

Life for love in browning's poetry: a fair trade?

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Robert Browning wrote his poetry during the British Industrial Revolution, a tumultuous time in which society was going through major cultural and lifestyle changes. The modernization of England led to the distribution of newspapers and other literature that thrived on the scandals of others. This in turn contributed to the Victorians being constantly desensitized to occurrences that would previously have been deemed highly outrageous. This general downward spiral of morality inspired Browning to publish poems that were more provocative than real life news, which resulted in some of his best work. He sought to enlighten the public about their newly acquired numbness to immorality. His poems were not solely for shock value, however, as he also managed to pioneer some fascinating themes in his work. One theme, which is both intriguing and shocking, is the idea of murdering one's lover so that their love will last forever. In Robert Browning's poems, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*, the male speaker of each is relating his account of the murder of his respective loved one, and despite an apparent difference in motives, both men achieve their goals of eternal and "exclusive possession" (Crowell 60). The protagonist of *My Last Duchess* is a Duke who is showing the emissary of a potential suitor his art gallery. The painting that is the central object of the poem is of the Duke's recently deceased wife, who was killed in accordance with the Duke's wishes. The Duke describes the mannerisms of the late Duchess as less than faithful, although from the reader's perspective she seems more naïve and polite than anything else. Her alleged crimes consist of having a heart that is "too soon made glad," of being "too easily impressed," and of thanking men for small favors with the same air that she thanked the Duke for his "

nine-hundred-years-old name.” The bitter jealousy of the Duke has caused him to act irrationally and ostensibly cruel. Since the Duchess would not submit herself to the suspicious over-protectiveness of the Duke during her lifetime, the Duke, in his insanity, decided to immortalize his ownership of her by ending her life: “ It soon becomes clear that the paranoid Duke, who could never achieve exclusive possession of the Duchess, fancies that he has done so on canvas” (Crowell 60). This evokes the sense that the description of the Duchess is “ an idealized rather than a realistic portrait” (Roberts 39). The only evidence to rely on is the Duke’s own words, and it becomes obvious that they are not to be taken completely literally. What is shocking to the reader, aside from the candidness through which the Duke recounts the death of his lover, is the fact that he shows no remorse or even recognition of his misdeed. In fact, it is soon uncovered in the poem that he considers the Duchess to be nothing more to him than an object, no more human than the painting itself, as he casually leads his audience further down the gallery, reminding us to “ notice” the other masterpieces in the hall. He does not seem to lament the death of his wife, instead he revels in the preservation of her beauty in the portrait, where she forever “ stands/ as if alive”. The Duke prefers to “ exercise control over the Duchess imprisoned in the portrait” rather than struggle to “ control the vitality and goodness of his loving wife” (Davies 31). In essence, the Duke has sacrificed the Duchess in order to satisfy his “ aristocratic sinfulness and greed” (Ibid). The concept of killing someone in order to safeguard their loyalty is not exclusive to *My Last Duchess*, as it has been previously iterated in Browning’s other poem, *Porphyria’s Lover*. This is one of Browning’s earliest dramatic monologues,

depicting an unnamed yet clearly demented individual whose idea of eternal love does not rely on both parties being alive. The speaker weaves a twisted tale of how he managed to capture his lover's undying love by, ironically, killing her with her own hair. His hapless lover, Porphyria, had just professed her love to the speaker through a physical gesture of passion, yet the speaker reveals to the reader that she was "too weak, for all her heart's endeavor[...] to give herself to [him] forever". He expresses his joy and self-assurance that, at least for the moment, she belonged to him. Therefore, in order to "capture and completely control the fleeting moment" he decides to strangle her to death with her hair (Roberts 41). One would think that such a gruesome and violent death such as strangling would be an horrible wrongdoing to someone's lover, but the speaker asserts that he is "quite sure she felt no pain." The utter lunacy of the speaker becomes more and more apparent as he fantasizes that "her cheek once more/ Blushed bright beneath [his] burning kiss." It turns out that Porphyria has violated the norms of Victorian society as well as her family by loving him, and his doubt that she had the resolve to "set [her heart's] struggling passion free/ From pride" is what caused him to murder her. The Victorian Era being rife with judgment, every act of sexuality and violence is considered a transgression. People in Victorian society were obsessed with keeping the individual's behavior in check. Both the Duke in *My Last Duchess* and the anonymous killer in *Porphyria's Lover* demonstrate this effort in society. The Duke himself scrutinizes and passes judgment on every move of his lover, and finds fault in everything he sees. He personifies the actions of his counterparts in real life, the morally corrupt men whose absolute power

allowed them to condemn lesser individuals than themselves based on what they considered moral wrongdoings. He puts a "disproportionate emphasis" on his lover's "lack of proper deference towards him" because of an "insanely possessive jealousy" which he appeases by having her only existence being a portrait that he can cover with a curtain, and thus exercise absolute control over her (Erickson 83). His questionable methods for alleviating his mistrust of the Duchess parallel the methods in which Victorian society tried to quell immoral behavior. Porphyria's lover also seeks to preserve the boundaries of female sensuality, although he is portrayed as genuinely crazy. The male effort to put a limitation on female sexual activity is prevalent in both poems. A casual glance at either of the poems makes one wonder whether the characters in them are just insane or engrossed in a more sinister operation. The reader discovers that one can get caught in the flow of the language and finish the poem without making any sort of moral judgment whatsoever. Nevertheless, it is important to note that at the end of *My Last Duchess*, the Duke reveals an ulterior motive- the acquisition of wealth (the dowry) from his potential new wife. This shows that he is in fact evil. In *Porphyria's Lover*, however, the speaker remains with his lover's body after her demise, his only purpose of living to be with his loved one forever. Thus, he is genuinely insane, but this does not take away from the fact that both murderers secure their respective love partners for a lifetime.