meaning "style" or "manner", James V. Mirollo drew a literary comparison in which "bella maniera" poets tended to focus on bettering Petrarch, rather than pursuing originality or perfection in their own work. Mirollo also proposes that the artistic equivalent of an intertextual approach was common amongst sixteenth century Mannerist artists. In this respect, their work tended to be built upon other artworks, rather than on the natural subject itself. For the Mannerist poets, but probably equally for the artists, "what followed [Petrarch] was often a fragmentation and imitation of his *maniera* rather than a creative exploitation of its underlying theme" (Mirollo, 1972, p. 34). Furthermore, as a natural extension of this first point, the very nature of *ekphrasis* in its most common usage – the literary or artistic representation of other works of art – implies the addition of an extra interpretative stage in the meeting between material reality (the study of historical artefacts in a particular place and time) and the artist's representation of it. It might be hypothesized, as does Stephen Cheeke, that the fascination that poets have with art is part of a dual process where understanding is transferred from one medium to another. Browning, in *One Word More*, refers to the desire for understanding inherent in moments of imagined translation (Cheeke, 2008, p. 83); we yearn therefore for the angel "Painted by the tenderness of Dante" (Browning, 2010, p. 605, l. 51), or for "Rafael's sonnets" (l. 58). The implication here is that, independently, neither art nor poetry is capable of capturing the essence of the original object without this mutual exchange. As Cheeke puts it:

> He [Browning] understood the longing to cross over into the other discipline, the desire for translation, as well as the fascination with the return journey, that is with bringing an understanding of the processes of painting back to the poem and reporting or revealing that understanding there.

(Cheeke, 2008, p. 83)

In Browning's context, poetry explains painting and, conversely, painting is necessary in order to fully realise the potential of poetic language.

If Browning did indeed conceive of language alone as an insufficient representative medium (Armstrong, 2013, p. 93), then his use of Renaissance painting also raises questions about his conception of originality. Like the *bella maniera* artists, Browning tended to add a third or fourth interpretative filter to this act of translation, using the accounts of others to deliberately mediate his experience of nature – first the object itself, then its artistic representation, and finally the interpretations of a Vasari or Mrs. Jameson. In fact, technically, Browning's poetry was the fourth stage of this process, which places him even more tenuously in contact with nature than the Mannerists. This degree of artistic distance between object and poem would have been utterly unconceivable for a Romantic poet. A natural consequence of such a mediated poetic response was that technical inaccuracies and prejudices began to multiply. In *Andrea Sarto,* as we shall see, Lucrezia del Fede becomes an entirely constructed symbol of Browning's fears and insecurities, Vasari's bitterness, and the persona Andrea's unhappiness with his own career. Like a game of Chinese whispers, ekphrasis as Browning practiced it led to all manner of misunderstandings. Korg puts it rather diplomatically, merely observing that "his interpretation of what he saw was likely to be controlled by judgments he read in Vasari" (Korg, 1983, p. 99). However, there seems to be little doubt that Browning's various distortions situated his poems in rather rather ambiguous ethical territory, where truth and faithful representation were subordinated in favour of effect. Browning was rather elusive on this point, claiming in the "Introductory Essay" ["Essay on Shelley"] that "The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon must remain" (Pettigrew & Collins, 1981, p. 1008). This "raw material", though, could as well be a

representation of the world – a piece of art or poetry - as the world itself, so long as the perspective on it was objective:

> There may be no end of the poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality; what it was before they saw it […] will be as desirable to know as ever.
> (Pettigrew & Collins, 1981, p. 1003)

In returning to the subjective-objective corollary, Browning makes no distinction between the objective perspective on art, nature, or on secondary accounts of either. The "object" could be any of these things. The relevant hierarchy then, as we discussed in Chapter 1, is constructed on the basis of Browning's simple privileging of objective perspective over subjective emotion.

In positioning his poetry either as a witness to other art or to other perspectives on art, Browning demonstrated that his conception of "masculine" originality was somewhat slippery, just as it had been for the Mannerists. Woolford and Karlin suggest that the whole idea of creativity, whilst clearly important to Browning, was nonetheless based on some glaring inconsistencies that appear to emphasise the gap between his compositional theory and practice. Famously reluctant to reveal external influences, he was prepared to concede, on the inspiration for *The Flight of the Duchess* for example, that it "originally all grew out of this one intelligible line of a song that I heard a woman singing at a bonfire on Guy Faux night when I was a boy" (Browning cited in Woolford & Karlin, 1996, p. 6). As Woolford and Karlin point out, this is all rather evasive and grudging, relegating the memory to the distant past and an unknown woman's otherwise unintelligible song (Woolford & Karlin, 1996, p. 6). It also bears striking similarities to the kind of sensibility implied by Kittler and his proposed Romantic "variant of the voice that emanates from the mother's mouth in the hazy depths of childhood" (John Johnston in Kittler, 1997, p. 12). Browning seemed to be intent on underplaying the effect of concrete external influences that could potentially undermine perceptions of his own creative efficacy. One can only speculate that Browning was so sensitive

because he believed that originality was somehow commensurate with masculine ideals of initiative and action. His surprisingly bitter remarks in a letter to a Mrs. FitzGerald, who had reportedly queried the historical origins of "Jochanan Hakkadosh" (*Jocoseria*, 1883), suggest that he was more troubled by the issue than it might otherwise appear:

> …the poem *tells* you *who* he was, what he was, where he lived, and why he was about to die: what more do you want? […]

and later in the same letter:

> …for poetry, if it is to deserve the name, ought to create – or re-animate something – not merely reproduce *raw* fact taken from somebody else's book.
> (Woolford & Karlin, 1996, p. 3)

Browning's angry attempt to educate this unfortunate woman are as close as we can come to confirming the existence of deep insecurities about his poetic creativity and identity. In seeming to question his originality as a poet (which, incidentally, Mrs. FitzGerald does not do), she had clearly, if inadvertently, touched a raw nerve.

Whether Browning in fact *needed* to be so sensitive about originality is, of course, another matter entirely. Intertextual critics tend to agree that creativity can never exist within a cultural vacuum. Even Bloom, as we have seen, realised that strong poets are influenced just as weak ones are, although they may do more with their influence in order to assuage their anguish at the necessity, and "make […] history by misreading one another" (Bloom, 1997, p. 5). Similarly, Joseph Frank implicitly defended the "secondariness" of the Mannerists and all those whose work engages directly with other art, rather than with nature itself:

> Simplest of all to dispose of is the obvious fallacy that any artist ever directly imitates anything that can be called "nature." For the vision of every artist is always oriented by an already existing tradition interposed between himself and a hypothetically "pure" visual experience.
> (Frank, 1968, p. 78)

There can, in his view, be no direct representation of nature without the mediation of "existing tradition." It is therefore implicit that the Mannerists' use of other works was not a weakness, but simply a part of their distinct essence – in effect, their "honest" transparency. Equally,

though Browning's poetry was based not only on the works of others, but also on other interpretations of those works, this too need not be a weakness per se. As Culler suggests, Browning saw the Renaissance as something "which in his view had the energy and vitality to promise a new birth in the Victorian age as it had in the Renaissance" (Culler, 1985, p. 185). If we stretch the analogy somewhat, the mating of Browning and the Mannerists produced as its "offspring" a range of constructed female presences who were thus the product of a dual genetic heritage. Browning brought with him the aggressively patriarchal rhetoric of the Victorians, asserting his masculinity where historical events and social changes brought it into question. The Mannerists, for their part, brought their own distinct set of cultural prejudices, which will be explored in the next section, and which were contingent on their own contemporary social situation. The women of Browning's poetry, then, are constructed out of the complex interplay of two independent but related historical moments.

Renaissance Women: An Historical Overview

The Victorians, it seemed, had certain ideas about Italian Renaissance women. Jacob Burckhardt, for example, wrote in 1860 that "Women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men" and furthermore that "the same intellectual and emotional development which perfected the man was demanded for the perfection of the woman" (Burckhardt, 1990, p. 281). It may well be that Browning was of the same persuasion; according to historian Joan Kelly, even twentieth century feminists such as Simone de Beavoir and Emily James Putnam were also under this impression (Kelly, 1999, p. 46). However, it seems that this representation is not entirely accurate. Kelly suggested that early Italian capitalism, like the industrialism of the Victorian age, transformed and restructured society, and that women were in fact *adversely* affected. According to her assessment, women "experienced a contraction of social and personal options that men of their classes […] did not" (Kelly, 1999, p. 21) and furthermore that all aspects of Italian Renaissance society contributed to weakening women into "an

aesthetic object: decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent – on her husband as well as the prince" (Kelly, 1999, p. 46). The last point is particularly relevant here, as it implies that the aesthetic arts – poetry, painting, sculpture and music – had the potential to emphasise and solidify this position. The painted woman of the Renaissance portrait, as will be discussed later, was doubly a material object, created by both art and culture.

Kelly identifies a number of areas in which the changing social circumstances contributed to the objectification or subordination of women. She first identifies Medieval courtly love as a far more equal affair than it would later become in the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, women entered into relationships freely, even being permitted to express themselves sexually. Where the social status of each party was similar, love resembled vassalage. After accepting a suitor's declarations of love, "A kiss (like the kiss of homage) sealed the pledge, rings were exchanged, and the knight entered the love service of his lady" (Kelly, 1999, p. 24). Mutual trust and respect seemed to have characterised Medieval aristocratic relationships and, perhaps surprisingly, "the poets and theorists of courtly love ignored the almost universal demand of patriarchal society for female chastity" (Kelly, 1999, p. 25). Browning's attitude towards adultery and sexual purity is somewhat elusive; certain female constructions, such as Lucrezia del Fede in *Andrea del Sarto*, are by implication adulterous, although such claims are never explicit and it may well be that Browning depicts her in rather hostile terms because of other aspects of her character quite apart from her sexual exploits. Here we might suggest that her stifling effect on Andrea and her violent assertiveness and vulgarity are at least as significant. Lucrezia will be examined more closely towards the end of this chapter. Similarly, even if the eponymous "hero" of *Fra Lippo Lippi* is afforded his various sexual escapades, it does not necessarily follow that he gets away with it *because* he is a man. For one thing, he is not married and therefore cannot be adulterous; for another, his behaviour does not hinder his work, as Andrea's relationship with Lucrezia does. This, it

seems, is the real scandal. Nevertheless, despite his seeming acceptance of Lippi's escapades, Browning remained consistently chaste as a poet. Ashby Bland Crowder, for example, marvels at his innocence in using the obscene word "twats" (Browning, 2010, p. 170, l. 291) in *Pippa Passes* (1836), and concludes, unlike other less generous critics, that he had misunderstood the meaning of the word, and furthermore that "Browning's was a kind of innocence not uncommon among middle-class Victorians" (Crowder, 2012, p. 66).

On the subject of masculine chivalry, it seems that the Medieval model was closer to Browning's own romantic (in the sense of "love" oriented) heroic ideals, which will be explored further in the next chapter. For now, let it suffice to say that this seems to have been supported by Browning's desperate attempt to win what Laura Haigwood describes as a "competition" where "[Browning and E.B.B.] struggled over the privilege of admiring and serving the other" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 97). At least where E.B.B. was concerned, Browning did indeed attempt to resemble the chivalrous knight, although aware of his limitations and humble in his approach, as we see here in the most personal of all his poems, *One Word More*:

> Verse and nothing else have I to give you.
> Other heights in other lives, God willing –
> All the gifts from all the heights, you own, Love!
> (Browning, 2010, p. 609, ll. 114-116)

The use of the first person pronoun together with the absence of a separate persona is a rare concession to the subjectivity that Browning otherwise rejected. From this fragile and uncharacteristic position, Browning positions himself in a subordinate role: first, the idea of ownership is subverted and is transferred from the normative male domain to E.B.B., who we can assume is not a constructed figure but her actual self – the addressee of the poem and the collection. As we shall see, this is a departure from the typically Renaissance artistic foregrounding of male ownership through possessions depicted on or around the female body (Chadwick, 1996, p. 76). The gift exchange here is one-sided and generous, and confers on

Browning equal or even subordinate status in his relationship with his wife, and in so doing echoes the Medieval "kiss of homage" (Kelly, 1999, p. 24).

For her own part, E.B.B. played her role in the exchange by remaining a strong, respected poet similar, in terms of what she represented, to the independent Medieval woman-at-court. Kelly cites Countess Beatrice of Die and Marie de France as examples of prominent and respected women poets known for their bold and dominant erotic verse (Kelly, 1999, p. 30). These women were proactive in forming their cultural surroundings. According to Kelly, "feudal women consciously exerted pressure in shaping the courtly love ideal and making it prevail" (Kelly, 1999, p. 31). It is difficult to assess Browning's attitude to such women in general, however; he did allow E.B.B. such freedoms and even supported them (indeed it seems that he hardly had any choice given her popularity). However, simultaneously, he silenced and manipulated his poetic female constructions at will. In this sense, he appears to have adopted a rather schizophrenic perspective on gender, being liberally Medieval when it suited him personally, but at other times aligning himself with repressively Renaissance standpoints.

By the time the political and economic implications of early Renaissance capitalism were felt, expressions of literary and political power had already ceased to be available for aristocratic women. Powerful queens like the fourteenth century Giovannas of Naples were no longer to be found, although occasional defiant exceptions such as Caterina Sforza of Forlì did their best to defy the patriarchal obstacles placed in front of them, at least for a time (Kelly, 1999, p. 32). Ultimately, though, power came to exist on a much less direct and institutionalised plain. The transition of women's available roles from agents to objects appears to have been secured with the help of literature and art; Kelly identifies Baldassare Castiglione's idealised duchess, Elisabetta Gonzaga from *The Courtier* (1528) as an example of a normative courtly lady – an aesthetically pleasing, charming woman who did not handle weapons or ride (Kelly,

1999, p. 33). Furthermore, artistic representations of courtly love "were modified in the direction of asexuality" (Kelly, 1999, p. 36). The erotic verse of Marie de France gave way to more celestial, idealistic representations of love, perhaps similar in spirit to Browning's own rather chaste and innocent poetry. Of course it is always possible to identify sexually charged undertones in any representation of romantic love if one only chooses to; nonetheless, as Crowder noted of Browning, the overriding impression of sexual "innocence" (Crowder, 2012, p. 66) appears genuine. Thus, when we read even Browning's most personal expression of love in *One Word More*, we encounter a very proper, almost asexual, and clearly embarrassed depiction of marital intimacy that seems to reflect the artistic tendencies of the Renaissance:

> But the best is when I glide from out them,
> Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,
> Come out on the other side, the novel
> Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,
> Where I hush and bless myself with silence.
> (Browning, 2010, p. 615, ll. 193-197)

This is as close as Browning comes to expressing carnal knowledge of his wife in verse, or indeed any other written form (the published love letters are no more explicit). Even within the legitimate confines of his marriage (and this poem, whilst public, is directly addressed to E.B.B.), the images of union are hidden from view. Browning's lexical choices are remarkably opaque. Darkness hides the lovers; the "dubious twilight" (l. 194) is an odd pairing, perhaps reflective of the Victorian-Renaissance compulsion to figuratively shroud sexual relations in darkness. Moreover, even the "silver lights" are "silent" (l. 196), whilst another "silence" (l. 197) seems to hint tentatively at E.B.B.'s beauty, according to Woolford, Karlin and Phelan (Browning, 2010), although it could equally be interpreted as something else. Even at his most passionate, Browning remains evasive and ensures that he cannot be perceived as anything other than a respectable gentleman. The cumulative effect of these various images of hiding, darkness and quiet is very distinct from the open and unambiguous Medieval courtly eroticism. Browning's views on chastity and even legitimate sexual relations within marriage appear in

this respect to have been characteristically Renaissance. On this point though, Browning was certainly not unusual amongst his contemporaries.

Browning and the Mannerist Style

Anti-aestheticism

Browning's apparent collusion with certain, though clearly not all, Italian Renaissance cultural ideals, then, implicitly situates his constructed women as "aesthetic object[s]" (Kelly, 1999, p. 46). These women are generally devoid of political power and are either ideally "ladylike" and chaste, or else repugnant if they do in fact dare to traverse appropriate gender-specific behavioural norms. This last point will later be exemplified in reference to Lucrezia del Fede from *Andrea del Sarto.* A natural consequence of this was that Browning's poetry, also on a microcosmic level, began to resemble certain elements of Mannerist style in a way that confirms his affinity with the Renaissance as a whole. As we have already seen though, the etymology of the word "mannerism" serves to emphasise how important these apparently "superficial" elements might nevertheless be in the overall context of the movement's value system. Style was, to the Mannerist, not simply an effect; it was also an essential *raison d'être*. One particularly obvious example is the deliberately "anti-aesthetic", jarring nature of Browning's poetic language. Isobel Armstrong describes him as an "ugly" or even "grotesque" poet, engaging in an "insistent, almost wilful, delight in inchoateness" (Armstrong, 2013, p. 93). Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that this was a position that Browning assumed deliberately, and that the effects, which we will now examine briefly, were achieved by design rather than by accident.

Armstrong's study of Browning's language led her to conclude that "Effects are exaggerated to the point of extravaganza, whether it is the constant present tense or the habit of straining the syntax by omitting articles, relatives, verbs and auxiliaries" (Armstrong, 2013,

p. 93). The earthy language of *Fra Lippo Lippi* provides a pertinent example. Aside from the range of colourful and bawdy expletives, Lippi's speech is marked by hesitations, breaks and colloquialisms that seem to situate the poetic style closer to prose realism than to any ideals of poetic perfection:

> - he's a certain…how d'ye call?
> Master-a…Cosimo of the Medici,
> In the house that caps the corner. Boh! You were best!
> (Browning, 2010, p. 485, ll. 16-18)

There is, here, no accident in this hesitant, colloquial language, but rather "grotesque" design. We could speculate about whether Lippi's gleefully inappropriate self-portrait next to the beautiful celestial beings of *Incoronazione della Vergine* also serves as a metaphor for the grotesque use of language. It is, at the very least, a polarising aesthetic choice; the pursuit of perfection was abandoned so that affective qualities – distortion, emotion, energy and vitality – could be foregrounded. This is, in essence, the defining character of the grotesque as Browning saw it, akin to "a deliberate disowning of order, a refusal to structure language" (Armstrong, 2013, p. 93). It was an artful, though anti-aesthetic, rhetorical strategy that led Browning to such territory, rather than an involuntary crudeness or lack of skill. Thus, whereas early critics of Mannerism such as Dolce and Bellori referred to certain "shortcomings" or "faults" (Miedema, 1978, p. 20), Browning instead found redemptive qualities and a conceptual basis for poetry's "new birth" (Culler, 1985, p. 85).

Baudrillard's model precedes the real: style as substance in Mannerism and the Baroque

Another feature of the Mannerists, according to John Shearman, was a certain ostentatiousness of design, or bravura, comparable to the musical excesses of the ornamented baroque, which would later come to develop the stylistic spirit of Mannerism further. According to H.E. Greene, Browning's musical education and awareness was more systematic and consistent than his education in any other field, although it was by no means without its limitations (Greene, 1947, p. 1095). Browning's rather prestigious teachers, amongst them the

distinguished John Relfe, would likely have acquainted him with the various travelling virtuosi of the time. Amongst these performers were Franz Liszt and Niccolò Paganini, consummate technicians who enjoyed wild popularity across Victorian-era Europe. It is in the spirit of this neo-baroque that Browning appears to have approached one of his most proficient creations, *A Toccata of Galuppi's*. This short poem is a meditation on an unidentified toccata by Baldassaro Galuppi, which transports the performer to Venice. There, he imagines a dialogue between two lovers at court. Technically, Browning's achievement in maintaining trochaic octameter throughout is rather impressive, mirroring in form the musical subject. The toccata form was in many ways the epitome of baroque excess; short, technical, but often lacking in depth. It is interesting then that Browning's performer allows his affective response to the music to interfere with its technical proficiency:

> Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by…what you call
> …Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
> I was never out of England – it's as if I saw it all!
> (Browning, 2010, p. 370, ll. 7-9)

The interjection, "what you call" (l. 7) is reminiscent of similar passages from *Fra Lippo Lippi*, and creates the impression of uncertainty as the persona enters Galuppi's musical vision. It is also, in many respects, an anti-aesthetic moment, suggestive of the Mannerist tendency to reject perfection in art. Browning's choice of musical medium makes this even more permanent; by nature, a musical performance is the epitome of one of Browning's most recurrent themes, "The instant made eternity" from *The Last Ride Together* (Browning, 1981, p. 117, l. 109). The inherent poignancy is nonetheless carefully and artificially constructed: the various "disjunctions" of lines 7-9 do not, in fact, disrupt the metrical pattern. Furthermore, unlike the musical performer, Browning the poet had the freedom to remove or to "repaint" what he so desired. The poet is, at the moment of composition, unrestricted by the relentless movement of time.

The natural conclusion here must be that this anti-aesthetic moment from *A Toccata of Galuppi's* was purposeful and reflective of a wider anti-aesthetic philosophy on art and poetry. According to Stephen Cheeke, Browning believed that art "helps us to see the world more intensely, and to love what we see" (Cheeke, 2008, p. 85). Instead of painting perfection or setting it into verse, Browning appears to be suggesting that the function of art is to draw to our attention what we might otherwise have ignored. In *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the painter reflects on exactly the same point, and in so doing lays out his vision of mimetic art:

> 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.
> (Browning, 2010, p. 501, ll. 300-304)

Art is thus a representation of reality, rather than of ideals, and in constructing a disjointed reality, the poet enables the represented object to appear "better to us" (l. 303) - not through distortion, but simply by being represented.

It is not certain, however, that this view is entirely Mannerist in essence. In fact, in many respects, it seems closer to an altogether more post-modern interpretation of the image, Jean Baudrillard's *hyperreal*, where representation comes to mean a sign without a referent. Baudrillard believed that the primarily psychological condition of hyperreality was apparent in "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). At the point of *simulation*, another defining concept for Baudrillard, the image ceases to represent reality. The *simulacrum* is thus the image that represents a dissociated object, and its own truth and essence exist separate from any underlying, represented reality. In fact, "reality" does not really exist at all. Accordingly, in *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, we witness the disembodied images of Shakespeare's "Shylock's bridge" and "carnival" (l. 8), which are, crucially, not representative of anything that the performer has witnessed, and nor are they images represented directly in Galuppi's music. They are, instead, associations based on the

performer's *perceptions* of Venice, which are themselves based on other fictional perceptions primarily from Shakespeare (who, we can presume, probably did not visit Venice either). Thus, what we witness in this poem is not reality, nor even a representation of it, but rather a series of images based on other images with no underlying reality or referent. "Substance" then, is undermined; style and image is the poem's very (Mannerist) purpose.

It may be that to situate *A Toccata of Galuppi's* in Baudrillard's post-modern simulated landscape is to stretch a point too far. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense that the images of the poem are dissociated from the faithful representation of art or nature, and that they are themselves constructions. What is clear is that Browning created a world where the image – the stylistic, superficial surface – is undermined and where he reminds us of the transient and inconsequential nature of existence. In a sense, Browning questions whether reality is really something different from an image, which may go some way towards explaining why he felt so drawn to Renaissance art. Interestingly, it appears that Browning cannot help but situate women in the midst of this sensibility, where we first meet the vibrant but vulgar image of "such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red" (l. 13) whose nonsensical exchange with her lover occupies the structurally significant mid-point of the poem in the eighth stanza. This positioning lends it more conceptual weight:

> "Were you happy?" – "Yes." – "And are you still as happy?" – " Yes – And you?"
> - "Then more kisses" . "Did *I* stop them, when a million seemed so few"
> Hark – the dominant's persistence, till it must be answered to!
> (Browning, 2010, p. 372, ll. 22-24)

The exchange is framed by the need to resolve the harmonic structure of the toccata. The "persistence" (l. 24) of the dominant is a reminder that music, like time, waits for no one, and that courtly intrigues and decadence will always, ultimately, become meaningless.

A Toccata of Galuppi's poignantly reflects the "instant made eternity" (Browning, 1981, p. 117, l. 109) by Browning as poet, but when we reflect on the creative process and the

source material, we must conclude like Baudrillard that really what Browning has created is an image, unrelated to an underlying reality, because that reality has been lost to history. There is a sense of loss in this recognition – the loss of something never truly owned – that is connected to the partly material absence of the "Dear dead women, with such hair, too" (l. 44), which the cadences of the music conjure up for the performer. Ostensibly using music to capture the inevitable decay of a superficial society, Browning's brilliant technical accomplishments in this poem ultimately focus unflatteringly on a construction of *women* as imagined material. The vibrancy of colour – the "lips so red" (l. 13) and the sensual "gold [which] / Used to hang and brush their bosoms" (l. 45) contrast powerfully with the greyness of death and the inevitable dissolution of material constructs - "Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned!" (l. 35).

There is, however, a significant caveat to the argument that Browning's women were always *materially* objectified. The examples above, which seem fairly consistent with his representation of women elsewhere in the collection, do focus our attention on the female body as distinct from artificial adornments *on* the body. Jewellery, clothing and family emblems are generally ignored or underplayed by Browning, suggesting that he was not overly concerned with the idea of the masculine possession of a woman through the gifts that he bestowed upon her. In contrast, Whitney Chadwick suggests that this was a central assumption in female portraits of the Renaissance, where the material possessions of wealthy men were often emphasised to such an extent that they became inseparable from the woman herself.[4] Thus, when we witness these flamboyant elements in Mannerist paintings, we are in reality witnessing "a careful visual inspection of the female goods which would bear the husband's

[4] This idea would later be explored explicitly by Browning in *Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic* from *Dramatis Personae* (1864). Here, after her death, a seemingly virtuous girl is revealed to have hidden real gold in her hair. The didactic exposition of her disgrace reveals that Browning may have later developed a conception of the inseparability of virtue, beauty and material wealth in women that was closer to portraits such as Ghirlandaio's *Giovanna Tornabuoni née Albizzi* (1488).

inheritence" (Chadwick, 1996, p. 76). Since this does not appear to be the case for Browning, we can only speculate that his particular male gaze, which we will explore shortly, was upon idealised *natural* beauty only. Therefore, whilst he too clearly objectified his artistic subjects, he did so in a way that emphasised the hierarchy between nature and material possessions, with the former preferred. Browning accordingly found it acceptable to direct his male gaze at the female body, but to gaze on her possessions would somehow have come across as vulgar. This unease might possibly be explained by his discomfort as a poet with the kind of Victorian utilitarian materialism that rejected the uses of poetry, as we have seen. At any rate, it is an interestingly inconsistent hierarchy, and appears to be something of a departure from the dual focus of the Mannerists on body *and* possessions.

A final observation in respect of the objectification of women in *A Toccata* concerns the aforementioned superficial dialogue between the lovers (ll. 22-24), which Browning drains of all serious and lasting meaning. As we have already suggested, this exchange is nonsensical and entirely insubstantial; nonetheless, the "protection" that Browning seems to afford the male participant in the conversation is telling. As a man, he avoids the identifying gaze of the persona and thus remains invisible. Furthermore, he remains a singular presence, whereas the woman is suddenly pluralised in the closing lines of the poem. At this point, he does not mourn the passing of the particular woman he has described, but instead extrapolates her presence onto *all* the "Dear dead women, with such hair, too" (Browning, 2010, p. 375, l. 44). The ease with which the persona switches from a singular (invisible) to a plural (delineated) referent is somewhat unsettling, as it does seem to imply that Browning conceived of women as somehow interchangeable and generic.

There are obvious parallels to be drawn between the stylish technical accomplishment of poems like *A Toccata of Galuppi's* and the compositional priorities of the Mannerist artists of the Renaissance. According to Shearman, "Mannerist works of art are conceived in the spirit

of virtuoso-performances" (Shearman, 1967, p. 81). Shearman provides copious examples that seem to epitomise this sensibility. Amongst these are the elaborate head-dresses and coiffures of Michaelangelo's *teste divine* paintings of the early 1520s (Shearman, 1967, p. 57), and Polidoro da Caravaggio's decorative house-façades featuring extravagant trophies and variations upon Roman reliefs (Shearman, 1967, p. 62). It is interesting to note in these instances that not only were they inventive and "virtuosic" in the same vein as Browning's *Toccata*, but also that they shared the same reliance on other sources from within the same medium. Caravaggio's trophies were an extravagant version of similar but less fantastical Roman friezes, whilst Michaelangelo's were inspired by classical models. Even Raphael seems to have gone through a Mannerist phase; Shearman's comments on his Magdalene in *Santa Cecilia* (c. 1515) seem to effectively encapsulate the combination of what I have earlier termed "secondariness" and virtuosity:

> Her face is a portrait of Raphael's mistress, but even she was seen through a refining screen of preconceptions. Her clothing is brittle, formed upon the study of Hellenistic sculpture rather than real life, and metallic and a little unreal in colour […]
>
> (Shearman, 1967, p. 58).

The "refining screen of preconceptions" functions well as an alternative label for this same combination. It is exemplified by the diverse impulses that Raphael channelled into his Magdalene: the contemporary mistress, the Hellenistic model and the Biblical Gospel Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, recent scholarship has suggested that even this Magdalene is a composite figure constructed out of a well-documented mistake by Pope Gregory I. In the sixth century, Gregory conflated the persons of Magdalene, the woman with the perfume from Luke's gospel, and Mary of Bethany into one historical figure (Hooper, 2008, p. 81). Perhaps in respect of papal infallibility, this new "composite Magdalene" survived and grew a cultural life of her own. Even for Browning who, as we will attempt to exemplify, was rather careless with documentary truth in a number of his ekphrastic poems, this particular "refining screen"

appears to be a rather extreme misuse of an historical person. It does, however, demonstrate that Browning's methods in constructing female referents from varied background material had clear precedents in the art of *bella maniera.*

Écriture feminine: Browning and gendered language

These disparate elements of Browning's style, then, seem to reflect the priorities of the Mannerist movement. For all its masculine crudeness and energy, though, Browning's poetic language does nonetheless appear to embody certain elements of Cixous's *écriture feminine*, mentioned in the previous chapter, especially as it was further developed by Julia Kristeva in "The System and the Speaking Subject" (1975). Kristeva used Lacan's *Imaginary* and *Symbolic* realms to define two distinct aspects of language, the *symbolic* and the *semiotic.* The first of these is connected to the typically patriarchal orders of authority, structure and repression, whilst the second is characterised by displacement and a random set of connections in the logical structure of the work as a whole. Crucially, Kristeva assumes femininity and masculinity to be social constructions and therefore, regardless of the biological sex of the poet, language can still be inherently female. The semiotic, to Kristeva, is the language of poetry, whereas prose remains a predominantly masculine arena (Kristeva, 1975), quite irrespective of the relatively dramatic rise of women novelists in the nineteenth century. Browning's stylised, distorted, interrupted language is not dissimilar to Armstrong's aforementioned assessment of the "grotesque". This anti-aesthetic language includes, as we have seen, "the constant present tense or the habit of straining the syntax by omitting articles, relatives, verbs and auxiliaries" (Armstrong, 2013, p. 93). This in turn bears striking similarities to Cixous's definition of female writing - the *écriture feminine* – where "the strength of women […involves], sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread […] which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord" (Cixous cited in Barry, 2002, p. 122).

In effectively equating Browning's style with the female, semiotic realm (although not in as many words), Armstrong draws attention to specific elements that separated him from his contemporaries. This also extends to the choice of subject matter and the persistent interest in the lesser men of history – Galuppi, the *Pictor Ignotus* and so on – which is reminiscent of the way in which Cixous located "peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate" (Cixous, 1997, p. 353) within the female domain. In the context of Bentham's views on the uses of poetry, it is possible to speculate upon the general anxiety felt by a number of Victorian poets and intimate that poetry *was*, by its very nature, female (i.e. semiotic). Furthemore, by virtue of its idiosyncrasies of style, Browning's poetry was perhaps more feminine than most.

There is a significant caveat to this assessment, however. Cixous's *écriture feminine*, in contrast to other Feminist theories (see, for example, Moi, 1997), does not dispense with the need for a biological distinction between male and female poetics, but rather accentuates it. Cixous's female language is simply unavailable to men, who are as constrained by the parameters of available gender-specific language as are women. Nevertheless, regardless of whether we allow Browning's poetic style to be characterised as fully or partially feminine, there is little doubt that at least certain *elements* or characteristics of Kristeva's interpretation of *écriture feminine* do in fact emerge from within an otherwise masculine framework. These elements are, it appears, largely present thanks to Browning's synthesis with wider Mannerist stylistic sensibilities.

The male gaze: objectifying women in Renaissance art

Feminist historians have, since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey, 2003), devoted considerable attention to the asymmetrical "male gaze" in the visual arts, and in particular its psychological effect on the female object. The origins of the idea itself can be traced back to the work of some of France's most prominent

philosophers; Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan all contributed to the refinement and application of the concept in the context of art. Foucault was perhaps most explicit in connecting the gaze to the negotiation of the kind of power structures that seem to have occupied Browning the most: the man and his wife, the painter and model, and the artistic object and the viewer. Victorian-era Europe was an age of museums and exhibitions: in Paris the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855 and its famous successor of 1900 attracted millions of visitors; similarly, in London, the remarkable and popular Victoria and Albert Museum opened in 1852. In short, a culture of "gazers" was born, obsessed with the act of observing. Frequently, perhaps overwhelmingly so, the represented female body continued to be the object of their attentions.

Browning captured the excitement of the Victorian museum and the joy of the hunt for lost art in *Old Pictures in Florence*, which also reveals his intense desire to possess the images of the Renaissance. The persona of the poem may in fact be Browning himself; the references to paintings such as the "muscular Christ" (Browning, 2010, p. 426, l. 212) could allude to works that Browning actually owned. According to Jacob Korg, this particular example may have been Pollaiuolo's *Christ at the Column*, which hangs in the drawing room of Casa Guidi (Korg, 1983, p. 99). At any rate, the driving motivation of the persona in this poem seems to be the all-encompassing desire to possess. "Nay, I shall have it yet, *detur amanti!*" (Browning, 2010, p. 429, l. 244), he exclaims. There are two possible interpretations of this drive, which are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, that Browning desired to possess works that represented his symbolic synthesis with the Renaissance. Secondly, that the proximity of these paintings allowed him to assume the artist's perspective on the world – the painted gaze.

Foucault proposed the existence of profound psychological consequences for the gaze. His work develops Victorian utilitarianism by transferring the application of Jeremy Bentham's

panopticon prison or institution to the internal state of the observed. Bentham's idea was to design a circular building where the cells faced a central observation tower. The surveillance of the prisoners could therefore be carried out by a single warden or official, who also made use of a form of self-regulation based on the fact that a prisoner would always be visible at any given moment. The design was to serve as an invaluable hegemonic tool for the prevailing social or political authorities, which in this context translates into the patriarchal structures of the respective Renaissance and Victorian cultures:

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.
>
> (Foucault, 1995, pp. 202-203)

The idea that becoming an aesthetic object also involves becoming "the principle of […your] own subjection" (Foucault, 1995, p. 203) is closely related to Louis Althussier's conception of the use of art as an ideological structure, contributing to forming cultural attitudes that maintain the political status quo (Barry, 2002, p. 158). Thus, the observed female figure is a subtle tool used by patriarchal structures to effect social control.

In the Renaissance, according to John Berger, a man's presence involves a promise of power, which is always exterior and can, if necessary, involve a level of pretence "in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). A woman, in contrast, has a presence which is always "so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Thus, elements of style, clothing and gestures all contribute to the image of a woman in a way that they do not for a man. Furthermore, she is always aware of her image, and "is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" because "From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to

survey herself continually" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). A woman is therefore constantly subject to the gaze, which splits the world into male agents and female objects.

(Susanna and the Elders (c. 1555), Tintoretto, 2014)

Berger's explication of the male gaze in a Renaissance context reveals several striking parallels when applied to Browning's poetry. We might consider for one his mastery of pretence in the dramatic monologue form: his own poetic voice is located somewhere behind a screen of personae, allowing him to dissociate himself from his representations. He is a master of disguise, because he assumes so many different and contradictory forms and seems to almost effortlessly synthesise with them psychologically. When he speaks with the voice of a Lippi or del Sarto, we are convinced, but it is clearly impossible that the fifty radically differing views and sensibilities are all *like* Browning. They are, at any rate, very unlike each other. His rhetorical power, then, is exterior to himself; his poetry is not, as it was for E.B.B. and other "subjective" poets, a faithful representation of his own identity. In this sense, his self-defined

objective medium is both a symbol and a characteristic of pretence – a distinctly masculine privilege.

In his representation of women, Browning was also able to adopt the position of a male observer and describe each one as an aesthetic object, albeit hidden behind his ostensibly generous admiration of her "beauty." Browning's poetic descriptions of the female body in *Men and Women* were rarely as explicit as they had been previously, especially in the originally conceived "Madhouse Cells" of *Dramatis Personae*[5]. Nonetheless, there are some disparate images that suggest that he did still harbour this inherently Renaissance artistic view of the female body – the gaze that produced works like Tintoretto's *Susanna and the Elders* (c. 1555), where the eponymous nude stares intently at her own reflection in a mirror. Simultaneously, two clothed elders peer at her body from behind a screen. In *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, we have already discussed the young lovers where, though their dialogue reveals them to be equally foolish and insubstantial, the male lover is allowed to pass unremarked and unscrutinised, whilst the female is objectified and generalised into a plural vision of other women whose "gold / Used to hang and brush their bosoms" (Browning, 2010, p. 374, ll. 44-45). The young man, then, is "clothed" by his absence, whereas the female is the subject of the persona's extended and extrapolated gaze. Similarly, in *The Statue and the Bust*, the waiting female looks critically on her own aging body in a mirror:

> One day as the lady saw her youth
> Depart, and the silver thread that streaked
> Her hair, and, worn by the serpent's tooth,
> The brow so puckered, the chin so peaked, -
> And wondered who the woman was.
> (Browning, 2005, p. 103, l. 157-161)

[5] A notable and famous example being *Porphyria's Lover*, which seems to consciously reflect the Mannerist *figura serpentinata* with its extensive use of the sibilant [s] in its descriptions of Porphyria's body – "her smooth white shoulder bare" (Browning, 2010, p. 72, l. 17) and "her heart's endeavour, / To set its struggling passion free" (ll. 22-23) – as well as in the circular descriptions of hair and limbs (for example in l. 40).

Here, we detect the existence of some troubling psychological consequences of the pervasive male gaze. The first is her self-reproach, underscored by the association with "the serpent's tooth" (l. 159), which invokes Eve's ancestral sin (the cornerstone of Christian patriarchy). This effect is emphasised by the poetic representation of the Mannerist *figura serpentinata*. According to Shearman, there is nothing more characteristic or emblematic of the Mannerist style (Shearman, 1967, p. 81). The form, as described in Lomazzo's *Trattato* of 1584, should be

> pyramidal, serpentine, and multiplied by one, two or three...it is the most mobile of all forms and is conical…The painter should combine this pyramidal form with the *Serpentinata*, like the twisting of a live snake in motion…The figure should resemble the letter S…And this applies not only to the whole figure, but also to its parts.
>
> (G.P. Lomazzo cited in Shearman, 1967, p. 81)

(Figura serpentinata in The Genius of Victory (1532-1534), Michelangelo, n.d.)

This *figura serpentinata*, which can be seen in an array of paintings and from the sixteenth century, obviously parallels the Biblical story of Eve and the serpent, although Shearman suggests that this interpretation was by no means exclusive or prescriptive, as it was also used to embody triumph, grace and complexity (Shearman, 1967, pp. 83-84). Famous examples,

which Browning was surely acquainted with, include Michelangelo's *The Genius of Victory* (1532-34) and Giovanni Bologna's *Astronomy* (c. 1572).

When reading the aging woman's meditation on her departing youth in *The Statue and the Bust*, it is possible to conclude that Browning used the figure primarily in the context of beauty, subtly undermining the woman's implicitly pejorative view of herself, as well as that of the men who gaze upon her. The implication, if we are to accept this interpretation, is that the signs of her age - "the silver thread that streaked / her hair" (ll. 158-159) and the "chin so peaked" (l. 160) - are in fact also signs of beauty which in turn emphasise the disjunction between image and reality. The repetition of the sibilant [s] in line 158 and the image of the serpent (l. 159) are, at the very least, a fairly strong indication that Browning was indeed consciously referring to this most emblematic of Mannerist stylistic features here.

A second psychological consequence implied in these lines revolves around the damage that the gaze causes to female conceptions of identity. Here, she reflects (presumably on her image in a mirror) and "wondered who the woman was" (l. 161). This moment is reminiscent of Lacan's infant *mirror stage*, where alienation results from the disjunction between the object's vision of (her)self and the ideal (Sturken, Cartwright, & Sturken, 2001, p. 81). The female lover's awareness of being an object in a mirror emulates the effect that she would probably have experienced had she gazed on her own painted image. The aforementioned description of her body from her own perspective in lines 157-161 is similar in tone and content to that of her lover a few lines earlier, which suggests that women are psychologically induced to adopt the same gaze as men:

> "Alas! My lady leaves the south.
> Each wind that comes from the Apennine
> Is a menace to her tender youth […]"
> (Browning, 2005, p. 101, ll. 100-102)

Although ostensibly caring, the callous bridegroom's perspective reduces his wife to a vulnerable object totally devoid of agency and subject to the effects of nature. His vision of her

"decline" (l. 105) is based on a value system in which a woman is *only* an aesthetic object and, in keeping with the principles of Foucault's Panopticism, she too views herself in the same way and according to the same values. Thus, the circle of self-surveillance is completed as she directs a normative (male) gaze upon her own body. The fact that Browning participated in representing and resuscitating this characteristically Renaissance perspective can hardly be denied. The extent to which he may have also subtly undermined some of its central assumptions (the monopoly of youth on beauty and the infallibility of the male agent) is a more intriguing question. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the elusiveness of the dramatic monologue means that finding unequivocal answers is virtually impossible.

Constructing Eve: Lucrezia del Fede

Andrea del Sarto epitomises two of the aforementioned Mannerist tendencies – the tendency towards "secondariness" and a certain stylistic bravura. Furthermore, the subtitle "(Called 'The Faultless Painter')" (Browning, 2010, p. 385), is suggestive of a third Mannerist trait, the disdain for perfection in art. Observing Raphael's work, Andrea boasts that he has the technical skill to better it, but remains in awe of the "soul" (l. 112) that he somehow lacks:

> That arm is wrongly put – and there again –
> A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines, […]
> Still, what an arm! And I could alter it.
> But all the play, the insight and the stretch –
> Out of me! out of me!
>
> (Browning, 2010, p. 396, ll. 110-111, 114-116)

Although Raphael is not in general regarded as a Mannerist painter (with the notable exception mentioned earlier), he was nonetheless still a model of expressivity and of "all the play, the insight" (l. 115), at the expense of perfection. Thus, we can read the repeated exclamation, "Out of me! out of me!" (l. 116) as a desperate admission both of Andrea's regret and of his incompleteness as an artist. Browning explicitly juxtaposes his personal failings and the deficiencies of his art in these lines, and in so doing exposes a disjunction between his skill as

a craftsman and his moral weakness as a man. Crucially, Browning uses the figure of Lucrezia del Fede to embody Andrea's failure as a masculine figure. But the Lucrezia of *Andrea del Sarto* is simultaneously witness to the weakness of Browning's "secondary" source approach to his subject, because, as Korg suggests, she is not a true representation of the real Lucrezia, but rather an emblematic or composite figure constructed out of Browning's own experiences and on his seemingly uncritical usage of Vasari's not altogether unbiased account. Korg suggests that Vasari, as Andrea's pupil, was poorly treated by Lucrezia and his selective version of events was therefore coloured by his distaste for her (Korg, 1983, p. 118). Therefore, in Browning's reconstructed version, Lucrezia became beautiful but haughty, forcing Andrea to misappropriate the money he had been given by his patron, Francis I, flee the French court and give in to her avaricious designs. Lucrezia thus comes to resemble in kind a Biblical Eve, guilty of forcing Andrea to forgo his divine potential and instead give into her materialistic demands (again, as in *Pictor Ignotus*, Browning reveals his unease with materialism).

Browning's characterisation of Lucrezia, who is also the artist's silent addressee, is almost exclusively hostile. Nonetheless, according to Korg, in all likelihood "These statements are all falsehoods or distortions" (Korg, 1983, p. 118). It seems conceivable that Mrs. Jameson's *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* (1845) may also have been fresh in Browning's mind at the time of writing, including its theory that Lucrezia was del Sarto's model for all his female characters. There may have been a practical expedient here: Lucrezia was, after all, an available and probably willing subject. It seems though that Browning chose to interpret her recurring form negatively as a sign of her husband's obsession and of her own negative influence upon him. In reading the physiognomy of her painted face, Browning "could easily have read this face as an image of selfishness and sensuality" (Korg, 1983, p. 120), in part because of the associations he carried forward from Vasari. Thus, in relying so heavily on the interpretative accounts of sources separate from the works themselves, some conception of

Browning's own gendered sense of self begins to surface. As Korg puts it, "Although he had easy access to many of Del Sarto's paintings in Florence, he never uses a specific picture to support his poem's premise that the moral character of the artist is reflected in his art" (Korg, 1983, p. 118).

For psychoanalysts, the emergence of these deep-seated obsessions and hostilities – the manifestations of the *id* – occurs simultaneously with symptoms such as aggression or *projection*, where unwanted impulses, denied in the self, are attributed to others, especially those in close proximity (Freud, 1991). Korg speculates that Browning's wilful distortion of Lucrezia's character is a reaction to the alleged infidelities of the Brownings' neighbour of 1853-1854, Sarah Page, whose husband, the American William Page, painted Browning's portrait. Thus, the Lucrezia of *Andrea del Sarto* is part symbol, part projection, and perhaps therefore a manifestation of Browning's insecurities about marriage, fidelity and the obsessive pursuit of a seductive female. What she is clearly not, however, is a faithful representation of the actual Lucrezia del Fede as she lived and breathed.

Lucrezia's seductiveness is represented in this poem as a powerful combination of Browning's various aesthetic and private dislikes. Firstly, her aggressive, controlling sexual dominance is emphasised by her husky, masculine "low voice" (l. 123) and the image of her in the normative male position of fowler:

> But had you – oh, with the same perfect brow,
> And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
> And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
> The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare –
> Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
> (Browning, 2010, pp. 396-397, ll. 121-125)

Into the "snare" (l. 124) stumbles Andrea himself, emasculated and captured "as a bird" (l. 123). Not only this, but his submission of body – the frail body of a bird – is allied to the surrender of his "soul" (l. 123), which completes Lucrezia's circle of dominance. Within the structural limitations of the dramatic monologue, which, as we have established, involves the

silencing of the addressee, Lucrezia is unusually active here. Her "low voice" (l. 123) also serves as a reminder that she is an independent rhetorical presence, even if we do not hear her words directly in the poem.

Andrea's response parallels the male lover in *The Last Ride Together*, whose initial impotence in rejection leads him to shift the rhetorical focus, which is his exclusive privilege as persona. The subtle transition from her microcosmic rejection of their relationship to his macrocosmic philosophical contemplation of eternity and the purpose of love, "Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?" (Browning, 2005, l. 98), portrays her as petty and trivial. Whereas this woman is slowly silenced by the persona's rhetorical focus, Lucrezia does not allow herself to disappear. The physical violence of the fowler image is rare in the characterisation of a woman, and is certainly at odds with Victorian and Renaissance ideals of decorum. Although it was not unusual for Browning to associate violence with the negotiation of domestic power structures, as will be explored in detail in Chapter 4, this is never presented as a desirable or "ladylike" strategy. Andrea's thoughts are, at any rate, fairly unambiguous: immediately after this image, he resorts to almost childish insults. "Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind! / Some women do so" (Browning, 2010, p. 397, ll. 125-126). Interestingly, apart from the condescendingly patriarchal concession that "some women" (l. 126) may, strangely enough, possess intellect, Andrea by implication wishes only for a mind to be "brought" (l. 125) to their relationship. He does not hope for an independent, separate female mind, but instead one whose value only exists in its co-presence within marriage and in what it brings or contributes to the fellowship of male and female. This is a profoundly egocentric hope, reflective of Andrea's inability to relate to a strong female presence.

The second area of contention from the first lines of this image lies in the use of the word "perfect" (ll. 121-122), repeated three times and on each occasion associated with a representation of the female body: "brow" (l. 121), "eyes" and "mouth" (l. 122). We have

already seen that Browning shared the Mannerists' aversion to perfection in art, which he often artfully recreated through constructed anti-aesthetic language – hesitations, colloquialisms and disjunctions of various kinds. In this case, the insistent focus on perfection is explained and revealed through its association with Lucrezia, a woman who Andrea clearly blames for his various misfortunes in life. The distinction between beauty and perfection is not always obvious, since its manifestation on the female body may have the same referents. As objects of beauty, the same "brow" (l. 121), "eyes" and "mouth" (l. 122) might symbolise divine creativity. As Cheeke suggests in relation to Lippo Lippi's musings on the same subject, "'beauty' does not need to be positioned in relation to a separate category of moral good, but constitutes its own category of goodness or value" (Cheeke, 2008, p. 92). Accordingly, the contours of this seemingly difficult distinction begin to take shape: beauty is real and of moral value; perfection is really a complex perversion of reality – Baudrillard's image unrelated to the underlying referent – and is epitomised by this vulgar, controlling construction, Lucrezia. The fact that she too, as we have seen, bears little resemblance to the real Lucrezia del Fede only serves to emphasise the point. Browning has created in Lucrezia a complex 'Eve': she stifles her husband but is also his model; she is perfect more than she is beautiful, which is as much a moral judgement as an aesthetic one; she is, like Raphael's Magdalene, a composite figure, representing the worst of Browning's and Vasari's subjective experiences of controlling, immoral women; she is violent and makes herself heard as a poetic presence, despite being structurally and therefore literally prevented from doing so.

In sum, the representation of Lucrezia from *Andrea del Sarto* epitomises Browning's complex relationship with his constructed women – women who awed and hypnotised him with their natural, simple beauty, but also women whom he saw fit to control and silence, fixed by the male gaze. Browning's decision to situate so many of his painter poems in Renaissance Italy not only reflects his deep interest in the history and culture of his adopted homeland, but

also allowed him to synthesise the cultural framework of his own time with another conceptually sympathetic historical movement. Joan Kelly's social overview of the position of women reveals, however, that the Renaissance was a time of significant regression from generally more independent and equal gender relations in Medieval feudal society, at least amongst the aristocracy. Adopting Renaissance patriarchy would, therefore, appear to be a conservative step, confirming some of the suspicions raised in the first chapter that Browning, as a Victorian, was unsettled by the growing political and economic power of women in the industrial age and defensive of poetry as a 'masculine' art. However, it seems to be rather simplistic to suggest that Browning's poetry synthesised with Renaissance patriarchy fully, despite evidence that he was deeply influenced by it. Browning shared with the Mannerists a (perhaps feminine) fascination with stylistic virtuosity, and seemed outwardly unconcerned that his work was based on a "refining screen of preconceptions" (Shearman, 1967, p. 58) that played liberally with documentary sources. The result of such "secondariness" was seldom advantageous for his female constructions, and at worst resulted in gross distortions of historical figures like the unfortunate Lucrezi del Fede. In addition, his objectification of the female body through his various ekphrastic representations of Mannerist art and the motivations of Mannerist artists, confirm in many respects his position as a "Mannerist" poet. His explicit use of certain characteristic elements of Mannerist style, such as the *figura serpentinata*, emphasise this particular focus. However, as the examples from *The Statue and the Bust* demonstrate, Browning presented at times a rather ambiguous representation of not only this specific figure, but also of the male gaze in general. In short, his poetry may have demonstrated his awareness of, and even dependence on, the Renaissance, but this does not necessarily mean that he was without a degree of (albeit subtle) scepticism when faced with it directly.

A degree of ambiguity was not the only sign that Browning was an occasional dissenter in his representation of the Renaissance. As was suggested briefly in relation to Kelly's point that Renaissance social conditions for women were more restrictive than they had been earlier, Browning seems to have preferred the Medieval conception of the masculine chivalrous knight, and possibly the greater sexual freedoms afforded both men and women at this time. His vision of this aspect of masculinity, insofar as it represents a key departure from the Renaissance, is therefore an important point of departure for a wider exploration of the male role in *Men and Women*, and will therefore form the focus of the next chapter. Ultimately, we can probably tentatively conclude that Browning was indeed a "Renaissance man" (Culler, 1985, p. 185), but also that he was a Victorian with a distinct set of sometimes contradictory attitudes, whether to poetry, women, or men in general. The synthesis that Browning achieved between two similar historical moments was a rich cultural framework for *Men and Women*, but it was not necessarily a straitjacket. Browning was also undeniably his own man, despite Bloom's intimations to the contrary.

Chapter 3

The masculine ideal: heroes made and unmade

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's heaven for?

(*Andrea del Sarto*, Browning, 2010, p. 395, ll. 96-97)

In September 1846, Browning, in a flurry of activity, carried his new wife off to Italy and in so doing emulated his two great heroes, the legend Perseus and the poet Shelley. According to Greek myth, Perseus rescued the damsel Andromeda from the jaws of the monstrous Cretus, sent by Poseidon as a punishment for her mother's garrulous boasts about her divine beauty. Shelley, rather more prosaically, attempted the feat on at least three separate occasions, first to Scotland with the young Harriet Westbrook, whom he later abandoned, and later to Switzerland and Italy with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who became his second wife (Bieri, 2008). Unfortunately, Browning was rather less practical than his gallant predecessors, as "Elizabeth had to correct his mistakes about which railroad company was which, draw his attention to their different timetables, and suggest which Channel crossing would be most suitable" (Finlayson, 2005, p. 211). Nonetheless, we cannot help but admire his good intentions even if, as the persona questions plaintively in *The Last Ride Together*, "Fail I alone, in words and deeds? / Why, all men strive and who succeeds?" (Browning, 2005, p. 115, ll. 45-46).

Browning's desire both to embody and to emulate the archetypal masculine hero is reflective of a particularly prevalent – even defining – characteristic of Victorian masculinity. The influential Scottish social commentator, Thomas Carlyle, foregrounded the figure of the hero as an essential component of male identity in the form of an aspirational model:

> Hero-worship is the deepest root of all; the tap-root, from which in a great degree all the rest were nourished and grown […] No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of men.
>
> (Carlyle, 1966, p. 11)

Furthermore, like Browning, Carlyle rejected perfection even amongst heroic figures, instead privileging creative energy and dismissing criticisms of great men's faults as "valetism" – the tendency to laugh at the failings of those who, through action, leave themselves open to ridicule (Carlyle, 1966). This representation of the wholesome but flawed hero was anticipated by Browning, as we have seen, in the lascivious but creative persona of *Fra Lippo Lippi*, amongst others. Lippi's encounter with the guards "at an alley's end / Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar" (Browning, 2010, p. 484, ll. 5-6) is transformed, gradually but firmly, from a situation of blustering embarrassment to one in which the monk forcefully and convincingly defends himself by boasting about his artistic productivity. By the end of his monologue, we no longer remember the bumbling "beast" (l. 80) scorned by his captors, "Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head" (l. 76). Instead, we admire the artist whose rhetorical energy has overwhelmed the figurative Carlylean "valets" to the extent that it is now he, rather than they, who assumes the position of power and agency, even going so far as to reassure them paternally at the close of the poem - "Don't fear me!" (l. 392), he says. The rhetorical power that effects Lippi's reversal of the power dynamic is based almost entirely on the efficacy of his creativity. His reputation as an artist subdues the guards and reasserts his heroic potential, even in a situation where he is physically unable to impose himself. Browning's conception of heroism, then, was founded on pragmatism rather than idealism, and a recognition that, as he also believed of art, perfection was not a state to be aspired to. Only those who dared to act and to risk were truly heroic.

The Literary Man – a new kind of hero

Victorian ideas about masculinity were in a state of flux or even crisis, according to Carlyle, who claimed that the transition from the machismo excesses of Romantic Byronism and Medieval chivalry to a new indefinable ideal had left men "grop[ing] after it in darkness, one clutching this phantom, another that" (Adams, 1995, p. 1). For Browning, as for many

others, the beguiling physical and agentive masculinity of a Perseus or Shelley was an unattainable ideal in the contemporary social climate; the rise of industrialism and the invention of new technology was quickly displacing men from positions of agency at the heart of society. Furthermore, mechanisation had the potential to diminish the relevance of brute strength in the working environment. Traditional views about the centrality of male physical prowess were thus pragmatically and quietly replaced. The poetic qualities of spiritual, creative and intellectual enlightenment were now equal parts of the ideal, although the existence of a burgeoning athletics scene and the pioneering spirit of the missionaries and explorers of the British Empire ensured that physical strength never became *anti*-masculine.

The point that Carlyle appears to have been making, though, was that there was now a unique possibility for a *range* of different types of hero to exist, and the parameters of heroism were consequently extended beyond the confines of simple, unsophisticated machismo. Accordingly, the chivalrous knight could also be a figurative knight, not necessarily noble because of his strength, but because of his sheer determination and single-mindedness – the kind of energy that Browning so admired in Lippi. These characteristics were, as we shall see, central to Browning's construction of *Men and Women's* various male (anti-) heroes, amongst them Lippi and the pedantic, deceased grammarian from *A Grammarian's Funeral.* In both of these cases, the poetic characterisation of the male persona is neither transparent, singular nor static, but seemingly as indeterminate and polysemous as Carlyle suggested was the case for Victorians in general with their various emerging "phantoms" of masculinity. The grammarian's physical body, for example, is depicted as a nuisance or hindrance in the context of his heroic quest for knowledge, whilst Lippi is morally deviant, even if Browning presents this as being understandable. These heroes are models of masculine resolve – although in each case Browning undermines them in different ways – but they are nonetheless unconventional heroes cut from a different cloth than a Medieval knight or a Perseus. As we shall see though,

Browning was never able to reject completely the powerful, chivalrous physical presence, and the ancient myth remained, in many ways, a defining image for his construction of heroic masculinity.

A Grammarian's Funeral – a hero made and unmade

Browning, as we saw in Chapter 1, implicitly connected his objective poetry to masculine creative ideals in opposition to the "femininity" of the Romantic subjective mode, even if such a simple contrast is in many ways unsatisfactory and inconsistent with his own idiosyncrasies of style. For the Victorian literary establishment, the negotiation of ideal gender models was fundamental to the self-image of the poet:

> In the true Literary Man there is thus ever, acknowledged or not by the world, a sacredness: he is the light of the world; the world's Priest; — guiding it, like a sacred Pillar of Fire, in its dark pilgrimage through the waste of Time.
> (Carlyle, 1966, p. 157)

It is this kind of enlightened but resolutely anti-machismo hero that Browning presents in *A Grammarian's Funeral*. Taking as his point of departure a physically feeble but obsessively single-minded pedant, Browning allows a complex interplay to develop between on the one hand an ironic or satiric interpretation of the sickly man in pursuit of a pointless ideal, and the students' fervent appreciation of his energy and resolve on the other.

The persona of this poem is, rather unusually, a multiple one – a group of devoted students – although it functions as a unanimous, singular presence. In a sense, they function collectively in a manner similar to the English plural "you" - an observation that would doubtless have amused the eponymous grammarian. The students' praise of their teacher is effusive and centres on the symbolic journey of his corpse to its final resting place "On a tall mountain, citied to the top, / Crowded with culture!" (Browning, 2010, pp. 590-591, ll. 15-16) where he is to be buried far from "the unlettered plain [with] its herd and crop" (l. 13). The image alludes to the grammarian's aloofness as a man, eschewing success in the present

moment in favour of long-term academic commitment, unlike those "Heedless of far gain, / Greedy for quick returns of profit" (ll. 98-99). The students' perspective is rather similar to the proud, principled rejection of material profit that characterises *Pictor Ignotus* and, as we have already suggested, perhaps mirrors Browning's own more or less involuntary lack of commercial and critical success at the time of writing. There is no doubt as to the students' interpretation of the grammarian's life and activities; this man is a hero whose intellectual quest is as thrilling and inspiring as the medieval knight's. He is at once aggressive – "Fierce as a dragon" (l. 94) – and morally or spiritually pure as he completes "God's task to make the heavenly period / Perfect the earthen" (ll. 101-102). Like Carlyle's "Literary Man", the grammarian is made a hero through the distinctly masculine force of his will and energy. The heroic grammarian is a "high man, with a great thing to pursue" (l. 115), whose sacrificial spirit denies him both bodily and social fulfilment.

Browning does, however, allow us another interpretation that grows out of the necessary distance between poet and persona. Contrary to the students' ideal image of their teacher, we encounter an implicit criticism of a man who separates himself from the real world. The dichotomy between theory and practice, or between action and passivity, emerges from behind the student's eulogy. To illustrate this further, we might consider once more the two parallel examples from Browning's contrasting Renaissance men, Lippi and del Sarto. The former, a wilful and lascivious monk, is (also sexually) active; he is in constant movement – usually to and from places where he should not be – but this activity translates itself into artistic potency, which redeems him. Andrea del Sarto, meanwhile, waits feebly at home whilst his wife, Lucrezia, does freely as she wishes. He is passivised and, though his work is perfect, it is incomplete because it lacks the soul of a Raphael. This essential conflict between masculine active and emasculated passive is also a crucial part of the grammarian's representation, although Browning does not provide any obvious answer as to whether he viewed intellectual

"activity" as commensurate with the physical realm of the traditional hero. In one respect, Browning seems to suggest that the grammarian's life differs from the clearly physical, agentive dimension to the work of the perhaps admirable "low man [who] seeks a little thing to do, / Sees it and does it" (l. 113). He, in contrast, is described by the static (i.e. stative) verb "knows" (l. 116), whilst his life's work is represented as hopeless – he "Dies ere he knows it" (l. 116). The grammarian's travails are set against a comical backdrop of his physical weaknesses – "*Tussis* [a cough] attacked him" (l. 88), and the students "found him bald too – eyes like lead" (l. 53). He was, furthermore, "Cramped and diminished" (l. 38) and even "Moaned" (l. 39) about his work. The poem appears, in this sense, to satirise the obsession of grammarians and their pursuit of lofty aims, painting this one as a faintly ridiculous figure who chose "not to Live but Know" (l. 139).

The extent to which we agree or disagree with the satiric interpretation of the grammarian's life centres around whether or not we admire the *manner* in which he went about his task. Certainly in the context of the collection as a whole, "The high man, aiming at a million, / [who] Misses an unit" (ll. 119-120) is closer to Lippi than he is to del Sarto. The afflictions which plagued the grammarian are also obstacles to be overcome and his shortcomings are simply blemishes on an otherwise noble spirit, undeterred by his setbacks, as he "Left play for work, and grappled with the world" (l. 45). The students' comparison to "Lyric Apollo!" (l. 34) implies that, for all his faults, the grammarian was indeed heroic material, although this reference too might well be seen as somewhat ironic. Interestingly, Apollo was the god of not only male beauty, but also of poetry, which suggests that Browning was indeed alluding specifically to the kind of heroic "Literary Man" that Carlyle described. There is, of course, every possibility that Browning intended us both to admire *and* to scorn him; the existence of the Literary Man and the ridiculous, satirised pedant side by side is perhaps equivalent to what we might term the "making" and simultaneous "unmaking" of the

male hero – a tacit acknowledgement that the true nature of masculinity is contradictory by nature and as elusive as a "phantom" (Adams, 1995, p. 1).

Perseus and Andromeda – the battles and the war

(Perseus and Andromeda (1570), Vasari, 2006)

Although Browning, as we saw in Chapter 2, tended to look to the Renaissance for inspiration, there was one classical myth that fascinated him to the point of obsession. Adrienne Munich even goes so far as to claim that the myth of Perseus and Andromeda was so important to him that "it seemed as if the poet had constructed his life to fulfil the promise encoded in the ancient myth" (Munich, 1993, p. 137). Despite the fact that E.B.B. was forced to take a somewhat more active role in her own rescue than she might otherwise have been expected to do, there seems little doubt that she played her role as an Andromeda. Munich suggests that E.B.B. recognised that the myth was important to her husband's conception of himself as a male, and that he "required a damsel to rescue" (Munich, 1993, p. 138), perhaps even more than she desired to be rescued.

It certainly appears that Browning expected his constructed women to *want* to be rescued, if *A Woman's Last Word* is at all representative (and here we have to accept, as previously noted, that Browning does not provide us with an abundance of female personae on which to base our assumptions). Here, the woman willingly and happily accepts her role as "damsel" – she yearns for her lover to "Be a man and fold me / With thine arm!" (Browning, 2005, p. 20, ll. 23-24), and positions herself ready for his rescue, "Laying flesh and spirit / In thy hands!" (ll. 31-32). Assuming the position of an Andromeda is not commensurate with any kind of feminine superiority, moral or physical; she must submit to her husband bodily – "Be a god and hold me" (l. 21); in knowledge - "Teach me, only teach, Love!" (l. 25); in language – "I will speak thy speech, Love" (l. 27); and in emotional steadfastness or maturity – "-Must a little weep, Love, / - Foolish me!" (l. 37-38). E.B.B. herself, despite playing her role, seemed to do so somewhat grudgingly, as if humouring her husband. She recalled, in her response to his courtship, that she believed that he was "nailing me up into a false position with your gold-headed nails of chivalry" (E.B.B. cited in Mermin, 1989, p. 119). The kind of voice that Browning constructed in *A Woman's Last Word* was accordingly a predominately structural device designed not to represent a real woman's psychology, but rather to provide a poetic scaffolding for the emergence of a mythological Perseus-hero. Thus, the heroic action is artificially made, and we must continue to search elsewhere if we are to discover an independent female persona in *Men and Women.*

However, as Munich points out, there was more to the Perseus myth than simply the one heroic, muscular act of physical liberation. Perseus subsequently settled into his role as a devoted husband and father, abdicating from the throne when his son reached maturity (Munich, 1993, p. 137). This often overlooked part of the same myth shows that heroism was, for Browning, a process or state, rather than a sequence of independent acts. Browning's holistic appreciation of the Perseus myth resonates with conceptions of Victorian masculinity

as multi-faceted and nuanced, as opposed to simply confused and undefined, as was Carlyle's implication in suggesting that men were now "grop[ing] in the darkness" (Adams, 1995, p. 1) in search of a new ideal. That masculinity could be a process or state is suggestive of Carlyle's "Literary Man", who invokes a heroism of lasting ideas, and is in a sense embodied by Browning's grammarian, even though *he* is also to an extent undermined by his separation from the lived experience of life. George L. Mosse, in his work tracing the origins of modern masculinity, identifies an early forerunner to subsequent anti-physical masculinities where the very English conception of the ideal male is "informed by a moral imperative that overshadows physical endowment" (Mosse, 1996, p. 52). Mosse connects the moral imperative to nationalism and political sacrifice, rather than to the more mundane qualities of English verbs and nouns, which perhaps offers something of an answer as to why Browning seems to ridicule as well as idealise his grammarian. It is perhaps not the commitment to ideas that Browning satirises – in fact quite the opposite – but rather the import, extent and moral value of those ideas. A hero, including a "Literary Man", ought to choose his battles wisely, although he can still be heroic even if he does not.

Gendered manifestations of the Perseus myth in all its various stages infuse *Men and Women* with diverse heroic figures. Nonetheless, the image of the rescuer and the rescued dominates, although the orientation of the rescue is more complicated than the simple opposition between male "agent" and female "patient", to borrow terms from linguistics that imply activity and passivity respectively. In *Women and Roses*, for example, the male lover-persona uses the conventional metaphor of a female rose to establish his own imperfect fantasy of rescue even as it concurrently represents his failure to complete the mission. "How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you" (Browning, 2005, p. 255, l. 18) he asks in a moment of brash masculine violence, but immediately transitions to the subsequent stage of the Perseus myth – he becomes, temporarily, the devoted husband who asks to "Break my heart at your feet to

please you?" (l. 19). The initial fantasy of rescue dissipates into a more equal appropriation of the power dynamics of the relationship as he claims blissfully "Oh! to possess, and be possessed!" (l. 20). This moment of surrender is, however, just one battle lost in a long war. The difficulty that Browning appears to have encountered in his appropriation of the myth leads to what might reasonably be described as an epistemological impasse. He must rescue, dominate and possess – the tree must remain his own but "In vain, the same fashion, / They circle their rose on my rose tree" (ll. 23-24). Simultaneously, as the devoted husband-lover, he must also accept, yield, "and be possessed!" (l. 20).

The collision between the two competing sides of the same myth that this poem dramatises suggests that co-existence between the aggressive male possessor-rescuer and the respectful, devoted, possessed lover is impossible at one and the same time. Although Perseus rescued Andromeda before committing his life to her and to their son, he was not able to do it all in one single, physical action. Yielding to his status as a family man also required him to abdicate from the throne. Similarly, as Haigwood suggests, the difficult balance between Browning's respect for E.B.B. as a mentor and his subsequent drive towards greater creative productivity required some form of divorce, even if not literally. The consequence was that he was faced with a difficult task, needing to "assert his artistic independence from E.B.B. without damaging the intimacy of their marriage" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 98). Whilst ever his artistic and personal devotion to his wife was the dominant impulse, as was the case during the early years of his marriage and his partially "voluntary apprenticeship and subordination of his own judgment to E.B.B.'s" (Haigwood, 1986, p. 98), he was seemingly unable to write. It would be tempting to label this period of "apprenticeship" as a fairly unambiguous case of emasculation – the older, wiser, more famous and more active female dominates and silences her passivised husband. However, according to Thais E. Morgan, the Victorian ideal of manliness was actually in part defined by "the increasing presence of women as moral guides" (Morgan, 2000,

p. 203), which, although it did not necessarily preclude the emasculation of men, tended to emphasise "an ideology of separate spheres for men and women" (Morgan, 2000, p. 203). This morality centred on the home, which was the Victorian woman's territory and domain. Browning, as we shall see, was interested in the moments where these two spheres clashed. Domestic violence, which represents the most extreme and serious violation of the separation of (masculine) aggression and (feminine) morality was a difficult and painful subject for Victorians in general, and will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

If we read the Perseus myth as Browning apparently did, an alternative to the interpretation of "apprenticeship" as emasculation emerges. Just as Perseus was not always a physically dominant rescuer but also a devoted family man, so too did Browning appear to view subordination as a less than permanent state of emasculation. The conception of masculinity as a *process* of negotiation was an important element in this more subtle masculinity of ideas. This kind of masculinity involved active participation in the arbitration of power structures in a relationship. Devotion, respect and domestic harmony became, instead of signifiers of weakness, necessary precursors to a subsequent *re*-assumption of the dominant, normative masculine position. Browning saw, in other words, the relationship between male and female as cyclical. In a sense, where conflict is involved, it represented "lost" battles in the context of a longer war. *Women and Roses* dramatises this gradual but decisive transition to a position of masculine dominance – a "cycle's change" (l. 44) – and reconstructs the transition from possessor to possessed and then back again, strengthened and rejuvenated – "I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her, / Shaped her to his mind!" (ll. 46-47). Appropriately, images of violence abound, we "Drink once and die!" (l.23), "The bee [is] sucked in by the hyacinth" (l. 29) and "So I will bury me while burning" (l. 30). Whilst these are, as we have seen, typical expressions of masculine violence, they are also part of the lexicon of conflict in which *both* parties are aggressors. Accordingly, the Donne-esque sexual image of the (male) bee

penetrating the (female) flower and the state of capture necessary for pleasure where "Prison[s] all my soul" (l. 34), are also instances of women visiting violence upon men. As with any war, there are casualties.

In sum, then, we can deduce from the various male personae of *Men and Women* that the figure of the hero as an aspirational model was fundamental to Browning's construction of masculinity. Personally and professionally, Browning's obsession with the myth of Perseus and Andromeda was an important framework for this representation. Crucially, however, it is only in the context of the *whole* myth – including the later stages of Perseus' dedication to his family – that we can begin to fully appreciate the complexity of Browning's ideas about masculinity. In essence, *Men and Women* appears to promote Carlyle's multi-faceted heroic ideal, which includes not only physical potency but also, and sometimes alternatively, the resolve, energy and single-mindedness of the Literary Man. In short, Browning's masculinity involved the hero in many different manifestations, some of which required imposing a sense of dominance over women, whilst others allowed for the happy devotion of the male to a female lover or wife, at least on the understanding that this was a (perhaps temporary) stage of a longer process resembling the extended Perseus hero myth. Ultimately, though, Browning's heroes seem to embody a typically Victorian unease with their own purpose, which, as Carlyle put it, resulted in an indeterminate search for an elusive "phantom" (Adams, 1995, p. 1) masculinity. The extent to which this uncertainty resulted in turmoil, crisis and even violence will be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

A violent convergence: the poetry of domestic abuse

Shall we burn up, tread that face at once
Into tinder,
And so hinder
Sparks from kindling all the place at once?

(*A Pretty Woman*, Browning, 2005, p. 81, ll. 53-56)

There is, perhaps above all other considerations of Browning's poetic construction of gender and gendered relationships, one particular point at which external influences and internal conflicts converge into a singular motif. For the Victorians, this was not only a controversial thematic area for literary representations, but also one that profoundly affected the interplay between men and women, both in the day-to-day negotiation of marital relationships and in the larger context of normative social roles. Browning's representation of the psychology of domestic violence, according to Melissa Valiska Gregory, provides one possible explanation for his lack of commercial and critical success early in his career and, in part because of changing attitudes, for his later rejuvenation with *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) (Gregory, 2000, p. 491). Victorian critics were clearly uncomfortable with Browning's violent themes, which were, according to Mary Ellis Gibson, "hardly…within the conventional bounds of subject matter for a poem of epic proportions" (Gibson, 1992, p. 74).

Browning's tendency to traverse these "conventional bounds" was, as we discussed in Chapter 1, partly possible because his theoretical conception of objective poetry and the dramatic monologue allowed him to separate his own morality as a man from the distinct, independent perspectives of his personae. This was still a relatively new phenomenon for the Victorians, whose discomfort with Browning's subject matter presumably stemmed from a more Romantic, subjective view of poetry. M.H. Abrams noted, as we have seen, how objectivity complicated "romantic attempts to use literature as an index to temperament" (Abrams, 1971, p. 241). Thus, we can perhaps sympathise with Browning's seeming frustration

at his lack of commercial success, which he probably attributed to the ignorance of his audience - those "Partakers of their daily pettiness", as the anonymous persona of *Pictor Ignotus* puts it (Browning, 2010, p. 230, l. 54). Gregory notes the example of a rather sanctimonious contributor to the *English Review* of 1846, who declared of Browning's murderous themes that "in our eyes, murder is always murder" (cited in Gregory, 2000, p. 497). The reviewer's indignation, it seems, stems from his belief that poets ought not only to say what they mean, but also to write about altogether more "wholesome" things; caught between Romanticism and Modernism, the Victorians were still clearly more comfortable with the transparent world of the subjective poet.

Browning's depictions of domestic violence, though, are not only interesting because they imply a subversive, transgressive relationship to the literary establishment. They are also worth investigating because what the 1846 reviewer implied of Browning's sinister motives *may*, in actual fact, also have an element of truth, however small. Whilst we may be suspicious of using biographical accounts to explain a poet's intentions, we must recognise that such critical-theoretical approaches were altogether more common in Browning's own time and should therefore be afforded appropriate weight. The contemporary French theorist Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve's "portrait" approach to the literary imagination echoes Abrams's assessment of the Romantic view of artistic temperament:

> Literature, literary production, as I see it, is not distinct from the rest of mankind's character and activity […] I am inclined to say, *tel arbre, tel fruit* – the fruit is like the tree.
>
> (Sainte-Beuve, 1965, pp. 281-282)

It is easy to see just how Browning might have suffered at the hands of his Victorian critics if this perspective is at all representative. His is hardly poetry "to be perused with profit in the nursery or in a railway carriage" (J. Skelton (1863), cited in Litzinger & Smalley, 1970, p. 207) as another contemporary reader put it. Nevertheless, Sainte-Beuve's approach allows us the freedom of certain speculations which other resolutely non-biographical philosophies of

analysis deny us. Firstly, the very fact of Browning's commercial and critical failures at the time of writing, especially next to the unqualified successes of E.B.B., were enough to have left him feeling somewhat isolated and emasculated. Secondly, not only was his own poetry dismissed as immoral, but the Romantic habit of synthesising the creator and the created material must have been personally chastening. The initial failure of his literary project – objective poetry – may have been difficult for him on a professional level, but nevertheless understandable; the aspersions on his character had the more serious potential to turn him into a pariah in the community. Nor was Browning apparently immune to criticism: we have already discussed his disproportionately furious response to Mrs. FitzGerald's seemingly innocent question about Jochanan Hakkadosh. Similarly, we have seen how Andrea del Sarto's failures as a painter were represented as commensurate with his failures as a man. For all Browning's claims that the objective life of a persona might be allowed to exist freely and separately in the dramatic monologue form – to "reproduce things external" (Browning in Pettigrew & Collins, 1981, p. 1001) - we cannot help but wonder whether the poet's private insecurities did in fact begin to surface as a form of psychoanalytic projection in his poetic personae. Assuming that this *could* at least be the case, this chapter will examine the ways in which Browning's poetry transgresses Victorian propriety and explores domestic (physical) abuse – the darkest consequence of the emasculation of man.

Violence and masculine self-esteem: Victorian domestic abuse

Browning's quantitative treatment of romantic, marital relationships in *Men and Women* is overwhelmingly weighted in favour of dysfunctional, abusive scenarios in which male figures exert control over female objects. In some cases, as in *Andrea del Sarto* and *The Last Ride Together*, the methods of control are entirely rhetorical; Andrea's Lucrezia, for example, is blamed by the persona for his misfortunes, and the form of the address allows her no response. Nonetheless, she remains free to act as she wishes even if that means damaging

her husband's career irrevocably (or at least, in true Biblical tradition, that is what this "Adam" would have us believe). However, it is *actual* psychological and physical violence that tends to be the dominant representation of marriage in the collection. There are, of course, notable exceptions where marriage remains a happy and harmonious state – *At the Fireside* and *Love Among the Ruins*, for example, and specifically of his own marriage, *One Word More*. Even in these cases, however, there tends to be a subversive undercurrent; as suggested in Chapter 1, *One Word More* serves to subtly undermine E.B.B.'s subjective poetry even as it praises her as "my moon of poets" (Browning, 2010, p. 614, l. 188). Similarly, *Love Among the Ruins* has, as we shall see, a structural and rhetorical subtext at odds with its outwardly transparent love theme.

These undercurrents might, then, suggest that Browning's obsession with domestic violence was a poetic response to his own internal psychological conflicts – particularly those that appear to have emasculated him, personally or professionally. Anthropologists have long understood that there are strong correlations between feelings of disempowerment and instances of domestic violence. Margrethe Silberschmidt's 2001 study of the implications for male identity and sexual behaviour of socioeconomic change amongst women in modern East Africa parallels the gendered aspects of Victorian industrialism. Susan Zlotnick noted, as we saw in Chapter 1, that this inherently "female" revolution "was rooted in a sense of endangered class and gender power" (Zlotnick, 2001, p. 15), whilst mechanisation and an emergent female labour force removed men from the centre of social and economic history. The arts were doubly endangered, as they also came under attack from the masculine discourse response to this sense of marginalisation, epitomised by Bentham and the utilitarian movement. In East Africa, Silberschmidt similarly foregrounds the importance of increasing female contributions to socioeconomic change and remarks that "the patriarchal system resides precisely in the fact that male authority requires a material base" (Silberschmidt, 2001, p. 657) . The resultant

behaviour is both physically and sexually assertive to the point of abuse, since these elements are important aspects of masculine self-esteem. The fear that female independence is a threat is therefore met with more or less controlling behaviour on the part of the male. This translates into violent or near-violent contexts where "The code of honor is associated with an agency for self-defense against enchroachment from the outside, and men are projected into an active role, the role of controller and aggressor" (Silberschmidt, 2001, p. 665). Silberschmidt's study of masculine behaviour and attitudes is far from unique – indeed such behaviour seems to be almost universal. H. Amaro, for example, links male self-esteem to the spread of H.I.V. (Amaro, 1995), whilst Dibyesh Anand connects sexual violence specifically to Hindu nationalism in India, which he defines as a specifically masculine discourse (Anand, 2007). In each case, collective and individual emasculation is directly related to aggressive attempts to reassert masculine identity, which can also involve violence and intimidation.

The implications for poetry written at an apparently similar historical moment are profound because they allow us to read the forceful negotiation of gender identity into almost every conflict situation that we encounter. To summarise the examples used earlier, in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the monk's assertive language includes "violent" expletives specifically inaccessible to women (Lakoff, 1973, p. 49), whilst masculine normative excuses for his promiscuity make up defining aspects of his character. All behaviour is permissible for him so long as there is "for the church / A pretty picture gained" (Browning, 2010, p. 506, ll. 389-90). Lippi becomes a man *because* of his licentious behaviour and his ability to translate it into material form. In contrast, *Andrea del Sarto* is emasculated because he allows his wife, Lucrezia, to dominate him to the extent that his material output is weakened and his talents wasted. His inability or unwillingness to assert himself violently is indicative of his poor character; he becomes entirely passivised and is impotently "grown peaceful as old age to-night" (Browning, 2010, p. 402, l. 243). He is, too, further materially emasculated as he admits

"I have labored somewhat in my time / And not been paid profusely" (Browning, 2010, p. 403, ll. 253-254). These contrastive examples also show that Browning saw masculinity as intimately connected with rhetorical assertiveness or violence, and linked impotence to passivity. This view tacitly supports the psychological apparatus that underpins domestic abuse, which, by nature, is supported by rhetoric and rhetorical energy (as we shall see in the following examples), together with physical action and a material manifestation – pain or flight.

The violent fantasies of the two short poems, *Life in a Love* and *Love in a Life* demonstrate that Browning did appear to be intimately – perhaps personally – acquainted with the psychology of unhealthy material and physical obsession. Not only are these elements characteristic of domestic abuse scenarios, but they are also, as Silberschmidt suggests, part of the way in which patriarchal systems create male self-esteem (Silberschmidt, 2001, p. 665). These poems might thus conceivably be interpreted as twisted forms of the poet's own gendered wish-fulfilment, played out in territory where lost power is first rhetorically and then physically regained. However, there is limited value in overplaying speculative biographical interpretations when contemporary records unambiguously foreground these troubling themes as historically contingent realities. Domestic violence was not only Browning's private fantasy, even if that is a plausible interpretation of his work: it was also widespread and problematic in Victorian society. Browning himself obviously intended us to view these as objective constructions where the poet "chooses to deal with the doings of men" and where "the describer is dispensed with" (Browning in Pettigrew & Collins, 1981, p. 1003). The "doings of men" is a plural formulation, suggesting that the perspectives involved will inevitably be distinct from each other, and, crucially, also from the poet himself. It also supports the argument that men are agents – hence "doings" – which again allows us to read violent potential into every rhetorical situation in which masculinity is asserted through action.

Representation as prevention

In 1853, the breakaway Peelite faction of the Conservative Party proposed the Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults upon Women and Children, which was passed in the same year and stipulated that physical assaults could be punished with up to six months in prison (Hammerton, 2002). This was one of a number of progressive Acts designed to protect women from violent husbands, although it was most likely founded on the basis of necessity, rather than idealism. John Stuart Mill suggested in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) that domestic violence was extremely common and included marital rape, which remained a grey area in the eyes of the law:

> [A husband] can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations.
>
> (Mill, 1991, p. 485)

The effect of Mill's essays, of such legislation and, importantly for our purposes, of literary representations of domestic violence, was the increased visibility of transgressive behaviour to the public gaze. As we suggested in Chapter 2, Foucault's interpretation of the gaze as a social and psychological construct resulted in a degree of self-regulatory behaviour: the effects of Panopticism were useful for the maintenance of political power. It is common, of course, to assume the gaze to be a destructive, damaging influence as it is when directed at the female nude body, for example, in Renaissance painting. However, self-regulatory behaviour is also an essential mechanism of hegemonic social control, and, if harnessed correctly, also has the power to protect. Accordingly, as Hammerton puts it, the "public gaze could not help but expose common patterns of marital misconduct…[and] focussed on the darker side of conjugal life […] which was inconsistent with the middle-class domestic idyll" (Hammerton, 2002, p. 1). The consequence for the literary establishment was an increasing recognition that representations of domestic violence, in contributing to the energetic political will of the

Peerites and subsequent Victorian governments, were *not* in themselves morally transgressive, but could potentially serve as preventive tools with genuine social and domestic benefits.

How, then, could Browning have been so critically misunderstood if his violent poems were in fact a contribution to this altogether impressive, progressive social project? Were his critics quietly angry that he had exposed them and drawn attention to their own dark practices? The issue, according to Gregory, was rather more complicated than that, and once again it is Browning's conception of objective poetry that is central here. Whilst Nancy's murder in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and later Dempster's wife-beating in Eliot's "Janet's Repentance" (1857) brought domestic violence into the Victorian reading room, Gregory argues that these descriptions are of an entirely different character to Browning's psychologically realistic poems. The first problem she raises is that Browning wrote poetry, not prose. The Victorians, it seems, could not escape from the Romantic tendency to require subjective identification with the lyric voice. Secondly, Gregory suggests that it was Browning's pitilessly direct psychological treatment of sexual violence and obsession that cowed his readers, who tended to expect that "Representations of sexual conflict in novels show it to be particularly troubling and mysterious, a subject demanding delicate handling or oblique treatment" (Gregory, 2000, p. 493). Gregory suggests that contemporary treatments of the same material lacked "any real intensity" (Gregory, 2000, p. 493). Browning was, in other words, a little too outspoken for contemporary tastes.

The two complementary miniatures, *Love in a Life* and *Life in a Love* explore the psychological effects of domestic conflict with exactly this kind of "intensity". In the first of these, the lover stalks his house menacingly, looking for his lover as "Room after room, / I hunt the house through / We inhabit together" (Browning, 2005, p. 108, ll. 1-3). The persona's obsessive resolve builds slowly, but the early image of the "hunt" (l. 2) is chillingly suggestive.

Although the lover's intent never surfaces directly, his meticulous awareness of the house's interior and of his lover's movements within it serves to reconstruct the psychology of the stalker. He knows where she has touched the curtain and couch (l. 6), and pictures her movements with unnatural clarity, where "Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather" (l. 8). The second stanza reveals the extent of his obsession; this is no brief run through the house, but a thorough and relentless search where he feels compelled to "Range the wide house from the wing to the centre" (l. 12), even if it takes the whole day (l. 14). His childish delight is reflected in the energetic sense of the adventure of the "quest" (l. 14). This word in particular is an odd lexical choice for a distraught lover, which lends credence to the suspicion that he is somewhat deranged of mind. The persona's sense of excitement only increases as night falls and he imagines "Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!" (l. 16). An infectious rhetorical energy beguiles the reader who cannot help but share in the lover's enthusiasm, albeit momentarily – a response that would doubtless have proved disturbing for readers accustomed to the aforementioned habit of Romantic lyric identification.

The second poem of the pair, *Life in a Love*, is, perhaps not surprisingly, a mirror image of the first. Although its subject matter is conceptually similar, the beloved is in this case present as interlocutor, and the promise of real violence is therefore much closer at hand. The opening lines are imagined as a reply to words spoken by the lover, which gives them directness and relocates the sense of menace from potential and theoretical (as in *Love in a Life*) to actual and present:

> Escape me?
> Never –
> Beloved!
> While I am I, and you are you,
> So long as the world contains us both,
> Me the loving and you the loth,
> While the one eludes, must the other pursue.
> (Browning, 2005, p. 109, ll. 1-7)

The coolly logical argument in line 7 temporarily dissociates the persona and the lover from their own independent identities and instead depersonalises them, transposing them into generic entities in a hunt-like scenario, first "the one" and then "the other" (l. 7). We have already seen how Browning used composite or representative figures to symbolise values, conditions or generic personality traits. As discussed in Chapter 2, Lucrezia del Fede becomes an amalgamation of aesthetic and feminine weaknesses in *Andrea del Sarto*. Similarly, the courtly female lover of *A Toccata of Galuppi's* becomes pluralised, one of the many "Dear dead women" (Browning, 2005, p. 375, l. 43), and thus comes to embody the implicit assumption that somehow *all* women are similar. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg proposed the existence of a hierarch of literary characters who might be either aesthetic, illustrative or mimetic. They believed that characters "should be understood in terms of the kind of function that they perform" (Paris, 2003, p. 220). Browning's male characters are accordingly afforded the full range of a psychological representation and are therefore generally mimetic. Conversely, female characters are frequently objectified, or become composite "illustrative" or "aesthetic" figures with no independent meaning beyond themselves, except in relation to their contrastive or supportive function.

In the context of this poem, Herbert Kelman's work on dehumanisation is particularly interesting. He defines human identity as contingent on the state of being "an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices" (Kelman, 1976, p. 301), and furthermore dependent on its relationship to a distinct community. If the rhetorical agent manages to justify or represent the object's loss of either individual or communal aspects of identity, he may then freely resort to violence since all moral constraints have been removed. In both of these short poems, Browning simulates the practised mechanics of dehumanisation. The contexts are in each case conspicuously devoid of community. *Love in a Life* is claustrophobically self-contained within the boundaries of the house that is searched over and

over by the obsessive lover. Similarly, in *Life in a Love*, the menacing evocation of "fate" (l. 9) eludes to the inevitability of being found, and no matter to where in the world the lover escapes, the pursuer will never give up. Not only does the victim have no independency and agency, but her community too is useless to her.

Kelman's theory of dehumanisation is reflected in the syntax of *Life in a Love.* The persona gradually strips away the semantic referent of the personal and possessive pronouns, working subtly to progressively deny the pursued lover a sense of her own identity. Initially, the male persona engages directly with her, replying to her implied words with short, clipped statements, "Escape me? / Never- / Beloved" (ll. 1-3). From this position, he affirms her independent identity and even emphasises it explicitly – "you are you" (l. 4). This rhetorical strategy is quickly undermined though, as the persona begins to avoid personal pronouns altogether and to generalise both the addressee and the self in line 7 ("the one" and "the other"), before returning to assert his own agency as "I" in the rest of the poem with almost no reference to his lover. There is only one subsequent address to the woman as an independent being, and even then it is not in direct or explicit reference to her own individuality but rather her (possessive) relationship to an ambiguous, indefinable location, "your farthest bound" (l. 16). The start of the chase involves two individuals; its commencement and conclusion describe only one distinct "I" figure alongside another anonymised or dehumanised presence whose sole purpose is to be pursued. The persona's own identity becomes, in the closing lines of the poem, entirely self-referential, as he claims "I shape me" (l. 20), which in turns serves to complete the circle of dehumanisation – he has written (or spoken) his lover as an individual out of the poem.

There is, in addition, one particular moment that is disturbingly ambiguous in its reference to violence and pursuit. The persona refers to an oblique, generalised act of raising oneself up after a fall,

To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And baffled, get up to begin again, -
So the chace takes up one's life, that's all.
(Browning, 2005, p. 109, ll. 13-15)

It is the absence of personal pronouns that invites ambiguity; although we assume that it is the pursuer who must laugh and rise again after symbolic defeats in the quest for his fated goal, we might equally be witness to fantasies of violence visited upon the pursued woman. Similarly, there is a logical discontinuity in line 15, where the all-consuming activity of the persona - all of his "life" - is inappropriately downplayed, almost as an afterthought, "that's all" (l. 15).

Browning's approach to implied domestic violence or threat is subtle in these poems, but quite clearly resolves its tensions within the psychological bounds of the persona's obsessive energy. The dramatic monologue form specifically allowed Browning to enter into the workings of a disturbed mind, and in so doing the restrained but forceful use of rhetorical strategies became available from the first person perspective, allowing him to move beyond the "delicate handling or oblique treatment" (Gregory, 2000, p. 493) that characterised contemporary novelistic depictions of the same subject matter.

The Violence of Rhetoric

Browning's approach to the representation of domestic violence in lyric form grew out of not only the subject matter itself, but also a conscious strategy to reassert the central position of poetry. As discussed in Chapter 1, Browning was acutely aware of the marginalisation of the arts by the Benthamite masculine discourse of the utilitarian movement. Gregory proposes that the dramatic monologue was Browning's attempt "to prove the lyric voice capable of confronting modern social problems" (Gregory, 2000, p. 494). The forceful conviction required to make such a statement also had to be realised in rhetorical assertiveness, so that this aspect of masculine identity – the manipulation and subjugation of a doubting audience – was foregrounded specifically for the purpose of defending poetry as a whole. It is possible to

speculate, as might a psychoanalytic critic, that this defence of poetry is simply a form of sublimation, which, according to Freudian principles, displaces sexual desire, longing and power and transfers them to aspects of cultural or religious expression (Freud, 2002).

Dorothy Mermin's colourful formulation, that Browning "consider[ed] the exercise of imaginative power as a form of covert aggression" (Mermin, 1983, p. 49), effectively captures the essential conceptual inseparability of Browning's views on poetry and his sexually aggressive rhetoric. Gregory links this specifically with Browning's aforementioned attempts to reassert the position of poetry at a time when it was losing ground both culturally (to the novel) and socially (to utilitarian priorities). She claims therefore that Browning used the aggressive potential of his dramatic personae to resituate psychological conditions as historical aspects of human identity, where "speakers […] firmly locate themselves historically and rhetorically" (Gregory, 2000, p. 494). Thus, with a strong objective basis in history, the persona imposes himself violently on the audience who must (perhaps unwillingly) accept the force of his rhetorical energy. The fact the Browning rarely allows us to separate physical and rhetorical violence emphasises the strength and desperation of his feelings about lyric authority and its effects on inner psychological states, "as the very act of self-expression exacts a physical toll" (Gregory, 2000, p. 495).

A particularly pertinent expression of the inseparability of the physical and rhetorical realms can be found in the outwardly transparent love lyric, *Love Among the Ruins.* "Love is best!" (Browning, 2010, p. 539, l. 84) concludes the besotted lover here, but we are never convinced by the simple choices that the poem seems to propose between binary pairs: the pastoral landscape and the ruined city; complication and simplicity; past and present. Browning's conception of masculinity, as we have seen repeatedly, privileged the active over the passive. Given this conceptual background, it appears rather contradictory that the persona of *Love Among the Ruins* would conclude that masculine action – war, glory, violence and the

pursuit of gold – is only transient, "whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!" (Browning, 2005, p. 4, l. 81), at least alongside the lasting tranquillity of love. Strange it is, and indeed most unlikely. For one thing, we must remind ourselves that this is a persona, rather than Browning himself, and therefore that it is the rhetorical thrust and the intricacies of poetic design that are more likely to communicate the poet's meaning than the transparent words of the subjective poet. Irony, as Laura Haigwood noted, was part of the quality that distinguished Browning's objective poetry from that of his wife (Haigwood, 1986, p. 102), and indeed it is hardly presumptuous to judge that a man's heart is where his treasure lies, so to speak:

> Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
> Struck them tame;
> And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
> Bought and sold.
> (Browning, 2010, p. 535, ll. 33-36)

The persona is ostensibly critical of the "Lust of glory" (l. 33), and its transient superficiality is not materially different from "shame" (l. 32). But if we look closer, we might discover that the typically Victorian disapproval of such frivolities is subtly undermined. As we saw in Chapter 2, Browning was a "Mannerist" poet at heart who tended to see style and virtuosity – the surface realm – as essential and as inherently valuable as any deeper levels that might exist beneath it. The persona's discomfort at condemning all "the gold" (l. 36) is emphasised by the poetic form: the rhyming couplets float in a strange state of unbalance as long trochaic lines are answered by clipped, three syllable responses. It is as if the persona is enraptured by what he describes only to remember that he must distance himself from it. The short, almost taciturn lines, "Struck them tame" (l. 34) and "Bought and sold" (l. 36) are unconvincing; not only do they lack the beauty and musicality of the longer lines, but they are also, in themselves, rhetorically violent. There is no sense of negotiation or reflection, but instead Browning creates a feeling of almost utilitarian economy: we encounter interruption – "As they crop-" (l. 6), scepticism – "(So they say)" (l. 8), bald and rough binary oppositions – "Peace or war" (l. 12),

and expressions of enclosure or capture – "Bounding all" (l. 30) and "Shut them in" (l. 82). These lines are all functional rather than aesthetic, which suggests that the persona's commitment to his conclusions – that peace, love and tranquillity are preferable to conquest, violence and glory – is predominately for the sake of appearances.

Structurally, the poem also provides certain clues that the persona's sympathies are not quite what they might outwardly appear. Browning's awareness of the symmetrical design of his poems often led him to embed conceptually significant moments at central points. In this poem, such a moment exists in lines 42-44 of the seventh stanza (the poem has fourteen stanzas). Here we encounter the surprising revelation of a hidden tower that, in its time "Sprang sublime" (l. 46):

> While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
> Through the chinks –
> (Browning, 2005, p. 3, ll. 43-44)

At this structurally decisive moment, Browning places another emerging image – like Lippi in *Incoronazione della Vergine* – which reveals the true nature of the moment. The juxtaposition of the domestic - the "houseleek" (l. 43) - with the beautiful and natural - the "head of blossom" (l. 43) - is somehow destabilised by the anthropomorphic, grotesque mischief of the "winks" (l. 43). Here, we encounter what could be interpreted as a joke from which the lover is excluded. This moment also reflects the palpably *asymmetrical* nature of the poem's descriptive focus; though this is a love poem, the lover is relegated to the status of a mere afterthought as the magnificent "tower in ancient time" (l. 45) and the masculine action of the marauding charioteers and king (l. 59, 61) capture our attentions in a way that diminishes her, the "girl with eager eyes and yellow hair" (l. 57). Indeed, aside from one more oblique reference in stanza 12, the lover is sadly ignored as the persona energetically beguiles us with his barely disguised admiration for all the action and the masculine violence of a long forgotten, chivalrous past.

Love Among the Ruins subtly represents the point of convergence that Browning's representations of masculine violence upon the female body embodies. We have seen how his poetry was initially rejected by the literary establishment because it engaged explicitly with the psychological interior of sadists, violent manipulators and perpetrators of domestic violence in ways that contemporary novelistic representations did not. However, although it is tempting to suggest that Browning's violent poems are private fantasies connected to his threatened masculinity and drive to regain control lost in an age of increasing female agency, this view is altogether too simplistic. Furthermore, Browning's attempts to create a new kind of poetry, the objective dramatic monologue, eschews such an interpretation, which rather belongs to the Romantic age when poetry was seen as an "index to temperament" (Abrams, 1971, p. 241). The idea that the poet and his poetry are somehow commensurate was an idea that Browning specifically attempted to undermine precisely by focussing to the extent that he did on violence through first person constructions.

Victorian England was, as we have seen, beset by domestic violence. A combination of legislative measures on the one hand and a growing number of artistic representations on the other, may have had some preventive effects. Browning, though, cannot necessarily be credited with pure altruism in this respect. His intense examinations of psychological violence and manipulation were also part of his commitment to re-asserting the authority of the lyric at a time when its relevance to society and social issues was being fundamentally questioned. In addressing one of the most problematic of contemporary issues – one which struck at the very core of Victorian middle-class values – Browning effectively demonstrated the suitability of objective poetry for the task. In so doing, he utilised rhetorical language that was, by nature, forceful, energetic, masculine and manipulative. Thus, in serving one outwardly noble social purpose and bringing domestic gender conflict into the reading room more holistically than did any of his contemporaries, he also perhaps inadvertently perpetuated masculine rhetorical

assertiveness and the subjugation of female poetic constructions. In this respect, the realms of the literary and the physical, the rhetorical and the sexual, and the subjective and objective collide in his poetry of violence.

As a culmination of Browning's construction of gender, violence is both an unfortunate consequence and an underlying cause – a never-ending cycle of masculine dominance. As Elaine Scarry proposes in *The Body in Pain* (1985), pain (the physical manifestation of violence) and the imagination are fundamentally similar discursive areas of practice. In fact, as Scarry puts it, "The only state that is as anomalous as pain is the imagination" because "While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being wholly its objects. There is in imagining no activity, no 'state,' no experienceable condition or felt-occurrence separate from the objects" (Scarry, 1985, p. 162). With Browning, pain, whether through physical or psychological violence, is only made available to the reader through our engagement with his poetic imagination. As an objective poet, his enormous, genetic power over his imaginative material denies us access to his own interior states but instead allows his poetry to exist separate from subjectivity and only as "its objects". These objects, Browning's poetic constructions, can therefore stand freely on their own terms, unencumbered by the poet's presence. Domestic violence thus became for Browning the focal point of his new poetic world. It was, though, without doubt, still a resolutely masculine world.

Conclusion

When Browning, in 1889, committed his recitation of *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix* to Gouraud's Edison cylinder phonograph for posterity, he also implicitly demonstrated his awareness of the significance of the "instant made eternity" (Browning, 2005, p. 117, l. 109). As a poet and a man, Browning seemed acutely aware of his place in history. In the first of these roles, Browning was fully aware of Bentham's criticisms of his art as trivial, petty and useless – claims that are and have, prior to the fervent opposition of French feminists like Cixous, also been levelled at femininity. His response was to attempt to start a new historical-literary process, pioneering the extensive use of a form of poetry that eschewed the subjective, personal experience in favour of an objective, detached "dramatic" record – the dramatic monologue. Essentially fostering the distance between poet and persona, the monologue allowed Browning to enter into the psychology of his men and women in a way that would have been impossible for the Romantic poets whose work encouraged subjective identification with the poetic voice and was therefore seen as "an index to temperament" (Abrams, 1971, p. 241).

The focus on objectivity proved, unfortunately enough for Browning, to be somewhat of a double-edged sword. The monologue allowed sufficient detachment to explore historical personae intimately and to serve useful social purposes - drawing attention to domestic abuse, for example. There is, concurrently, a clearly masculine flavour to this appropriation of active-objective poetry – Browning "chooses to deal with the doings of men" (Browning in Pettigrew & Collins, 1981, p. 1003) – "men" being the operative word here. Conversely, the dramatic monologue also alienated the unprepared Victorian reader, still conceptually bound to the seemingly unbreakable synthesis between the poet's voice and psychology. Reading the demented, obsessive violence and threat of *Love in a Life* and *Life in a Love*, for example, the

Victorian reader would no doubt have feared for Browning's mental health, which perhaps explains the initially poor reception of his work (Gregory, 2000, p. 493).

If Browning approached history, in respect of the dramatic monologue, as a liberal and forward-thinking innovator, he simultaneously embodied, perpetuated and sanctioned an equally extensive range of conservative, patriarchal beliefs and practices which profoundly affected his construction of especially female identity. By its very nature, the dramatic monologue allowed one persona to dominate both the listener and any other entities described by them; it is a form that structurally silences all but the speaker – disturbing power indeed in the possession of unstable or morally dubious figures. In essence or theory, the monopoly that the persona enjoys is not necessarily ideologically hostile to women. However, as Browning practiced it, the dramatic monologue did indeed tend to silence and pacify women. Very few of the personae of *Men and Women* are female, and even the few who are given voice tend to do so on masculine premises. In some cases, they might deliberately subordinate themselves and bow to male authority (as is the case in *Any Wife to Any Husband*, for example), or else they might pliantly offer themselves up to the fulfilment of male fantasies of power and heroism, as in *A Woman's Last Word*, where the lover yearns for a man to "Be a god and hold me" (Browning, 2005, p. 20, l. 21). In effect, these constructions allowed Browning to create female psychology as he saw it from a male perspective, and therefore more closely resemble masculine wish-fulfilment – the desire for an Andromeda-like damsel to rescue – than genuinely mimetic representations of female psychology.

Browning's patriarchal conservatism emerges particularly forcefully from his extensive use of Renaissance themes and paintings. In the Mannerist art of the fifteenth century especially, Browning appears to have found a historical movement that, to him, mirrored most closely the priorities and concerns of the Victorian industrial age. Yet, intrinsically, this was not an age of liberation for women – indeed quite the opposite. Women had been systematically

shorn of sexual and political power in Renaissance Italy just as, in Victorian England, their domestic incarceration similarly diminished them, despite the increasing importance of women in the material processes of industrial production. In art, Mannerist painters unclothed the female body, and this male gaze resulted in psychologically damaging objectification. Politically, though, this was a useful tool allowing men to control female behaviour through the practice of Foucault's Panopticism – the self-regulatory gaze of the female upon her own body in accordance with masculine conceptions of it. Thus, as *A Woman's Last Word* ably demonstrates, the female begins to see herself through male eyes.

Browning's interest in Mannerism was somewhat complicated by its stylistic tenets though, which undermined its role as a predominately hegemonic patriarchal apparatus. The Mannerists were full of ostentatious bravura, and Browning's own distorted style, in mirroring characteristically Mannerist figures such as the *figura serpentinata*, in fact bore striking resemblances to the transgressive *feminine* style of writing that Julia Kristeva developed out of Cixous's *écriture feminine* (although, of course, only to an extent). Simultaneously, Browning shared a typically Mannerist disregard for primary sources – artistic material would normally be filtered through a "refining screen of preconceptions" (Shearman, 1967, p. 58), rather than being directly representative of nature or the subject itself. This "secondariness", which Browning seemed admittedly rather embarrassed about (as his letter to the unfortunate Mrs. FitzGerald demonstrates), was nonetheless rather useful for him, as it allowed him to create composite figures. Accordingly, the figure of Lucrezia del Fede from *Andrea del Sarto* serves as a meeting point for Browning's various prejudices – about aggressive women, perfection in art and even his neighbour's unfaithful wife. The result was damning for Lucrezia, and this particular aspect of the Mannerist sensibility appears to have fostered and accentuated Browning's various masculine fears, whilst simultaneously providing him with an outlet for the silencing and distortion of powerful women.

Ultimately, *Men and Women* is a fascinating collection because it exists in liminal historical, cultural and imaginative territory and embodies a vast range of contradictions. Browning's poetry is objective, but his tastes and background caused him to admire and even privilege the subjective mode of the "seer", whose personality is "the very radiance and aroma" of the poem (Browning in Houghton & Stange, 1968, pp. 336-337). The dramatic monologue allowed him to dissociate his own poetic voice from his personae, but yet he seemed personally drawn to greater synthesis with his models, the literary and mythological heroes Shelley and Perseus – so much so that he appears to have constructed a narrative from his own life that effectively bound him to them. His desire to be a hero, though, was undermined by certain emasculating aspects to his relationship with his wife; her success, age, and his perhaps damagingly competitive notion of complete romantic dedication to her, which effectively silenced him as a poet for the majority of their married life. Structurally, Browning's poems allowed him to perpetuate a patriarchal ideology, and his perspectives on women and the hero's relationship to them are resolutely masculine. Stylistically, though, they demonstrate distinctly "feminine" linguistic tendencies. The list goes on - in drawing attention to domestic violence, for example, we might ask whether Browning was usefully engaged in contemporary social political debate, or whether he entered into the psychology of that violence with disturbingly gleeful abandon, clearly well aware that the approach was off-putting for contemporary readers. At the same time as we admire Browning's directness, we cannot help but wonder whether his primary motivation for creating a poetry of domestic violence was built on less elevated foundations. Was Browning motivated by a selfish desire to prove the brilliant effectiveness of the dramatic monologue, which could inspire feelings of empathy even for abhorrent criminals, or did he use his poetry to compensate for and react to his own personal, literary or social sense of emasculation?

The answers to these questions and others raised earlier appears to be a conglomeration of "yes", "maybe" and "both" – the elusiveness of gender, gender representation and the impenetrable masks of the dramatic personae of *Men and Women*,work together to create a collection that is truly "on the way somewhere […,] situated between two kinds of excitement" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 1). It is testament to Browning's commitment to the objective mode that we can never be sure about origins, meanings or intentions. *Men and Women*, as a collection, demonstrates above all else that exploring the very contradictions themselves can be both the journey and the destination. Gender, as Browning represented it, is not simply a binary opposition between physical or figurative male and female, but is in fact a complex and contradictory discursive arena of thought that can be explored from multiple angles and with multiple voices. We may or may not agree with the voices that we hear, but the dramatic monologue forces us to engage with them and in so doing elicits an emotional and intellectual response to issues far beyond the scope of any individual perspective. In allowing us this response, Browning's greatest achievement in *Men and Women* appears to have been to create poetry that leaves the poet and the persona behind and engages us, as men and women, with the issues of the poem directly.

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