
Porphyria's Lover

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young heroine, the right of wardship and marriage over Idonea de Vipont, sister of Isabella mentioned above, was granted soon after Evesham to another somewhat unscrupulous associate of Clifford's, Roger de Leybourne (d. 1271). Leybourne actually married Idonea to his son, but the tradition that the middle-aged guardian himself became the husband of his young ward to secure her estates has persisted strongly enough to be recorded as fact in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.⁹

No far-reaching conclusions can be drawn from these bits of hypothesis, but in the aggregate they would seem to indicate that, despite the known influence of *Caleb Williams*, *Othello*, and *Die Räuber*, Wordsworth did adapt for his purposes actual historical characters and incidents.

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PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* has been called a study in madness, on the strength, perhaps, of his having once entitled it *Madhouse Cell, No. II*. The poem, however, had probably been written as early as 1834, was certainly published in 1836 in *The Monthly Repository*, and so far had been called simply *Porphyria*. Not until 1842, when it was reprinted along with *Johannes Agricola* in *Dramatic Lyrics*, did it receive the invidious title. In 1863 the pair was divided, *Porphyria* becoming *Porphyria's Lover*.

One of Browning's earliest compositions, this poem was a product of the "confessional" mood which had inspired *Pauline* in 1833. Unconventional as Porphyria's lover is, he is no more mad than many another of Browning's heroes. Knowing that Porphyria loves him passionately but has not the strength of character necessary to make her true to him, he thinks it better that she should die rather than sully her spiritual purity in the marriage-bed of a man she does not love. "And yet God has not said a word!" Why should He? Was not this the doctrine Browning was later to preach a thousand and one times?—

⁹ Under Roger de Clifford.

And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
 Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
 Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.

(*The Statue and the Bust*)

But in 1842 Browning had not the courage of his convictions. His advertisement is well known. "Such poems as the following come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of 'Dramatic Pieces'; being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." So in reprinting *Porphyria* and *Johannes Agricola* he felt they might injure susceptibilities, the former by its unconventional moral, the latter by its scathing satire on religious orthodoxy.¹ The title, *Madhouse Cells*, was a convenient means of fobbing the two poems off as entirely objective studies in mental aberration.

By 1863, however, he had got over the worst pangs of poetical stage-fright, and was undertaking more and more to express his own opinions in his poems. It was time to get rid of the title, *Madhouse Cells*, and the humbug it stood for. Without it no one would have ever thought *Porphyria's Lover* a study in anything madder than the sort of eccentricity readers of Browning are accustomed to.

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¹ See my article in *SP*, xxxiii (1936), 618.

¹ Because a longer period than usual has passed since my last report, and because a larger number of books and articles than ever before have had to be examined, I am forced to limit my comments to succinct accounts of the chief purposes and uses of the more important books and articles, and sometimes to a mere mention of titles. For the same reasons my personal comments will often seem dogmatic, lack of space preventing presentation of supporting evidence.