

The 'reversibility' of gaze in Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Love...'

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For Renaissance artists, painting was perhaps an instrument of knowledge but it was also an instrument of possession, and we must not forget, when we are dealing with Renaissance painting, that it was only possible because of the immense fortunes which were being amassed in Florence and elsewhere, and that rich Italian merchants looked upon painters as agents, who allowed them to confirm their possession of all that was beautiful and desirable in the world. John Berger in his "Ways of Seeing" writes, "To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your home. If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents.'

In the article "Men of Blood," author Carter J. Wood acknowledges analyses of Victorian violence necessitate an understanding of the time period's "constructions of dutiful femininity that excused men's disciplinary violence and an all-male judiciary that stood idly by or even actively supported male household dominance" (Wood 266).

To be sure, the Victorian gender ideology that held women in a passive and submissive role, and assumed men had the authority to keep women in this role via "disciplinary violence," is a key component of understanding the murderous incident in "Porphyria's Lover." Yet Browning's poem is exclusively expressed from the point of view of a male speaker.

While the death of the female character is at the crux of the poem and this study of the poem, it is the male speaker who executes her. For these reasons, the common focus of "gendered analyses" of Victorian England will be shifted slightly in order to more centrally involve an understanding of how

Victorians defined masculinity, and the imagined role of men in their culture and society.

"Victorian England," explains Jeffrey Richards in his essay in 'Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940', "was a male-dominated society" (100). Yet before men dominate their society, they are boys. Victorian boys largely learned about manhood and masculinity through the writings of Thomas Hughes, writing which was "a paean to the virtues of... robust manliness" (103, 4).

Hughes's books "were avidly read in school" by Victorian boys who gleaned from them a definition of manliness that involved "habits of Obedience, Reverence, Discipline, Self-Respect, and all that tends toward a true Christian" (53). These "habits" that constitute manliness are primarily concerned with power - power over the self. In this national notion of masculinity, man first overpowers himself, and is then able (and allowed) to overpower all others.

Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is set during the late Italian Renaissance. The speaker (presumably the Duke of Ferrara) is giving the emissary of the family of his prospective new wife a tour of the artworks in his home. He draws a curtain to reveal a painting of a woman, explaining that it is a portrait of his late wife; he invites his guest to sit and look at the painting. The analogy of possessing and the status of women as mere object is embodied in the portrait.

But what is kinetic here is the gazing, as Browning blurs the very distinction between subject and object. Looking is an effort to control another subject as object. But when another subject is introduced as a viewer the first subject functions as object. The subject who looks may achieve control over the object only to become the object observed. When the poem opens and the description it provides it only validates the subjectivity of the duke and the objectivity of the duchess because we will come to know that the duchess exists only in the picture.

She is now reduced to a desired, pleased and controlled object. But when the duke is exhibiting the paintings to the emissary the duke becomes an exhibitionist. That makes the Duke an object and there is only subject left in the scene -the emissary. Therefore, gazing is always reverse. The subject needs to be gazed by an object. And by only becoming an object the subject can validate its existence and subjectivity.

As Davis indicates, Lacan goes beyond Freud to define the process of looking and its reversal as involved in what Lacan understands as the 'Gaze.' The 'Gaze' represents the scheme of oscillating positions between looking and being looked at, as those opposing positions are 'implicated' by the 'desire' of the unconscious or 'Other.'

In looking the looker is 'seen' or 'implicated' by the unconscious or Other. Lacan encourages us to see that it is desire in the unconscious which is producing textuality. When we read, we attend to a text as though it were an

object; however, it is the Gaze which is holding us through the object text and turning us into mastered objects (Davis, pp. 987-988).

' The Gaze which inscribes the Other's desire in a discourse of positioning - is trained on readers from the outside as they read, and through the willing surrender to the active/passive alternations of reading, readers (subjects who become objects) play within and also escape the confines of voyeurism and exhibitionism' (Davis, p. 988).

Thus, a ' text' is not a discrete object but an intersection of a manifest text and an unconscious text, neither of which is the text. Double-ness is inevitable, since the text is both what the reader reads and the means by which the Gaze ' reads' the reader. Any notion, then, of an ' authoritative reading' is inevitably decentred (Davis, p. 1002).

' That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she is alive' the very first line of the poem creates a sense of possession of the Duke that is confirmed by the word ' my.' At the same time an illusion of possession is created. The duke is not only looking at the picture but he is also being looked at by it of which he is completely unaware.

The motif that ran through his mind to kill his duchess is the lack of single indifferent dominance of desire of His over her and only dependent faithful singular gratitude of her for Him. But she can be '.... too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed' and '... her looks went everywhere' that was against the traditional role imposed by patriarchal society on women. The picture

therefore serves as an object of desire and the complete possession of the duke over his duchess that was impossible at the time when she was alive.

But the picture here also serves as a product of 'male gaze' that is the depiction of women from a masculine point of view, presenting women as objects of male pleasures. The Duchess, like Porphyria becomes 'a projection of repressed male desire' that needs containment. That fear of object loss, Lacan would suggest, is a metaphor of a repressed fear of a greater loss, the loss of life itself. It may well have been the Lover's fear of death - the ultimate menace to the self - which urged him to sacrifice her to his own uncontrolled desire to stave off extinction.

Narrating the manifest text which his unconscious has generated as a misreading of her "darling one wish," the Lover confirms that he is now the masterful subject. He is the observer; she, the silenced object. "And yet God has not said a word!" (l. 60) he proclaims. Even God has been rendered silent, mastered, in the face of the narrating of this masterful subject. Through the power of his narrating, Porphyria's Lover projects an image of the Promethean rebel defying even God and remaking Porphyria in the image of the silent, eternally faithful object of love.

In her book *Robert Browning*, Isobel Armstrong adds that the poem itself is an "attempt to examine... neurotic or insane behaviour, and in particular the pathology of sexual feeling" (Armstrong 288). Certainly, the act of strangling Porphyria does initially seem insane - an act without a clear or actual rationale - yet this widely held critical view of Browning's piece is perhaps

too myopic. Madness, after all, says little about anything else other than itself.

It is the intention of this paper to prove that "Porphyria's Lover" is a far more complicated piece than a basic tale of a deranged man who commits a deranged act. Textual evidence supports a different, more complex, and perhaps more troubling reading - that Porphyria's death is the deed of a sane man, motivated by the lust for power. Porphyria's murder can then be interpreted as being motivated by the Victorian understanding of gender roles, the state's stance on the morality of its citizens, and concepts of artistic creation. "Porphyria's Lover" then becomes a poem that is fundamentally about neither love nor death, but one concerned primarily with power.

Browning employs sexually restrained male speakers in order to signal the pathology of patriarchal gender constructions and sexual desire defined by bourgeois limitations in Victorian society. The Duke confronts a crisis of manhood in that the Duchess challenges both the formation of manliness as reserve as well as the Duke's use of such manliness to justify his social position.

In challenging his class position, the duchess also undermines the ability of patriarchy to impose complete order upon sexual desire. 'My Last Duchess' portrays therefore the deanimation of a female by the speaker's narcissistic desire to control the world around him, a desire that makes the woman and the external world into images of himself rather than realities. The subject is

reduced to being the object of desire and, in identifying with this object, it becomes alienated from itself.

The Duke makes of her yet another beautiful, silent, docile object to be looked at, like the bronze Neptune which Claus of Innsbruck cast for him. Apart from all these services, the portrait of the duchess in the end turns into a memento of punishment, a token of aesthetic caution to the family of his new wife.

In the poem we see it is not only the art work of a female portrait that is gazed at but the Duke also falls under this sense of gazing when he plays the role of an exhibitionist where the subject is the emissary. The duke and the duchess both become in one way or another objects. But the emissary also becomes an object because he also looks at the portrait and looked back by it. In this way there is no subject left in the poem. They are part of an action that is constantly happening.

Their actions create an event and through that event they come into being. The continuous process of looking and being looked back creates a being and validates it. Our vision always bears reversibility within it that makes the body both subject and object, the seeing and the seen. Despite the reversibility of the seeing and the seen, it is the possibility of being observed which is always primary. Therefore, we are always already gazed at by phenomenological intent that is our intention to be understood by others or to be gazed at to negotiate with the reality that demands to be real to

validate our own existence and thus we are made assured that we are always already objects.

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