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The speakers of Robert Browning’s “ My Last Duchess” and “ Porphyria’s Lover” are both men who took the lives of the women who loved them, for somewhat different reasons. Porphyria’s lover might, at first glance, appear crazed by love, but the love soon reveals itself to be self-love rather than love of his sweetheart. The duke, who too is quite strong on self-love, does not even pretend to have been in love with his “ last duchess.” Apparently, however, he loves his power and self even more than he loves himself. His grouse against his late wife seems to be that she did not share his all-excluding passion for himself, and for his name and position, rather than for his heart or person. Both men strongly believe that they have done the right thing. Their manner of self-justification highlights the difference in their mental makeup.

The Duke’s late wife was a sweet woman of a charming nature who found joy in life and in the things around her. She loved the Duke with all his trappings of power and wealth, but she also enjoyed the simpler pleasures of life. She was sweet and charming with her husband the Duke, but to the Duke at least, it seemed that she was no less sweet and charming to anyone else. He feels that she ranked “ My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/With anybody's gift.” No doubt, she would have mended her ways if he had asked her to, but “ E'en then would be some stooping, and I choose/Never to stoop.” He resorts to the only course he has ever known—the exercise of his power: “ I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together.”

The Duke does not even dream that anyone could think that he had done

any wrong. That is why he makes a plain revelation of all the grim facts to an ambassador who has come with a new proposal of marriage to the daughter of a Count well known for his “munificence.” This reputation even emboldens the Duke to suggest that he would expect a substantial dowry. However, when he avows in the very next breath that the Count’s daughter’s “fair . . . self” is his only object, he expects to be believed! That is proof positive of the force of his personality and the manner in which he attempts to stamp his will on others.

Porphyria’s lover on the other hand, is a weaker figure than the formidable Duke, but arguably, more cunning, if less sane. Porphyria is as sweet and charming as the Duchess, but she does not hesitate to demonstrate her excessive love for her sweetheart. She has stolen away from a “gay feast” to be with her lover, whom she worships. Why then does he kill her? He projects the weakness of his personality onto her and jumps to the ridiculous conclusion that she was “Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor, /To set its struggling passion free/ From pride, and vainer ties dissever,/ And give herself to me forever.” “Happy and proud” at the evidence of her love for him in the present moment, he ruminates and “I found/ A thing to do, and all her hair/ In one long yellow string I wound/ Three times her little throat around,/ And strangled her.” That was, perhaps, his way of assuring himself that she would never leave his side again, of her own volition.

The Duke justifies his actions only before his fellowmen, and is content to expect his reward from them. Uxoricide, in the Duke’s eye, apparently enhances his qualifications for a munificent dowry at his next foray into matrimony. If this is madness, Porphyria’s lover is a worse case, because his

plaint is that God has not rewarded him: " And yet," he sighs, " God has not said a word." Self-love is a curious thing, and Browning has captured somewhat different shades of it as motives for murder in these two poems.

References

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