

# The power of voice in "my last duchess"



"My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning is a Victorian poem that demonstrates the power of voice. This poem is narrated by the Duke of Ferrara who uses his voice to gain control of those around him. He even speaks for his deceased wife, only explaining his view of the situation preceding her death. While the Duke has a voice, his former wife is encapsulated by silence and isolation. The Duke determines who is allowed to see her portrait, and decides which part of her story he wants to share. This essay will analyze the silence forced upon the Duchess, and will demonstrate how the form of the poem expresses the controlling voice the Duke maintains throughout the work.

"My Last Duchess" is a poem that demonstrates the silence enforced upon a Duchess, emphasized by the isolation created by her former husband. From the very beginning of the poem the Duchess is shown as alone and isolated: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive" (1-2). The Duchess is physically attached to the wall as a portrait, and cannot interact with those around her. She is a strict observer, watching others interact as she merely looks on. The Duke has even limited the amount of people that can see her: "But to myself they turned (since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I / And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst, /How such a glance came there; so, not the first /Are you to turn and ask thus" (9-13). She is isolated behind a curtain, and cannot control the amount she is hidden or shown. Though there are some select few that are shown her portrait, she cannot speak for herself. They supposedly have questions about her, but the Duke answers all questions himself. Even while the Duchess was alive, the Duke does not express that she had a voice. He

describes her: " Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, /Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without /Much the same smile?" (43-45) According to the Duke, she always smiled, but does not make reference to any words that she spoke. On line 13 he makes a similar statement: " Sir, 'twas not/Her husband's presence only, called that spot/Of joy into the Duchess' cheek (14-15). The Duke describes her physical presence, but does not speak about her oral communication. Although it goes without saying that she did indeed vocalise her feelings while she was alive, the fact that the Duke never makes reference to her speaking supports the idea of silence and isolation forced upon the woman. Her words did not seem to matter before her death, nor do they matter now. Because she is never described as having a voice, she is almost forced into being a mere inanimate object even while alive, as opposed to a living, opinionated, or interactive human being. Robin Lakoff explains the importance of language and interaction with women: " Speech about women implies an object, whose sexual nature requires euphemism, and whose social roles are derivative and dependent in relation to men. The personal identity of women thus is linguistically submerged; the language works against treatment of women, as serious persons with individual views" (Lakoff 45). The entirety of the reader's perception of the Duchess is dependent on the men around her. Every representation of her is linked to the actions or perceptions of a man, and never about her as a human being. The men in her life overshadow any of her interests, thoughts, or accomplishments. Lackoff explains the importance of proper representation: " In appropriate women's speech, strong expression of feeling is avoided, expression of uncertainty is favored, and means of expression in regard to subject-matter deemed ' trivial' to the ' real' world are elaborated" (45). By

only expressing that the Duchess smiled often, the Duke portrays her in a trivial manner. He removes any of her strong expressions of feeling, and describes her as flirtatious and trivial. Lackoff continues by explaining how this behavior is detrimental to women: "Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. 'Woman's language' has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of" (45). The Duchess (who is still unnamed) does not have a voice, and cannot control the way that she is spoken of. The Duke spares no words in describing her through his perception, demonstrating the powerlessness she possesses. Shifra Hochberg adds, "The Duchess' countercontext of female desire, as this essay will demonstrate, reveals many of the underlying paradoxes, tensions, and irresolutions of gendered struggles for power and dominance within a patriarchal cultural matrix" (Hochberg 77). While living, she was expected to act with strict virtue and naivety, exactly as the Duke expected of her. Once dead, all memories of her are determined by the man in her life. She did not have a voice when she was living, nor does she have a voice now that she is dead.

The Duke of "My Last Duchess" portrays men as much more free than their counterparts, though also as manipulative and possessive through their manners of communication. This poem is written as a monologue through the voice of the Duke of Ferrara, which signifies that every idea revealed throughout this poem belongs to the Duke himself. In essence, it is one long,

uninterrupted ramble of the Italian Duke. Although this monologue is presented as a conversation between the Duke and the emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke's marriage, the Duke is the only character to speak. The idea that the Duke's words are the only ones shared could signify that the Duke may consider his words the only ones that are of worth and that he is the only authoritative character. Due to this demonstration towards another male, it is entirely possible to consider the idea that he treated his Duchess in the same-and perhaps even worse-manner. The Duke's need for control and authority is also represented through the rhyming pattern utilized throughout the poem. The rhymes are formed in couplets, a very structured and concise form of communicating ideas. They appear very controlled, just as the Duke appears through his described mannerisms. The couplets a more controlled and aurally appealing system: they are an interesting representation of the Duke's character. He speaks so eloquently about his dead wife and his home, and it is almost easy to forget the fact that he killed his wife. Though the words he says are aurally pleasing, the message he portrays is controlling and manipulative. Just like the couplets express, though the events of his life do not flow perfectly he still speaks of them in a very controlled and systematic way. He compiles contrasting ideas together that have little unifying factors, yet he does not break in his speech. While speaking of his former wife, he says: " There she stands / As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet / The company below, then" (46-48). In a matter of three lines, the Duke speaks of his dead wife and then invites the emissary to accompany him to meet his new wife. The Duke demonstrates controlled emotions through the enjambment as he unites many of these contrasting ideas together, sparing any normally

present emotion. As Kevin J. Gardner says of the use of enjambment: "Despite his specious claim that he has no " skill/In speech" (35-36), however, the duke is clearly a master of rhetorical revelation: the regular use of enjambed lines throughout the poem may suggest an inability to control either his wife or his own tongue, yet his disruptive caesurae create a rhetorical violence that allows him to reassert his sovereignty and command" (Gardner 170). The length of each line also denotes the circumstances in which the Duke possesses or lacks control in his life. In every short line that the Duke declares, he shares a factual statement. For example, the first line of the poem states: " That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive" (1-2). This line is very factual and non-expressive: he has a portrait of his previous wife on the wall, and is a good portrayal of her person. However, he continues to describe the portrait by saying: " Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps / Fra Pandolf chanced to say " Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much," or " Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff / Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough / For calling up that spot of joy" (13-21). The Duke does not appear to feel in control of the situation; the moment he lacks that feeling, he begins to ramble. He does not possess facts that she was disloyal to him, which means that he does not possess control; thus the unending ramble. The structure of " The Last Duchess" demonstrates the manipulation and power that men held over women during the 1500's, as told by Robert Browning.

"My Last Duchess" is a poem that exemplifies the power of voice. It contrasts the overbearing ramble of the controlling, manipulative Duke with the isolated and silent Duchess. The silence of the Duchess can represent the silence of women throughout the era, as men control the majority of their lives. In the case of the Duchess the Duke controlled when she died, who sees her portrait, and how she will be portrayed to those who come after her. The Duke uses his voice to gain power and control over his life and the lives of others, as he uses an entire monologue to express his sentiments and opinions. "My Last Duchess" demonstrates how important the power of voice truly is.

## Works Cited

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