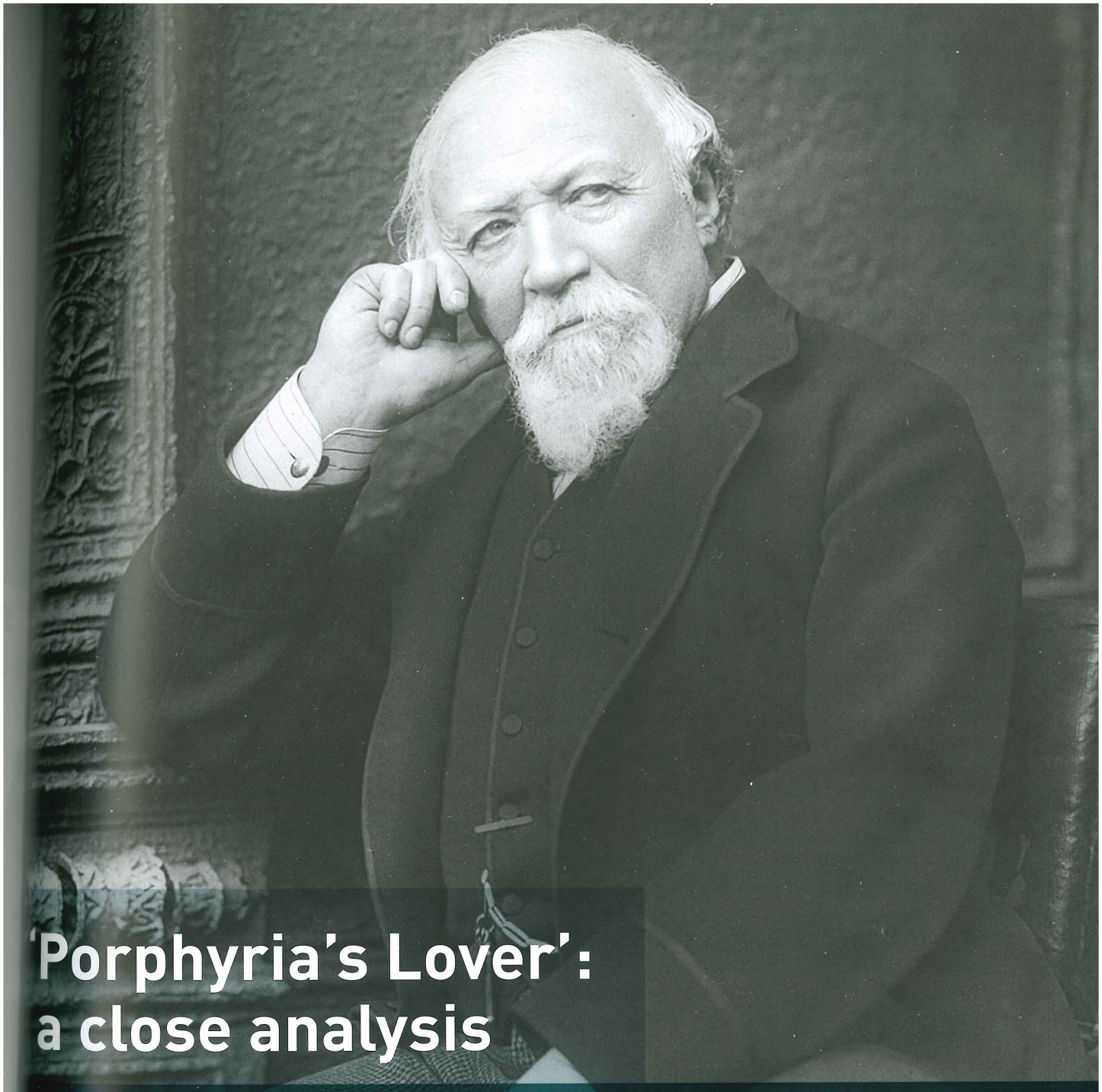

'Porphyria's Lover': a close analysis

Lindsey Stewart's close reading sets Browning's first dramatic monologue in its wider literary context.

Browning's Dramatic Monologues

Of all the Victorian poets, it is Robert Browning who is the key precursor of modernism. Having failed as a dramatist, he took the idea of a character's individual voice, with all its unreliability and peculiarity, and created dramatic monologues; brief set-pieces, often beginning in *media res*, which are rich in irony. The reader can sense that the speaker is weird; they just don't appear to know it themselves. This was a crucial break from the self-expressive lyric that the Romantic poets had given the reading public. The story of 'Porphyria's Lover' is one of self-obsessive love and murder; a beautiful young woman meets her lover for an assignation in a secret location and he murders her. His motive is unclear and it is this lack of clarity which intrigues.

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An Enigmatic Speaker – Piecing Together the Clues

Initially the un-named speaker in 'Porphyria's Lover' is something of a blank canvas. Unlike in most of Browning's later dramatic monologues, we are not introduced to a public persona or a definitive time setting; he is not an Italian Duke, a materialistic Bishop or a lascivious Renaissance painter. The lover is solely defined through his attachment to Porphyria. She, we gather, is probably favourably connected, and possibly wealthy; wearing gloves, taking her leave of 'to-night's gay feast,' (27) and eschewing 'vainer ties' (24). 'Feasting' suggests a pre-Victorian setting. The speaker, perhaps unwelcome at this 'feast', seems obscure and lower in the feudal hierarchy, lurking in a darkened cottage somewhere remote. Compounding his isolation, the implied listener to his dramatic monologue seems to be himself, although the last line of the poem suggests that he thinks God might overhear. Our expectations tend towards an illicit romance, challenging barriers of class and filial obligation.

Pathetic Fallacy

Juxtaposing the tumultuous, stormy outdoors with the subsequent glowing seductiveness of the cottage, Browning's first stanza uses a definitive example of what his contemporary John Ruskin had called 'pathetic fallacy', a derogatory term he used to describe a false sense of reality:

The rain set in early to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.

We know that the speaker, projecting himself onto these natural phenomena, is mired in an emotional storm. He is sullenly spiteful, vexatious and teetering on the edge of heart-break. The impression that his lengthy waits are a regular scenario is suggested by his opening line wherein 'tonight', particularly, the onset of these conditions has begun 'early'. Something is amiss. But, as an apparent answer to this turbulence, like a fairy-tale princess, Porphyria 'glided in'. It could be that this means in a queenly fashion, or it could even be spectral. There are some intertextual similarities to be found here with Keat's *The Eve of St Agnes*; the contrasting extremities of warmth and chill, the illicit liaison in which Porphyro is the active agent, perhaps providing a source for Porphyria's name.

Lady Lilith by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

A Single Perspective

The purposeful visitor busies herself straight away, tasked with transforming the scene, and confirming our romantic expectations. This goes beyond domestic servitude for she works carefully to ensure that the fire will suggestively 'blaze-up' and then begins her transgressive 'Victorian strip-tease'. She dispenses with the promiscuously 'soiled gloves', sheds her wet cloak and shawl, then scandalously removes her hat to teasingly loosen her long hair. The implication is that she is boldly alluring. Throughout all this our speaker has been oddly passive to the extent that it is Porphyria who is the sexually assertive lover, placing his head on her bare white shoulder, murmuring her love, and, we hope, bringing an equilibrium to the troubled mind of the afflicted speaker. Crucially, the only perspective we have is the lover's and, as Isobel Armstrong's seminal reading of the poem argues, 'it is not clear whether or not [Porphyria] has been conjured by the fantasist's dream of a seduction'; in other words, we only have his view that she even exists, let alone how she behaves. This narrative is full of trickery, gaps and unreliability. Perhaps disconcertingly, he twice refers to her 'yellow hair', first held back and then hanging over his cheek. Her fate seems to be that of an inverted Rapunzel, in which her hair singularly fails to save her. This hair is not fairy-tale 'golden' but an unadorned 'yellow' which is distinctly anti-romantic and hints at the lover's limited lexical choices.

A Controlled Form

Posed by the clearly dominant Porphyria in a tableau of protection and comfort that will be grotesquely mirrored in later lines, the *volte-face* occurs. The speaker, with all evidence tellingly pointing to the contrary, asserts that Porphyria is 'weak' and unable to commit herself to him because of 'pride'. His urge to create a flattering narrative for himself leads him to the revelation that 'Porphyria worshipped me' and it is this epiphany that suggests 'a thing to do', an alarmingly complacent phrase for what now horrifyingly unfolds. Her hair becomes

Porphyria's Lover by BrionyVictoria on deviantart.com

'string' and the magic, fairy-tale number 'three' is employed by Browning as a detail of her murderous strangulation:

all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around

Browning does not have his speaker mimic the rhythms of speech here. Unlike Browning's other famous dramatic monologue, 'My Last Duchess', the speaker does not speak with the give-away hesitations of a cultured man who is haughty and searches for an evasive phrase. On the contrary, here we have the insanity of an ordered rhyming couplet whilst a murder takes place. The controlled form is full of irony.

Gaps in the Narrative

Told retrospectively, we realise that our speaker has been recounting events with the corpse of Porphyria arranged next to him, cruelly echoing her earlier affection. Now the climactic crisis is over and all that Porphyria apparently 'scorned at once is fled'. Given his propensity for projection we might assume that it is perhaps all that he scorned that has now been removed. A stock scenario might be that she was betrothed to another and because this was just too terrifying a possibility for the lover, permanent erasure provides an emotional release. But Browning leaves us with a narrative gap. If this is just a tale of passionate, morbid jealousy, then the details of the murder (the gruesome image of her flickering eyelids in her last moments and the wholly unwarranted nature of her death by 'yellow hair') seem excessive, almost ceremonial. It is as though she is being punished, maybe for being a proud woman, or possibly for being from a certain class. Importantly, with her death the speaker feels that he owns her; his control is asserted.

This narrative is full of trickery, gaps and unreliability

Multiple Interpretations

In many ways the poem resists any single interpretation. The lover's actions may find wider cultural meaning as part of the Victorian obsession with dead people, especially women. In later Victorian England corpses were often depicted in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and also posed and photographed in coffins to produce macabre snapshots. A floating corpse is used in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' as a motif for the inability of art accurately to reflect beauty and life. In this way, Porphyria's lover is an artist in extremis, albeit a distinctly gruesome one, who is seeking to possess and objectify. On the other hand, we wonder if we are just privy to the thoughts of a lunatic. Or in a more complex way, perhaps we are being asked to follow the twisted logic of a resentful peasant. Either way the murder is a Gothic moment of horror that upsets the romantic tale we might have anticipated. We cannot sympathise with the lover but he has the last word, and significantly God does not.

Drawing on a Range of Genres

'Porphyria's Lover' was arguably the very first short dramatic monologue to make it into print and was published in *The Monthly Repository* in 1836. Although Browning took an interest in reports of grim criminality, one of which could be a source for the poem, the poem's real focus is on the psychology of the murderer. The amalgam of genres he used to set about his depiction requires careful unpicking. There are hints of Shakespearean soliloquy, well-placed clues that pre-date the late Victorian penchant for detective fiction manifest in the hugely popular works of Wilkie Collins, and also a good measure of Gothic horror to be found in the murder itself as well as its remote setting, which is beyond the realms and codes of 'normal' behaviour.

Browning's choice of speaker, whose abnormal psychology comes to us through his own speech, may also suggest a wider societal willingness to understand extreme mental states, hitherto regarded in terms of godlessness and medieval witchery. Coincidentally or not, the move from brutal, repressive madhouses to a new era of asylums offering therapeutic care for the insane was just beginning as Browning's poem went to press.

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