

## **The Influence of Robert Southey's "The Origin of the Rose" on Robert Browning's "The Heretic's Tragedy"\***

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*Men and Women*, originally published in two volumes in 1855, is Robert Browning's best-known collection of poetry. It contains many of Browning's most frequently anthologized and popular poems, including the major dramatic monologues "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Andrea del Sarto." However, it also contains many lesser-known poems. One of the strangest of these is "The Heretic's Tragedy," the origins and meaning of which remain obscure. It is the contention of this article that a major and previously unidentified source for the poem is Robert Southey's 1798 poem "The Origin of the Rose," which throws new light on Browning's depiction of, among other things, Roman Catholicism in his poetry of the period. In particular, "The Heretic's Tragedy" seems to offer a deliberate inversion of the situation and imagery used by Southey in the earlier poem.

### **The Immolation of Jacques de Molay**

The historical event that lies behind Browning's poem took place in France in the early fourteenth century. On March 18, 1314, two men were burned alive on a small island in the Seine in central Paris. The men had been among the most powerful in France, and indeed Europe: they were Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, and Geoffroy de Charnay, Master of Normandy for the same organization. Earlier that day both men had been condemned to life imprisonment for a variety of crimes; however, both had subsequently protested their innocence, enraging the French king, Philip IV, who demanded their immediate execution. The men were duly bound to a stake and slowly burned to death before a crowd. We are told they bore their grim ordeal with considerable fortitude: according to a contemporary monkish chronicler, "[t]hey were seen to be so prepared to sustain the fire with easy mind and will that they brought from all who saw them much admiration and surprise for the constancy of their death and final denial" (Nangis). Their courage seems to have greatly impressed the witnesses to their execution, many of whom apparently took the rapid subsequent deaths of both Philip IV and the Pope as evidence of divine displeasure at this injustice (Barber 285).

The burnings of de Molay and de Charnay represented the final destruction of the once formidable Grand Order of the Knights Templar, which had been founded in Jerusalem in 1119, initially to defend the "holy sites" of Christianity. The Order had grown immensely wealthy and powerful in the intervening centuries, and unsavoury rumours had long since begun to circulate among its enemies about grotesque and heretical ceremonial practices that the Templars allegedly enjoyed in secret, including idolatry, spitting on the crucifix, and even cannibalism. Whether motivated by genuine pious disgust at these rumours or an opportunistic desire to seize the Order's enormous

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wealth and eliminate a threat—or a combination of the two—the French king, Philip IV, ordered the mass arrest of all Templars in France in October 1307 (Barber 39-40). Five years later, its wealth appropriated, the order was officially dissolved by Papal decree.

It is the burning of de Molay (de Charnay is not mentioned in the poem) that forms the subject of Browning's "The Heretic's Tragedy." Perhaps in response to the so-called Papal aggression of 1850, in which Pope Pius IX provoked considerable protestant anger by setting up (or, as he would have argued, restoring) a Roman Catholic hierarchy of dioceses in England and Wales, the nonconformist Browning wrote a poem that satirically depicts one of the most notorious episodes in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

That Browning would write a poem that is, at least in part, anti-Catholic is not surprising. As Ian Jack, one of the editors of the Oxford edition of *Men and Women*, puts it, "[n]othing in his upbringing disposed Browning to a sympathy with Roman Catholicism" (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 208). This may be something of an understatement. George Clayton, the Brownings' minister at York Street Congregational Church in Walworth, which the poet attended with his parents as a child, was, according to John Maynard, "far from a fire-and-brimstone Calvinist preacher" and he at least "spoke decently" of the Catholic Church, unlike many of his protestant contemporaries (53, 54). Even so, he was still a very strong critic of the Church. Clayton's preaching seems to have had its effect on the adult Browning, even after he moved to live in a Catholic country: in Ian Jack's words, "nothing that he [later] saw of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy led him to admire it" (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 208). Barbara Melchiori claims that even though his "attitude to Catholicism, as to most things, was contradictory ... an attentive reading of [Browning's] works" reveals "the depth of bitter anti-Catholic prejudice underlying his frequent attempts at broadmindedness" ("Browning in Italy" 174). She argues that "[f]or Browning the whole history of the Catholic Church was based on corruption and ill-doing" ("Browning in Italy" 177). Jakob Korg agrees, claiming that Browning "certainly shared much of the casual anticlericalism common to Englishmen of Dissenting origins" and that he saw the history of the Catholic Church as marked primarily by "pride, corruption, casuistry, sensuality, and indifference to duty" (131, 132). As Maureen Moran points out, Browning demonstrates this through the frequent depiction of "weak and wicked priests" in his work (125).

Browning's tendency to depict the Church in negative terms in his work was noted—and challenged—during the poet's lifetime. In 1865, Browning seems to have been somewhat embarrassed when the Roman Catholic politician Charles Gavan Duffy accused him to his face, during an after-dinner chat at which John Forster was also present, of having "habitually disparaged" the Catholic Church in his poetry (Duffy 261). According to G. K. Chesterton's later account, the poet protested that his long poem "Bishop Blougram's Apology"—first published in *Men and Women*—while admittedly "intended for" the controversial English Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, Bishop of Westminster from 1850, was not intended to be a satirical or hostile portrait (188). Duffy himself claims in his own account of the incident that Browning also argued in his defence that "the allusions to the Catholic Church, which I complained of, were mostly attributable to local circumstances. He had lived in Italy, and he took his illustrations of life from the facts which fell under his notice there" (261). This is not an entirely convincing argument—Browning's poetry is noticeably lacking in corrupt vicars—and it seems likely that an uncomfortable Browning was simply trying to wriggle out of a

rather awkward situation. As Ian Jack puts it, this may simply have been “the special pleading of a habitually polite man” (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 209).

John Maynard takes a rather more sanguine view of the poet’s feelings about the Church, but even he concedes that if Browning “was not the fire-breathing anti-Papist he has sometimes been taken for, he had, both by upbringing and temperament, a natural distrust for institutional and authoritarian Catholic tradition” (313). Even so, as Maynard argues, Browning “was almost always critical of the religion, but this general impression needs to be balanced by recognition of his affection for Italian institutions and his ability to portray positive church figures, in which Christian goodness is stressed above the particular creed” (448). Maynard cites the priest Caponsacchi and Pope Innocent XII in *The Ring and the Book* as examples of the latter (448). Indeed, the Pope in this poem is “almost saintly” in his benevolence (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 209). Much earlier in Browning’s career, in his 1850 poem “Christmas-Eve,” his speaker ultimately rejects both Roman Catholicism and secular humanism in favour of dissenting Protestantism. However, as Michael V. DiMassa demonstrates, the language Browning uses in the poem to describe the Pope’s celebration of Midnight Mass in St Peter’s in Rome is deeply ambiguous rather than purely condemnatory, and “hints at an attitude rife with ambivalence and unresolved feelings” (201-204, 204). Andrew Tate goes even further, and argues that Browning’s speaker, despite the “anti-Catholic bias that his creator had not conquered,” even displays an “intuitive reverence” for the magnificent Roman spectacle (39-53, 46). These critics perceive a sublimated admiration for Catholic ritual—in this poem, at least. David J. DeLaura argues that Browning’s engagement with Catholic art displays a similar ambiguity, and that “in response to an aggressive neo-Catholic aesthetic that every fiber of his being rejected” the three “painter poems” in *Men and Women* attempt to reread Catholic art from a protestant perspective, rather than simply dismiss it (367-388, 383).

Even so, at the time Browning wrote “The Heretic’s Tragedy” (probably in Florence, around 1853-1855) recent political events would have served to confirm his deep-seated mistrust of the Church and its institutions. Both Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, had been enthusiastic supporters of the democratic movement that swept Italy (and much of Europe) during 1848. Even the initially liberal (and highly popular) Pope Pius IX was forced to flee Rome late in that politically tumultuous year. French troops crushed the subsequent short-lived “Roman Republic” the following year, and a somewhat embittered Pius returned to Rome in April 1850. He had now unsurprisingly lost his earlier liberalism and would grow increasingly reactionary throughout the rest of his lengthy reign (he would only die in 1878). Pius’s so-called Papal aggression of late 1850, coming very soon after the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1849 had led to massive Irish Catholic immigration to England, would arouse considerable (and often violent) anti-Catholic sentiment among English protestants: “[r]iots occurred outside many Catholic churches, and sometimes outside Anglican churches where the parson was a ritualist” (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 207).

“The Heretic’s Tragedy,” then, needs to be seen in the light of a historical context in which critics—including Browning—were accusing the Roman Catholic Church of growing increasingly aggressive and intolerant of dissent. Significantly, alongside “The Heretic’s Tragedy,” other poems in the collection *Men and Women* also depict the Church in a critical or satirical light. The lengthy “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” for example, is, at least in part, a satirical portrait of Nicholas Wiseman, the controversial Roman

Catholic Cardinal who became Archbishop of Westminster upon the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in 1850. In relation to “Fra Lippo Lippi,” according to the editors of the Oxford edition of *Men and Women*, “Browning did not sympathise with the censorious attitude to Lippi which was gaining ground at this time” in Catholic circles: the “conservative Roman Catholic critic, A. F. Rio,” for example, condemned Lippi’s supposed lack of “refinement and dignity” (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 33). As Barbara Melchiori demonstrates in *Browning’s Poetry of Reticence*, “Holy-Cross Day,” which satirically depicts the resentful Jews of Rome being forced to endure a Christian sermon (a practice not abolished until 1847, shortly after the Brownings’ arrival in Italy), attacks the Church’s shameful history of antisemitism (*Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* 90-113). In Melchiori’s words, “Browning was using the Jews as a stick with which to beat the Roman Catholics, and ... his point of view was due to his early Congregationalist training, the tenets of which, ever-present, underlie his later and more broad-minded reasoning” (*Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* 111-112). The editors of the Oxford edition of *Men and Women* argue convincingly that “Holy-Cross Day” “may be compared in the present collection to ‘The Heretic’s Tragedy’” (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 400). Like the latter poem, it satirically depicts hypocritical and oppressive (if rather less sadistic, at least) Roman Catholics “[w]hose life,” in the words of the recalcitrant Jews, “laughs through and spits at their creed” (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: ll. 101, 407). The editors point out that Browning deliberately chose to place the poems together in collections from his 1863 collection *Poetical Works* onwards, presumably due to this topical similarity (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 400, 442).

### **“The Heretic’s Tragedy”**

“The Heretic’s Tragedy” is an almost hallucinatory depiction of de Molay’s execution, in the form of a fictional theatrical performance, or “interlude,” supposed to be performed as part of Roman Catholic festivals in Ypres (now in Belgium) some two centuries after the event. De Molay’s agonizing final moments are described with what can only be described as sadistic relish, and the interlude depicts his execution as a bizarre combination of judicial execution, religious ritual, and popular entertainment in which the “pious” public can simultaneously celebrate God’s “justice,” denounce a sinner, and mock the agonized screams of a dying man.

“The Heretic’s Tragedy” has hitherto received relatively little critical attention. The poet Algernon Swinburne, no lover of Christianity, was apparently a very early admirer, “chanting” it to the “Old Mortality Society” in his student rooms at Oxford in 1858 (Gosse 39-40). G. K. Chesterton, by contrast, found it to be a disturbing read, describing it as “pious and horrible,” “weird and almost bloodcurdling” (137). The poet and critic Arthur Symons, however, thought very highly of it, calling it “perhaps the finest example in English poetry of the pure grotesque” and “[o]f all Browning’s medieval poems ... the most original, the most astonishing” (117, 116).

One of the odder features of a very odd poem is Browning’s striking employment of floral—specifically rose—imagery. The Latin prose epigraph to the poem, in which the interlude is named “Rosa Mundi; seu, fulcite me floribus” (Rose of the World; or, comfort me with flowers”) refers with gruesome irony to the “Rose of Sharon” in the Biblical Song of Solomon, which de Molay compares to Christ (*King James Bible*, Song of Solomon, 2.1). As the flames rise around him the doomed de Molay makes reference to this Biblical text in his defence, declaring that even in the face of physical destruction he

trusts in the essential Christian belief (which Browning certainly shared) that God will show mercy to those who call upon him. “God is good and the rest is breath,” he bravely declares to his mockers (l. 59). “Why else is the same [i.e. Christ] styled Sharon’s rose?” he asks desperately (l. 60). Christ, like the rose, is beautiful, and this beauty symbolizes his gentleness and mercy. “Once a rose, ever a rose, he saith” (l. 61).

The grim details of the mechanics of de Molay’s burning in the poem’s early stanzas may well owe a debt to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, which, as the editors of the Oxford Browning demonstrate in their discussion of Browning’s late poem “Fust and His Friends,” the poet knew well (Browning, *Poetical Works*: 9: 237-240). Early on, Foxe describes the martyrdom of “proto-Protestants” like Jan Huss, Jerome of Prague and the Waldenses, and de Molay’s situation in this poem—that of a Catholic being burned alive by his fellows, at least in part for his deeply merciful view of God—can be compared to theirs.

De Molay’s accusers, of course, reject his view of Christ as weak and contemptible. In Daniel Karlin’s words in *Browning’s Hatreds*, de Molay is doubly taunted—both in the interlude’s epigraph and by his accusers during his immolation—“with his pathetically mistaken hope that God will prove to be merciful and loving” (126-127). The “one” who “singeth”—a sort of solo vocalist in this grim interlude—cheerfully reminds the burning de Molay that, contrary to his desperate assertion, “there be roses and roses”: some sweet, yes, but some very bitter indeed (“roast gaily on!,” the singer mocks) (ll. 63-65). The only “rose” vouchsafed to poor de Molay in response to his call is a terrible one, the “coal-black giant flower of hell” of the flames that consume him (l. 79). Even beyond the agony of his final moments, he still has an eternity of torment in hell to look forward to, we are reminded: as he dies, his damned soul flares “forth into the dark” (l. 88). In this context, the Abbot’s final pious exclamation that concludes the interlude—“God help all poor souls lost in the dark!”—seems something of a sick joke (l. 89).

Barbara Melchiori points out that much of what she calls the “nightmarish quality” of the poem—for those familiar with the poet’s work, at least—springs from Browning’s dark “inversion” of several of his “habitual symbols” (*Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* 76-77). As Melchiori states, bees, honey, roses, lilies, and gold, all used in a positive fashion elsewhere in Browning’s work, are each negatively employed in the poem (77-79). However, Daniel Karlin points out that Browning’s particularly weird juxtaposition of the beautiful rose and the horrific immolation of a living human being may also have a *specific* origin. He suggests that Browning’s poem alludes to what he calls “the apocryphal biblical story” of “Zillah, the Jewish maiden falsely accused of devil-worship and condemned to be burned, who was saved by the miraculous transformation of the stake into a rose-tree bearing red and white roses, the first to appear on earth since the fall” (127). De Molay’s horrible death in “The Heretic’s Tragedy” is, Karlin says, “the inverse of Zillah’s miraculous rescue” (127).

### **Zillah’s Roses**

There *is* a Biblical Zillah, one of the two wives of Lamech, but this is not Karlin’s Zillah (Genesis, 4.19-23). His story refers to a different woman, not a Biblical figure at all. This tale has its origin not in the Bible—or even in an “apocryphal” Biblical text, as Karlin states—but in a much later work. It appears in Sir John Mandeville’s *Book of Marvels and Travels*, a text that was, in the words of its most recent editor, Anthony Bale, “one of the

most important books of later medieval and early modern Europe” (Mandeville x). In this remarkable book, Mandeville, “who claims to be a knight from the southern English town of St Albans, Hertfordshire, travelling in the 1320s or 1330s,” describes his travels through what is now known as the Middle East (Mandeville x). As Bale points out, “Mandeville” was almost certainly an invented persona, “as fictional as some of the people he depicts,” and his book “comprises a wide range of material borrowed from elsewhere; Mandeville’s *Book* is certainly not Mandeville’s eyewitness account” (Mandeville x, xi). It is not a “factual account like a modern guidebook, but a more hybrid thing, mixing fact, error, and fantasy, mostly drawn from the accounts of others ... and recounted by a narrator best described as playfully unreliable” (Mandeville xi).

After describing Bethlehem, Mandeville—or the Mandeville persona—recounts the story of Zillah thus:

Between this church [what is now the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem] and the city is a flowery field, and it’s called *Campus floridus* or the Flowery Field on account of a beautiful virgin who was wrongly accused of fornication, for which she was sentenced to be burnt in that place. She was led there, and as the faggots began to burn, she prayed to Our Lord that He would help her make it known to everyone that she was not guilty. When she had said her prayer thus, she entered the flames, and immediately the fire was extinguished. The burning bushes became red rose-bushes, and the branches that were not burning became white rose-bushes full of flowers. These were the first roses and rose-bushes that any person ever saw. And so the virgin was saved through the grace of God, and that’s why the field, full of blooming roses, is called flowery field. (37-38)

It is important to note that in this particular version of the tale, “Zillah” is nameless, simply described as a “beautiful virgin.” In addition, according to this account, the maiden is condemned for fornication and not “devil-worship,” as Karlin has it (127). In the notes to his edition of Mandeville’s text, Anthony Bale points out that far from being an “apocryphal biblical story,” in Karlin’s words, “this *exemplum* reflects popular religious [i.e. *Christian*, not Jewish] texts rather than Mandeville’s ‘geographical’ sources”; he cites similar legends associated with female saints, such as St Agatha, St Lucy, and St Thecla (Mandeville 137). Karlin supplies no note for his reference to this story, but it seems clear that he is referring to Mandeville as inspiring Browning’s poem, at least in part. His reference to the roses as “the first to appear on earth since the Fall” is reminiscent of—but not precisely equal to—Mandeville’s “the first roses and rose-bushes that any person ever saw” (Karlin 127; Mandeville 38). Mandeville’s phrase seems to rule roses out of Eden and state that they were a much later divine creation.

As we have seen, Melchiori argues that much of the power of Browning’s poem is derived from its “inversion” of the poet’s “habitual symbols”; de Molay’s terrible fate is also an “inversion” of the maiden’s, as Karlin points out (*Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* 76-77; Karlin 127). Both, condemned for capital crimes and facing execution, call upon God to save them and proclaim their innocence to onlookers; both receive their “answer” in the form of roses—literal (while supernatural) ones in the case of the maiden; a terribly metaphorical one in the case of de Molay. The maiden is embowered with beautiful roses, both red and white; the unfortunate de Molay is trapped “in the toils / Of a coal-black giant flower of hell” (ll. 78–79). In both cases, God’s verdict (or de Molay’s accusers’ *interpretation* of it, in his case) is plain, although the historical de Molay’s guilt—at least of the more grotesque charges against him—was highly doubtful.

Both the poem's possible association with the "Papal aggression" of 1850 and Browning's depiction of what Karlin calls the "barbaric rejoicing" of de Molay's executioners seem to suggest that Browning's sympathies were, in this case, with the victim (28). Elsewhere in *Men and Women*, as has been discussed, the painter Filippo Lippi and the persecuted Jews of Rome are depicted with similar sympathy in relation to church oppression in the poems "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Holy-Cross Day."

The parallels between de Molay and Mandeville's "beautiful virgin" are clear. Was Browning aware of Mandeville's optimistic story, and somehow deliberately subverting it in his poem, as Karlin seems to be arguing? Karlin claims he "almost certainly" knew the tale but offers no evidence for this assertion (127). The editors of the Oxford and Longman Browning editions (including Karlin himself, in the latter case) fail to mention the story *at all* in their discussions of "The Heretic's Tragedy" (Browning, *Poetical Works* 2: 441-448; Browning, *The Poems* 3: 219-226). Did Browning read Mandeville, and find the story there? It seems likely that he knew the book, considering the enormous breadth of his reading, but he does not seem to have owned a copy and there is no mention of it in his (extant) correspondence (Kelley).

### **Browning and Southey**

Even if he did not read Mandeville's account of the maiden's escape, however, there is a way in which Browning may have encountered a different version of the same story. In 1798, the Romantic poet Robert Southey wrote a narrative poem entitled "The Origin of the Rose." In it, he uses Mandeville's brief account of the maiden's miraculous escape—which he in fact quotes in translation as a preface to his poem—as the basis of a rather longer version of the story, most of which is his own invention (Southey, *Poetical Works*: 5, 210-214).

Little work has been done on Browning's relationship with Southey. There is no evidence that the two men ever met—during Browning's early career, Southey spent most of his time at his home in the Lake District, which Browning never seems to have visited. Browning's best-known mention of Southey is rather dismissive: on August 22, 1846, he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett, while discussing his continued enthusiasm for Byron, that "[h]eaven knows I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder, after the Rosicrucian fashion ... they seem to 'have their reward' and want nobody's love or faith" (Browning and Barrett: 13, 280). In relation to Wordsworth, at least, this quote is rather disingenuous: while he seems to have been largely unimpressed by Wordsworth the man (the only one of this trio still alive in 1846, and the only one Browning seems to have met), Browning's work was, as I have argued elsewhere, profoundly influenced by that of Wordsworth, at least in his early years (Baker). Even so, the quote indicates that at this point of his literary life, at least, Browning had come to believe that these three Romantic poets, unlike his beloved Byron, had received their due in praise and fame during their lifetimes—perhaps rather more than their due, in fact.

Browning's only other extant references to Southey are brief. In a letter to his friend Alfred Domett dated November 23, 1845, while discussing the poet Thomas Chatterton, he mentions Southey's 1803 edition of Chatterton's works, which he has read (Browning and Barrett, 11: 193). This reference demonstrates more interest in Chatterton than in Southey, but it does show that Browning was aware of—and had

read—at least some of the prose work of the latter. There is also a brief later reference to Southey in Charles Gavan Duffy's account of the slightly awkward 1865 post-dinner conversation with Browning and John Forster previously discussed. Following a discussion of the humour of Thomas Moore, "the talk passed to that of Southey, which Browning professed to admire" (260). Duffy—who seems to have been in combative mood that evening—argued that Southey's comic poems were "dull and even dreary," and, barring "one or two exceptions," inferior to those of "Canning, Praed, or Moore"; Browning replied somewhat gnominically that "Southey's humour was of a different *genre* from that of the poets I had named, but he deemed it good of its kind" (260). This argues that Browning had at least *some* knowledge of, and admiration for, Southey's poetry.

Browning never seems to have met Southey, but he knew some close friends of the older poet. John Kenyon, Browning's friend and patron (and the man who first introduced him to Elizabeth Barrett), was also a close friend of the older man and was described by Southey as "one of the best and pleasantest men he had ever known" (Taplin 56). According to Margaret Foster, the amiable Kenyon in fact "knew every literary and artistic person in London worth knowing" (79). Another friend, the tempestuous poet Walter Savage Landor, was also a close friend of Southey (St George 169). Elizabeth Barrett, whom Browning married in 1846, seems to have been a much greater admirer of Southey than her husband. Her letters display a close engagement with Southey's poetry, prose, and life beginning at least in 1816, when she was only ten years old and called Southey "one of her favourite poets" in a letter to one of her brothers (Browning and Barrett: 1, 27). She read beyond the poetry; she admired Southey's history of the Church of England, *The Book of the Church*, and his biography of the unhappy poet William Cowper even moved her to tears (Taplin 21, 96). She comments extensively in her correspondence on Southey's sad deterioration into dementia in his final years and speaks of her shock at the publication of a fragment of a letter from Southey's second wife describing her husband's decline, shortly before the poet's death in 1843 (Browning and Barrett, 6: 324). She seems to have retained her interest in Southey after her marriage to Browning, whatever his own opinion of the poet; in February 1851 she told her friend Isa Blagden that she had recently been sent a biography of Southey (Browning and Barrett, 17: 5).

There is not, therefore, any direct evidence in the archives that proves Browning knew Southey's poem "The Origin of the Rose" and was using it as a source/inspiration for his own work. Even so, I want to argue that the parallels between the two poems are beyond coincidence. It seems likely that Browning decided to "invert" the tale of Zillah's miraculous escape in Southey's poem in order to tell a much more disturbing story in "The Heretic's Tragedy."

### **Southey's "The Origin of the Rose" (1798)**

"The Origin of the Rose" begins with the speaker addressing "Edith" (presumably a reference to Edith Southey, the poet's wife from 1795 to 1837), asking her to refrain from plucking a rose. His plea to her to take pity on the flower and spare what he calls its "sense of being" from destruction is very reminiscent of the work of his close friend Wordsworth (l. 5). It is particularly reminiscent, in fact, of Wordsworth's roughly contemporaneous poem "Nutting" (composed 1798–1799). In this poem the speaker guiltily recalls his "merciless ravage" of a beautiful "shady nook" in search of nuts as a boy; he is haunted by the way the desecrated "nook / Of hazels, and the green and mossy



bower ... patiently gave up / Their quiet being" (Wordsworth 220, ll. 43, 43-46). The speaker of Southey's poem mentions what he calls Edith's "infidel smile" at the prospect of a similar desecration, and this hints at the way he will later use the rose for didactic—indeed, thoroughly Christian—purposes (l. 5). He offers her what he calls the "bribe" of "a tale from other days" if she spares it: the story of how "first by miracle [the rose's] fragrant leaves / Spread to the sun their blushing loveliness" (ll. 6, 7, 13-14).

The speaker then offers "Edith" a considerably expanded account of the maiden's escape, as first recounted by Mandeville. Major additions to the story include the maiden's name, Zillah (Southey's apparent invention), and an account of the extreme piety that led her to reject all suitors in pursuit of holy celibacy: "Zillah on her God had centr'd all / Her spirit's deep affections" (ll. 26-27). The beautiful but unobtainable Zillah is, therefore, generally regarded with a rather unhealthy mixture of desire and admiration: her "tribes-men" "reverenc'd / Th' obdurate virtue that destroy'd their hopes" (ll. 28-29). Southey also invents a villain for the piece, the "vain and wretched" Hamuel, whose "wounded vanity" at Zillah's rejection, coupled with frustrated lust, leads him to plot the pious maid's destruction (ll. 30, 38). Hamuel cunningly spreads rumours that Zillah's piety is all pretence, and that her "life was foul, / Yea, forfeit to the law" (ll. 51-52). These rumours "soon obtain belief" among the good folk of Bethlehem (l. 44). Southey does not mention the exact nature of the crimes of which Hamuel accuses Zillah, but that they are sexual in nature is clear enough: Hamuel slyly suggests to his fellows that

... t'was a task  
Of easy sort to play the Saint by day  
Before the public eye, but that all eyes  
Were clos'd at night. (ll. 48-51)

We are reminded of the secret depravities allegedly practised by the outwardly pious Templars. How exactly Hamuel claims knowledge of Zillah's illicit nocturnal activities is not made clear; even so, the maiden is duly condemned to die by her peers, albeit for fornication, rather than the "devil-worship" Karlin mentions (127). Nevertheless, Karlin's use of the name "Zillah," absent from Mandeville and invented by Southey, indicates he must have read Southey's poem at some point, although he fails to mention it either in *Browning's Hatreds* or the notes to "The Heretic's Tragedy" in the volume of the Longman Browning which he co-edited.

The "well-schemed" Hamuel, a subtle villain in the Iago mould, produces such convincing "semblances of guilt" that poor Zillah is condemned to burn alive (ll. 56, 57). Like Christ—as is undoubtedly Southey's intention—Zillah is led "[w]ithout the walls" of the saviour's future birthplace to "a place abhorr'd, / For it was there where wretched criminals / Receiv'd their death" (ll. 58, 59-61). Upon reaching her personal Golgotha, she is bound to the stake, and the fuel is piled; for all their pious fury at her alleged crimes, her "calm holiness" and "patient looks to Heav'n" rouse the pity of the "assembled Bethlemites" (ll. 66, 67, 64). This is reminiscent of the way the historical de Molay's courage impressed the witnesses of his death. The wicked Hamuel is initially exultant, but his "savage joy" at the scene is rapidly replaced by "wakening guilt, anticipant of Hell" (ll. 69, 72). A brief glance from his intended victim strikes "into his soul a cureless wound"; the speaker uses this moment to expound didactically upon the power of conscience, "that God within us" (ll. 76, 77). Hamuel is granted a glimpse of the suffering to come.

For all Zillah's pleas, the pyre is duly lit, and the flames engulf "the suffering maid" (l. 83). However, God abruptly intervenes, diverting the flames into "one long lightning-flash" that instantly incinerates the wretched "Hamuel, . . . him alone" (l. 87). Unsurprisingly, the terrified onlookers let forth "a fearful scream" at this awesome sight (l. 89). The stake then "branches and buds," and

... Roses, then

First seen on earth since Paradise was lost,

Profusely blossom round [Zillah], white and red

In all their rich variety of hues. (ll. 91, 93-96)

The liberated Zillah inhales their scent, "fragrance such as our first parents breathed / In Eden," a "presage sure of Paradise regain'd" (ll. 97-98, 99). Her nostrils are, it seems, untroubled by the stench of the incinerated Hamuel's smouldering remains.

Zillah is thus spared martyrdom and stands exonerated before her fellow citizens, surrounded by an unarguable living manifestation of God's justice. *These* roses, then, symbolize God's love for—and protection of—the faithful who call upon Him. Their sudden appearance here is also somewhat reminiscent of the rainbow that stands for the covenant between God and humanity after the flood in Genesis (9.13). The incineration of Hamuel, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, is a brutally obvious manifestation of God's wrath towards the unrepentant sinner. The beautiful and sweet-scented roses—the first to bloom on Earth since the Fall—by contrast represent his mercy. Southey's didactic message—don't spread lies about the faithful, and, assuming you are one of the latter, trust in God's mercy *in extremis*—is evident, and entirely conventional.

### **"The Heretic's Tragedy" and "The Origin of the Rose"**

Browning's later poem, then, recasts Southey's to offer a somewhat darker—and more subversive—message to the reader. Injustice is averted in Southey's poem, while the religious authorities in Browning's openly celebrate it. De Molay, like Zillah, faces execution at the hands of the authorities after being found guilty of blasphemous conduct—a verdict based on rumour. Wickedness in Southey's poem is both perfectly comprehensible, if not sympathetic—Hamuel is motivated by nothing more exotic than plain old frustrated desire—and reassuringly *individual*. Hamuel is ultimately isolated and destroyed, although the fact his accusations are initially believed can, worryingly, be attributed to popular credulity as much as to his diabolical cunning. Wickedness is far less readily comprehensible, and much more pervasive, in "The Heretic's Tragedy": de Molay's executioners act with hideous—and entirely open—jollity, and there is no trace of compassion among them until the Abbot's final ironic call for God to take pity on "all poor souls lost in the dark" (l. 89). Even the evil Hamuel felt a flicker of conscience shortly before his death. Unlike Zillah, and his historical counterpart, Browning's de Molay begs his captors for his life and protests his innocence, to no avail; he receives only the sarcastic mockery of his accusers in return. While Zillah's execution is averted by God's will, and her unjust accuser punished, de Molay is not accorded any such divine protection. Although in both cases men light the pyres, God only diverts them in Zillah's case. The flames that consume de Molay are not divine, like the lightning that incinerates Hamuel, but thoroughly of this earth—and de Molay's agonizing demise is depicted in grisly detail. Unless, like the Bible translator William Tyndale, they were mercifully strangled to death before the pyre was lit, the victims of this sort of immolation usually

took some time to die; Hamuel is, at least, annihilated in an instant (although Hell's pains are, of course, eternal). The "rose" that consumes de Molay is a terrifying "coal-black" one composed of the smoke rising from his burning flesh; as the onlookers note with particularly sadistic relish, "with blood for dew, the bosom boils / And a gust of sulphur is all its smell" (ll. 79, 75-76).

Southey's poem is, therefore, a fairly conventional piece of piety in which the wicked are punished and the good rewarded. God's intervention here, through lightning and roses, is clear and unambiguous. We are recommended towards chastity, meekness, and piety, and warned away from lust, bitterness, and revenge. Browning's poem is a far darker examination of a communal blood ritual, barely masked by a veneer of piety. There is no lust here, unless it is a simple lust for destruction, but there certainly is bitterness and revenge, both directed by the supposedly pious towards a helpless victim whose "guilt" is by no means assured. It is as if Hamuel was merely suspected of his crime but annihilated anyway—or as if Zillah was roasted alive with Hamuel's gleeful commentary. Ultimately, for Browning, de Molay's execution is a savage act of mob violence, deliberately whipped up and directed by the Roman Catholic Church, against a despised outsider. In fact, de Molay's deeply merciful view of God as "Sharon's Rose" may be an important contributory factor in his destruction, directly opposed as it is to the vengeful Jehovah who seems to be the presiding deity at this murderous ritual.

As we have seen, we cannot know for sure whether Browning was aware of Southey's poem. Even so, the parallels and inversions in "The Heretic's Tragedy" seem undeniable. If so, Barbara Melchiori's argument that the macabre power of Browning's poem is largely derived from its "inversion" of the poet's "habitual symbols" should also be understood in the context of its source in Browning's "inversion" of Southey's work—specifically through Browning's very different use of rose imagery, but more generally in the very different stories these poems tell about forms of piety, human wickedness, and the power of religion.

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