

An Ambivalence of Judgement and Sympathy: Introspecting Browning's 'Bishop'

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Abstract

Robert Browning's poems have always remained an enigma as they showcase not only the problematized aspects of the protagonists' nature, but also captures the ambivalence and dichotomy that is bound to rise in the mind of the reader regarding their changing perception of the protagonist. This paper attempts to analyse the subliminal problematics of one of the most famous dramatic monologues by Browning, 'The Bishop orders his tomb at Saint Praxed's Church' and bring to the forefront the problematic dynamic of the readers' relationship with the dying Bishop in the poem.

The key issue in Browning's poems, as Robert F. Garratt notes, is the distinct and deliberate strategy to have a character play a character in order to develop rhetoric of persuasion. In this regard, the dramatic monologue pits a character against a situation, which demands that the character fight for psychological survival. The distinguishing feature of this development is the strategy of the speaker aimed at duping or convincing his auditor of a certain image consistent with the speaker's world view.

'*The Bishop Orders his Tomb*' is the death-bed speech of a Renaissance bishop, not concerned with salvation of his soul, but with orders for his own costly, sumptuous tomb. Although he is supposedly a celibate bishop, it quickly becomes clear that he is addressing his sons, the product of a long-term relationship with an illicit mistress.

As many commentators have noted, Browning's poetry always commits itself to religious questions. "St. Praxed's" is, of course, about a bishop's desire to convert himself eternally into living stone. He wishes "to lie through centuries, / And hear the blessed mutter of the mass, / And see God made and eaten all day long, / And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste / Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke"

It might appear at first that the monologue's intention is primarily satirical. From Browning's firmly Protestant point of view, it is an examination of the decadence and worldly excess of the Roman Catholic Church in the Renaissance.

The title introduces the irony of the entire poem. Usually a bishop is a man selected for that office because he is confirmed in his spirituality. The Bishop of Browning, however, has spent his life acquiring possessions that might establish, not his spiritual, but his material eminence among men. "At St. Praxed's Church" heightens the irony, because the church dedicated to a virgin martyr noted for her simplicity of life becomes the deathbed of a corrupt man and the seat of a projected splendid tomb.

Browning indeed echoes Macaulay's portrayal of Pope Leo X with his portrayal of the Bishop of St. Praxed's Church. Like Macaulay's "lovely women . . . horses, newly-discovered manuscripts . . . good judges of Latin compositions . . . and of statues," Browning's Bishop revels in the delight that is "the serious business" of his life:

"And have I not St. Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek
manuscripts.

And mistresses with great smooth marbly
limbs? –

That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,

Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's
every word". (II. 73-77)

With a portrait of a sixteenth-century Roman Bishop, Browning may more clearly juxtapose Christian and Pagan traditions. Thus the "Jew's head" in "St Praxed's" is aligned with a "lump" of "lapis lazuli". Representations of John the Baptist's severed head had a rich tradition in the pictorial arts from the Renaissance through Browning's time.

In ordering his tomb, the organizing principle behind Browning's poem, the Bishop in effect parodies the Lord's command to Moses to build him a sanctuary: "According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle" (Exodus 25.9).

In *The Bishop Orders His Tomb*, our judgment is mainly historicized, because the bishop's sins are not extraordinary but the universally human venalities couched, significantly for the historian, in the predilections of the Italian Renaissance. Thus, the bishop gives vent to materialism and snobbery by planning a bigger and better tomb than his clerical rival's. This poem can be read as a portrait of the age, our moral judgment of the bishop depending upon our moral judgment of the age.

Ruskin praised the poem for its historical validity: "It is nearly all that I said of the Central Renaissance in thirty pages of *The Stones of Venice* put into as many lines"; but being no friend of the Renaissance, this is the spirit of the age he conceived Browning to have caught: "it's worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin."

And yet for all Browning's directed satire at his St. Praxed's Bishop, the Bishop still elicits our sympathy. As Elizabeth Barrett noted after reading Browning's manuscript, "This is a wonderful poem I think and classes with those works of yours which show most power . . . most unquestionable genius in the high sense. You force your reader to sympathize positively in his glory in being buried!"

The Bishop's speech seems a wonderful baroque celebration of sex, language, colour, ritual and the sensuous beauty of marble and precious stones:

"Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the
ripe

As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty
pulse."

"And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray

Horses for ye, and brown Greek
manuscripts,

And mistresses with great smooth marbly
limbs?"

The combination of villian and aesthete creates an especially strong tension in *The Bishop Orders His Tomb*, where the dying Renaissance bishop reveals his venality and shocking perversion of Christianity together with his undeniable taste for magnificence:

"Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,

Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,

Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast
. . ."

and again in *The Laboratory* where the Rococo court lady is much concerned with the colour of the poison she buys and would like

"To carry pure death in an earring, a
casket,

A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!"

Browning himself appeared to embrace something of his Bishop's "sensual" religious code as he entered his character. Browning's Bishop argues for spiritual meaning invested in physical experience.

As Browning's Mr. Sludge memorably puts it: Religion's all or nothing; it's no mere smile O' contentment, sigh of aspiration, sir - No quality o' the finelier-tempered clay Like its whiteness or its lightness; rather, stuff O' the very stuff, life of life, and self of self. I tell you, men won't notice; when they do, They'll understand. (Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium,')

The "sympathy" and recognized "glory" that the Bishop evokes rests ironically in his unapologetic aestheticism: his embrace of the "very stuff, life of life, and self of self." Browning uses his technique of dramatic monologue to explore - as he does elsewhere in his monologues - faith and doubt. In "*Fra Lippo Lippi*" we see once again Browning's sympathy for sensualism. Lippo suggests the importance of recognizing "The value and significance of flesh," to see, experience, and revise it in art. Lippo advocates "The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades, / Changes, surprises".

Besides exposing and satirizing the religious corruptions, then, Browning's Bishop also underscores a sensual appeal that transcends the questions of ecclesiastical debate. "Life is for action," writes Newman, "If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith."

At the beginning of the poem the bishop is strong in his self-image of one who commands men: his rhetoric superb

and his artistic taste admirable. Accustomed to the good life, the bishop practices a Christianity which is human and material rather than spiritual. As William Whitla has indicated, the bishop has a life much in common with that of the Duke of Ferrara. Though the bishop evidences much of the Duke's control, he also shows spontaneity and a zest for life. He has had a mistress, and managed to avoid the complications which would have been difficult for his clerical office. He has obviously enjoyed the artistic achievement of this world while posing as one committed to the spiritual life of the next. As the poem proceeds, however, it seems clear that the most interesting and important thing in the bishop's life is his intense rivalry with Gandolf, another member of the clergy. The bishop particularly enjoys the sweet taste of victory he has won from Gandolf in their contention over the woman in the poem. In calling his sons around his bedside, the bishop delights in the reflections of his past life, when he lived fully in spite of his holy office.

There is however another side to the bishop, which is especially apparent at this moment in his life. He is clearly desperate, ordering and designing his tomb so that it will appear more lavish than Gandolf's, and thus assure for him the final victory in a life-long rivalry. The bishop is worried though, since Gandolf has already managed the choicest spot in the church.

“Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my
care;

Shrewd was that snatch from out the
corner South

He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!”

The Bishop then is necessarily most descriptive in his demands for jewels, marble, and the carvings which are to go on the tomb. And despite the fact that critics have praised the bishop's brilliance and vitality, this obsession to defeat Gandolf, even in death, pushes him unlike the Duke into the environment of non-control. In the struggle between the Will (to best Gandolf) and the Mask (control for manipulation), the bishop reveals his dependence on other people. For, as Langbaum has shown, the bishop's fear is that his tomb will not meet Gandolf's grand challenge. In order to assure this the bishop attempts every kind of persuasion, including the threat that he will turn over his villas to the Pope. The persuading, or the arguing, which thus far has been typical of the strategy of the double mask, develops to the point of such enthusiasm that the bishop's very speech loses control.

The picture of the bishop at the end of the poem is one that the Duke or Andrea would point to as a demonstration of what happens when one loses sight of the art of

persuasion. Obsessed with his chances for one last triumph, the bishop loses restraint and decorum, and any attempt to win his sons over is lost. Sensing his failure (ll. 113-118), he retires to the memory of his mistress, and in the closing line of the poem he makes one last stab at Gandolf: "As still he envied me, so fair she was!"

In the process of his defeat, the bishop demonstrates a vitality for life, art, and literature, and a human quality which the Duke, or Andrea, never manages. In the early stages of the poem with his requests for the ornate tomb, the bishop exhibits the command and the power which comes with his mask. He would be placed in Yeats's Phase Twenty with Napoleon, as a man of ambition, and with Shakespeare, whose mask allowed him the facility of images. This phase is typified by a breaking up of the personality and a need for dramatization. Gradually as the mask is dropped the bishop, true to his phase, is seen as less interesting; he is a pathetic being, helpless, completely decadent, deriving his only source of comfort from the past.

Browning's "St. Praxed's," rife with ironic analogies to apostolic sacraments, finds a further life in its negotiation of the Bishop's sensual approach to life and death. The true "genius" Elizabeth Barrett identifies in the poem, likely rests in "St. Praxed's" ahistorical concern with the splendid contradictions inherent in human nature.

The issues raised in the poem are critical human issues and we as readers have a certain understanding of Browning's stake in them. By a certain subtle technique on the poet's part, which calls for the strategy of double masks, the interest in the problem becomes more important than the interest in the poet. Once we recognize the conscious attempt on Browning's part to dramatize those problems, to let the character, or persona, loose to scramble and to protect himself, we will have a notion of the essence of the character, the mask, and of course, the poem itself.

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