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Eleanor Spencer

University of Durham

The Ambiguity of Violence in the Poetry of Robert Browning

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust
Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long.
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die. (Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," 1898)

"All the major [Victorian] poets turned their attention to issues of sexual attraction and repulsion, if not violence. More forcefully than other discourse of the time, poetry opened up a space where the awkward tensions between sexual longing and being could be closely investigated" (Bristow 1991: 128). From this assertion, it is clear that Joseph Bristow considers violence to be innately connected to "sexual attraction and repulsion," and suggests that the relationship between sexual impulse and violence can be most searchingly and eloquently expressed in poetry, for example, that of Robert Browning. Whilst there is certainly an inextricable link between sexual impulse and violence in poems such as Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," depictions of violence in Browning's poetry are suggestive of rather more than

mere sexual conflict, and may be considered representative and reflective of wider conflicts, for example, those within the individual psyche, and within the male creative personality; tensions between the desire of the individual and repressive Victorian censoriousness; and the disparity between idealised expectations of femininity and the voracious male fascination with the illicit.

Jan Marsh attributes the opposition between the idealisation of the feminine and desire of the illicit to "rapid and immense social and economic change" and its "corresponding cultural repercussions," claiming that "changes in patterns of work and family life [...] established new structures of feeling and representation whereby women were both elevated and constrained, worshipped and restricted to specific roles" (1987: 10). However, the incongruity between male expectation of the feminine ideal and desire of the sexually illicit was by no means unique to the Victorian male, as illustrated by Tertullian's (c. 160-220 AD) description of the female as the ambiguous "temple built over a sewer," simultaneously divine in her purity and sordid in her sexuality. The Janus-faced image of women as divine and woman as sordid occupied a significant position in the Victorian consciousness, and is embodied by the virtuous Rose, the heroine of Tennyson's "The Gardener's Daughter," and the subject of Julia Margaret Cameron's photograph, and Keats's femme fatale, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," painted by John William Waterhouse, respectively. These conflicting notions of "woman as desirable, woman as chaste, woman as dutiful, woman as witch" (Marsh 1987: 9) result in the male confusion and conflict of emotions that can be observed in Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," published in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842. Porphyria is both the feminine domestic ideal - "straight / She shut the cold out and the storm, / And kneeled and made the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;" - and unashamedly sexual in her gentle caress of the speaker - "She put my arm about her waist, / And made her smooth white shoulder bare, / And all her yellow hair displaced, / And, stooping, made my cheek lie there" (11. 6-9; 16-19).[1] Her partially unclothed state provides a subtle illustration of the speaker's conflicting emotions. Bristow (1991: 132) explains that the female body is seen as "a sight of purity in its nakedness," yet to the speaker, Porphyria's purity, represented by her "smooth white shoulder," is tainted by her association with wider society, symbolised by the clothes that she has not removed - the symbols of the soiled world outside the cottage, a world in which she is prevented from

[1] All quotations from Browning's poetry are from *A Critical Edition of the Major Works.* Ed. A. Roberts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

loving him openly by societal strictures, and those restrictions placed upon the "worshipped," ideal woman.

The paradoxical perception of the female as both "a sight of purity" and irrevocably tainted leads to equally paradoxical demands on femininity made by the male. Porphyria's lover desires to preserve this moment in which she is solely his - "mine, mine, fair, *I* Perfectly pure and good" (11. 36-37) - yet in strangling her, he irrevocably destroys the warmth, passion, adoration and attention that he so deeply desires. Her very presence in his cottage would be considered morally transgressive by society, yet he, believing that she is "too weak, for all her heart's endeavor / To set its struggling passion free *I* From pride, and vainer ties dissever" (11. 22-24), seeks to protect her from further moral transgression through infidelity by murdering her. The speaker is caught between Victorian society's insistence upon moral rectitude and his own powerful yearning for sensation and intimacy. Similarly, in Browning's "My Last Duchess," first published in the 1842 collection, *Dramatic Lyrics,* the jealous Duke wished to be the sole object of his wife's attention and adoration, yet in orchestrating her death, has deprived himself of that pleasure. He wished her to be simultaneously more attentive to him, and less appreciative of others. Thus, we see that these acts of violence committed by the speakers are bom of confused and conflicting emotional reactions to the feminine. Browning proves himself to be intelligently aware of Victorian society's paradoxical embrace of both moral rectitude and the desire for the illicit, and the violent bewilderment that results.

In an attempt to stave off the confusion of the "soul made weak by its pathetic want," *(The Ring and the Book,* XXI. 1. 559), Browning's speakers often seek to control the feminine; physically, mentally and verbally. In "Porphyria's Lover" we see how the speaker attempts to control and manipulate Porphyria, first with his sullen, spiteful silence, reflected in the "sullen wind" that "tore the elm-tops down for spite" (11. 2-3), then with brute force. Roma A. King (1968: 71) describes how "he resents her strength, although perhaps subconsciously." In the first section of the poem, Porphyria occupies the active role - "she sat down by my side / And called me. When no voice replied, / *She* put *my* arm about her waist" (11. 14-16, italics mine) - and it becomes clear that he believes that, in strangling her, and thus relegating her to the passive role, he has "righted things and assumed the normal masculine role" (King 1968:72). There is a deliberate reversal of the action as the speaker describes how, "Only this time, *my* shoulder bore / *Her* head, which droops upon it still" (11. 51-52, italics mine). However, he fails to comprehend that it was *his* misguided strategy of

control - his dour passivity and silence - that *forced* her to occupy the active role. Indeed, it is arguable that the entire poem represents a "misguided strategy of control'' on the part of the speaker. He attempts to rationalise his murderous act, blaming her "pride" and attachment to "vainer ties," yet the highly patterned rhyme scheme - ABABB - is at odds with his reasoned self-presentation. The intricacy of the rhyme scheme makes his colloquial, even casual tone seem unnatural and incongruous, prompting the reader to doubt the speaker's apparent rationality. Even after her death, the speaker seeks to control Porphyria, projecting onto her his own desires and insecurities, as he says, "The smiling rosy little head, / So glad it has its utmost will, / That all it scorned at once is fled, / And I, its love, am gained instead!" (11. 53-56), and justifies his violence as the fulfilment of "her darling one wish" (1. 57). Thus we see that a triple act of violence and control has been committed against Porphyria. His passiveness forced her to take charge of the situation, and then he punished her for her cheerful occupation of that active role by strangling her, then sought to justify his violence by projecting his desires onto her. Browning's sensitivity to the complexities of human relationships allows him to recognise that passiveness can paradoxically be used as a violent means of manipulation and coercion.

In direct contrast to Porphyria's lover, in "My Last Duchess" the Duke adopts a strategy of verbal activity rather than passiveness in an attempt to control his late wife. The Duke glibly and seemingly confidently directs the conversation and attention of the internal addressee towards the portrait, and attempts to demonstrate his mastery over his late wife through speech. However, his speech reveals his deep insecurities and inability to control his reaction to his wife, even after her death. The use of enjambment means that there is no sense of psychological or linguistic closure at the end of lines, but rather a sense of urgent, even uncontrollable compulsiveness behind the Duke's revelations. This impression of lack of control is compounded by the subtle change from masculine to feminine rhyme, as the Duke explains, "She had a heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (11. 21-23). Max Keith Sutton (1969: 285) describes how "the tempo accelerates with the addition of a slight syllable at the end of a line, making the utterance sound full of energy and vehemence." This is suggestive of the playful, innocent feminine energy of the Duchess breaking though the rigid verbal control of the Duke, as he fails to repress his violent reaction to the memory of his wife's vitality.

That the Duke is still threatened and intimidated by that vitality and innocent sexuality is suggested on two levels within the poem: firstly, by his conscious

insistence that the portrait is veiled - "(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)" (11.9-10), and secondly by his hesitations and demurrals, which suggest discomfort and anxiety, for example, in lines 22, 32 and 36.[2] It is clear that Browning's male characters are highly vulnerable to the latent charms of the female. Indeed, in "Women and Roses," published in Browning's 1855 collection, *Men and Women,* the male speaker promises his beloved that he would gladly "break my heart at your feet to please you! / Oh, to possess and be possessed!" (11. 19-20). Thus, the violent reaction of both Porphyria's lover and the Duke may have been a subconscious act of self-defence, bom of a fear of self-extinction at the feet of the beloved, intended to destroy the female that threatened to completely ensnare them.

Marsh (1987: 12) describes how the female figure in Victorian poetry and Pre-Raphaelite art "represented the artist's own soul, the creative impulse of his art" - a notion explored in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's prose piece "Hand and Soul." However, Marsh fails to recognise that whilst the female represents the artistic soul, the male speaker in Browning's poems often represents the artist's physical being, desiring to visually capture something of the female. For example, in "Women and Roses," the speaker exclaims, "Stay then, stoop, since I cannot climb, / You, great shapes of the antique time! How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you?" (11. 17-18). He wishes to capture and preserve the beauty of the female object in the same way that an artist wishes to immortalise the beauty of his subject or give visual form to his inspiration. Similarly, the Duke wishes to "fix" his wife by turning her in an *objet d'art,* which can be controlled with what Laura Mulvey (1975: 11) terms "the male gaze," which tends towards "a certain violence; penetrating, piercing, fixing." Carol Christ (1987: 386) attributes a similar "gaze" to Tennyson's male protagonists, describing how "Tennyson frequently presents poetry as an erotic theft through which the male incorporates a power he locates in the female. This theft is most often defined in visual terms, as an unauthorised gaze through which the poet steals the power that generates his art." However, the Duke does not appear to derive any creative power or confidence from the portrait, because, as Mulvey (1975: 13) explains, "woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified."

[2] "She had / A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad" (11. 21-22); "She thanked men - good! But thanked / Somehow -I know not how - as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift" (11. 31-34); "Even had you skill / In speech - (which I have not) - to make your will / Quite clear [...]" (11. 35-37).

That the female figure is intended as a representation of the artist's own creative energy initially seems problematic, as an act of fatal violence against the poetic rendering of the anima-figure would seem to symbolise the self-destruction of that very creative inspiration. However, William O. Raymond (1950: 209) suggests that the female figure is also representative of "abstract idealism," which is pitted against "masculine realism." Thus in "Porphyria's Lover" Porphyria represents the "abstract idealism" that naively leads her to believe that she can maintain a healthy relationship with a man of a lower socio-economic class in a class-conscious society, whereas the speaker represents the unfortunate reality of that injuriously class-conscious patriarchal society which leads him to harm her jealously. Porphyria, innocently unaware of the tensions that socio-economic difference causes between them, is also representative of Browning's "artistic inheritance of the ideals of Romanticism, as represented by the poetry ofShelley" (Raymond 1950: 195). Thus, the speaker's actofviolence against her is representative of the tension that existed between Browning's residual Romantic idealism and the mood of moral righteousness that pervaded Victorian society, though for Browning, such tension was employed constructively and creatively. Raymond (1950: 211) asserts that "Browning is prone to make his characters voice his own ideas, to grant them only semi-independence, or even reduce them to mouthpieces of his personality." If this is true, then an act of violence against the female is an enactment of the intellectual violence of the conflicting beliefs, opinions and emotions of the poet.

Such conflicting emotions and desires can be observed in Browning's "Two in the Campagna," first published in *Men and Women.* The speaker wishes to "pluck the rose" (1. 48), yet is troubled by the intangible presence of a "fault" or "wound" in their relationship (11. 39-40). Bristow (1991: 137) describes how the speaker, though "guided towards this divine act of sexual union, [...] none the less fears violating the woman's individuality." The tension between these desires is augmented by lines in which the speaker sincerely voices a desire for union, then immediately negates or qualifies it for fear of her subjection, for example when he says, "I would that you were all to me, / You that are just so much, no more. / Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!" (11. 36-38). The moral dilemma is also physically enacted in the line, "No. I yearn upward, touch you close, / Then stand away" (11. 46-47). The ultimate irreconcilability of these desires - to both sexually possess the woman and leave her free to retain her individuality - is subtly expressed in the image of the "thread the spiders throw / Mocking across our path" (11. 8-9), which long eludes his grasp. The speaker asks his beloved, "Help me to hold it!" and "Hold it fast!" (11.

11; 20). However, despite the speaker's obvious concern for the interests of his beloved, she is largely absent from the poem; his personal predicament is privileged over hers. Although not through physical violence, she too, like Porphyria and the Duchess, is denied a voice.

A similar conflict of male desires pervades "Women and Roses." The speaker wishes to "make an Eve, be the artist that began her, / Shaped her to his mind" (11. 46-47), yet recognises that "women faded for ages, / Sculptured in stone, on the poet's pages" dull in comparison to the "women fresh and gay, / Living and loving and loved to-day" (11. 6-9). The impossibility of "shaping" a woman to his mind, yet leaving intact her personality and vitality is encapsulated in the phrase, "Drink but once and die!" (1. 23). The speaker may "shape" her to his taste, but her individuality will "die" in the process. Bristow (1991: 134) observes an ethical point in the poem: "that women should not be entrapped by a male's all consuming desire. Women have the right to resist a male impulse that seeks to 'fix' its object." This reflects Browning's "firm commitment to the [notion of the] liberal subject; a free, independent and ostensibly ungendered being" (Bristow 1991: 129).

It is clear that Browning was deeply concerned with the freedom of the individual and the moral responsibility connected to that freedom. Marsh (1987: 152) suggests that the depictions of female characters such as Porphyria, the Duchess and Tennyson's Lady of Shalott are intended to communicate not only the implicitly criticised "confined and restricted world of the Victorian woman" but also "the dire consequences attendant on rebellion." Marsh's suggestion prompts us to consider whether Browning intended to convey a moral precept through his depiction of violence against the female. Whilst he no doubt wished to explore the complex rationalisation behind the punishment of the female, nothing in the poetry suggests that he is expressing a personal belief in her moral delinquency. Indeed, in "My Last Duchess," the reader is encouraged to view the Duchess as merely innocently vivacious and charming. In "Porphyria's Lover," the speaker convinces himself that his act of violence was a pre-emptive punishment for her inevitable infidelity. As in many Victorian texts, her "yellow hair" (1. 17) is symbolic of sexual potency and female desire, and it is deeply significant that he strangles her with the very symbol of the sexuality for which he is punishing her. However, the reader is left in no doubt that the speaker is mentally unstable, thus fatally undermining the legitimacy of his moral judgement. Far from criticising the female, Browning's depiction of violence is in fact a subtle condemnation of Victorian society as a whole. The advent of sensationalist novels and tabloid newspapers, both due to the

creation of a mass reading public, led to the normalization of violence, and a desensitised readership. Fed with lurid stories every day, the public came to regard such violence as hackneyed. This is suggested in “Porphyria’s Lover” as her strangulation is described in a conversational, even blase tone - “I found / A thing to do, and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, *I* And strangled her” (11. 37-41). Browning’s depiction of this fatal act is intended to shatter that sense of complacency and provoke a sudden, sincere emotional reaction, and in the process illustrate the disturbed condition of the Victorian psyche. Raymond (1950:203) suggests that “in order to accentuate the poignancy and arduousness of this process, the poet dwells with unflinching realism on the grim potency of evil and suffering.” However, Browning recognised that evil could often appear attractive and charismatic. In “My Last Duchess,” the Duke says, “Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a seahorse, thought a rarity” (11. 54-55), and we are led to identify the Duke with the impressive image of the god. King (1968: 69) describes how “the artistry of the object suggests a certain perverse beauty in the Duke and explains partly why we have been temporarily captivated by him. Upon reflection, he is likely to seem repugnant.”

One of the guises in which violence may “captivate” the imagination and appear attractive is that of Imperialistic ambition. Browning’s depictions of violent acts committed against women could be considered to be metaphors for acts of imperialist violence committed against subject nations. Edmund Dowden (1915:111), however, argues that Browning does not “anywhere study political phenomena or events except as they throw light on individual character,” and would thus be more interested in the individual instance of violence, than in its metonymic potential for the illumination of “political phenomena or events.” That said, Browning would have surely perceived and appreciated its effective metaphorical or metonymic potential. Like the female, the subject nations were considered to be what Edward Said described as “the Other” - ultimately unknowable in their dissimilarity. The misconstrued innocent vitality and sexual allure of Porphyria and the Duchess can be likened to the native traditions and cultures that were similarly suppressed by British Imperialism. Bristow (1991: 141) claims that Browning seeks to “estrange eroticism from Imperialism” in “Love Among the Ruins,” first published in *Men and Women,* by emphasising the contrast between the lovers’ embrace and the “whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!” (11. 81-82) caused by violence and warfare, and each stanza formally emphasises the schism between past and present. The speaker longs to mentally and physically disconnect from the “million fighters” of the past, and voices

a desire to "Shut them in, / With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!" simply concluding, "Love is best" (1. 84). Despite this attempt at estrangement, or perhaps, suppression, Bristow (1991: 141) questions "what act of war might the male speaker be committing on the woman that awaits him?" Her "yellow hair" calls to mind the unfortunate Porphyria, and we cannot help but wonder how long it will be before the speaker grows suspicious of her "eager eyes."

It seems that the Victorian male poet faced a double crisis of gender, so to speak. He experienced not only the inevitable uncertainty of a man in a society which simultaneously idealised and demonised, desired and despised women, but also an anxiety about how the writing of poetry was to be reconciled with the new Victorian ideal of "entrepreneurial manliness" (Sussman 1995: 82). Dorothy Mermin (1986: 67) notes that "for the Victorians, writing poetry seemed like woman's work, even though only men were supposed to do it [...] Male Victorian poets worried that they might in effect be feminizing themselves by withdrawing into a private world." What has come to be the stereotypical (though now somewhat discredited) image of the Romantic poet - a fey, solitary figure, isolated from the male sphere of commerce, governed by "feminine" imagination rather than "male" rationality - loomed large in the Victorian period, and male poets, such as Browning and, in his later work, Tennyson, sought to "recover a male identity though remasculinization" (Shires 1987: 269).

In "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," both published in *Men and Women,* Browning presents a male artist figure attempting, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile his occupation with the Victorian ideal of "entrepreneurial manliness." Both poems suggest that artistic potency is inextricably linked to male sexual energy and commercial success. However, with characteristic subtlety, Browning, despite portraying Lippo as commercially successful, and creatively and sexually potent - the apparent epitome of "entrepreneurial manhood" - suggests that there are inherent and insoluble contradictions within that ideal. As such, Browning's male artist figures are haunted by fears of emasculation, and the kind of violence that is elsewhere inflicted upon Browning's female characters. For example, in "Fra Lippo Lippi" it appears to Lippo that a guardsman holds aloft "John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair / With one hand [...]/ And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!" (11. 34-36). This ominous image is compounded by the Prior's reference to "Herodias, [...] *I* Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!" (11. 196-97). Lippo attempts to assert his masculine autonomy, declaring, "I'm my own master, paint now as I please," but then continues, "Having a friend,

you see, in the Comer-house!"(ll. 226-27). Lippo, despite his protestations of independence, is as dependent upon his influential Medici patron as any wife upon her husband, or whore upon her client. Indeed, Rossetti (1965-67: 2. 1175) wrote in a letter to Ford Madox Brown in 1873, "I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned." The "munificent House" that "harbours" Lippo also, in a sense, imprisons him (11. 29). He is forced to suppress his sensual nature, as the Prior orders him:

> ignore it all,
> Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
> Your business is to paint the souls of men -
> [...]
> Give us no more of body than shows soul! (11. 181-88)

For Lippo, as for Browning's female characters, to display his sensual nature would be to incur punishment and disgrace. In order to be economically successful and retain the favour of his influential patron, he must suppress his male sexual energy, yet in doing so, he cannot achieve the ideal of "entrepreneurial manliness," which the poem ostensibly celebrates.

It is clear that Browning found violence to be an abundant source of literary inspiration, and that the depiction of the violent act allowed him to explore the underlying tensions and oppositions that pervaded the dramatically changing Victorian society, and characterised the contradictory attitudes towards the female and the feminine, and the subsequent insecurity of the male. Browning recognised that violence could take many forms, and could appear behind the guise of passivity, suppression, or feigned moral righteousness. As with all of Browning's themes and subjects, violence is never straightforward or unambiguous, either in its motivation, its depiction or its perception. The complexity and acuity of Browning's depiction of violence engages the reader on both an intellectual and emotional level, and so we, as readers, are intellectually and emotionally implicated in the poem's search for meaning.

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