

of firm convictions and established beliefs" (9–10). As echoed in Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man*, "Satan will be overcome; Virtue will descend from heaven, surrounded by her angels, and reign over the hearts of men. Earth, which is now a purgatory, will be made a paradise" in the future (Houghton 35).

It is this future paradise of "man and angels" (14), a world reflecting Tennyson's "larger hope" for his age, that finally awaits the surfacing Kraken. Such an early-nineteenth-century hope, tempered with dismay and anxiety (Houghton 23), provides the contrast to Yeats's early-twentieth-century view of a world that can only wait for the nightmare to come. Furthermore, while such hope prevails in Tennyson's poetry, from "Ulysses" to *In Memoriam*, from "Locksley Hall" to "The Ancient Sage," this analysis shows that it had a distinct beginning in "The Kraken."

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Browning's PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

In Robert Browning's early dramatic monologue "Porphyria's Lover," first published as "Porphyria" in the *Monthly Repository* for January 1836, the speaker describes how he murders the woman he loves.¹ Michael Mason discovered two related sources for the murder in John Wilson's "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary" (published in *Blackwoods* for 1818) and Bryan Procter's poem "Marcian Colonna" (1820), which Procter acknowledged to be based on Wilson's narrative.² Both pieces deal with the murder of a woman by her lover, sensationalizing the erotic aspects of the crime and the woman's dead body. Browning retains elements of both texts. The claimed absence of suffering and details of the woman's white flesh, fair hair, and blue eyes are taken from Wil-

son; the all-night vigil and the appearance of animation after death are taken from Procter. However, I think there is also another text that underlies Browning's monologue, which suggests some details not found in either Wilson or Procter. Furthermore, this subtext and Browning's revisionary allusions to it provide a critical yardstick by which the speaker can take the measure of this monologist.

When Browning explored the type of the jealous and possessive male in "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," he drew on Shakespeare's treatment of this type in the character of Othello and also Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. The drama of *Othello*, in which the misguided hero murders his wife, seems to me particularly important to "Porphyria's Lover." In *Othello*, the eponymous protagonist is a romantic and passionate figure whose active and impressionable imagination is easily stimulated by Iago's calumny against Desdemona. Othello's romanticism is glimpsed early on in the play in a lyrical speech made as he disembarks after a stormy voyage and is reunited with his bride. Addressing Desdemona, he says,

O my soul's joy!
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death! . . .

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.184-93)¹

Othello's idealization of the death-in-bliss, a kind of sustained erotic consummation, precedes the later evolution of that figure in romantic poetry such as Keats's: "Now more than ever it seems rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain."² As a Victorian reacting against his romantic heritage, Browning parodies precisely this kind of romantic idealization in "Porphyria's Lover," where "that moment" (36)—the moment in which the lover witnesses the woman's apparently wholehearted love—is also the moment that he attempts to preserve by killing her. Browning, de-idealizing the romanticism of his predecessors, exposes the fatuity of this attempt, echoing Keats ironically in the lover's assurance: "No pain felt she, / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (41-42). In *Othello*, Desdemona's commonsensical response to her husband's inauspicious words—"The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow!" (193-95)—suggests a maturer perspective that is unfortunately disappointed by the eventualities of the plot; for, like the storm that heralds the murder of "Porphyria's Lover," the storm clouds of *Othello* are already gathering.

Browning inflates and explodes romantic egotism: the lover kills the woman, not himself. But the death that preserves the woman's imputed compliance is,

Browning implies, but a formalization of the romantic male speaker's desire to fix and possess the female beloved. Romantic poetry idealizes the woman who is subject to the male gaze; she is the reflector and guarantor of male identity. Hence the male anxiety about woman's independence, for her liberty puts masculine self-estimation at risk. Porphyria's lover wants her to remain "pure" (37); Othello, a prototype of the romantic male, believing Desdemona an adulteress, accuses her of being a corrupted text: "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.71-72). He had thought he owned that original "pure" text which secured his sense of self. The death of the innocent Desdemona is almost less scandalous than Othello's assumption that her adultery justifies his murdering her. His self-condemnation is provoked only by the discovery of her blamelessness.

Iago's malignity furnishes another feature of Browning's monologue. Having provoked Othello into murderous fury against his wife, Iago slyly suggests, "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.207-8). Strangulation does not occur in Wilson or Procter's texts, where the woman is stabbed or poisoned, but it is the method of murder preferred by Porphyria's lover, probably because it ensures that the all-important appearance of the woman remains unblemished. In point of fact, Othello resorts to smothering rather than strangling his wife, but the preservation of Desdemona's loveliness is a key factor in his decision:

Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster. (5.2.3-5)

As the lover fondly surveys his mistress's corpse after the murder, Othello eroticizes the soon-to-be-monumentalized body of Desdemona. However, unlike Porphyria's lover, Othello does have an understanding of the irrevocability of his action. He does not confuse life and death: "When I have pluck'd thy rose / I cannot give it vital growth again, / It needs must wither" (5.2.13-15). Othello's misgiving functions as an ironic echo in the lover's self-deluded, objectifying description of Porphyria's drooping head: "The smiling rosy little head, / So glad it has its utmost will" (52-53).

The subtext of *Othello* presents us with certain admonitory reading cues that help us construe the reality of the situation and give us an index to the indulgent self-deception of the lover. Mason suggests that Browning uses source-texts that portray insanity, not to prove his monologist a lunatic, but to give "an illustration of how an act conventionally referable to insanity might be the act of a rational being."⁵ I would contend that the pattern of *Othello* offers us another way of understanding a supposedly "rational" behavior that is founded on dangerously idealized notions of love and an endorsement of male self-determination at the expense of female autonomy. The "lunacy" that Browning

exposes is that his monologist's crime can be regarded as "rational." The lover's act of violence thus casts its shadow on all those other less-dramatic acts of domination and appropriation that manage to pass unnoticed under the cover of rational male behavior. Browning uses Othello as the archetype of the deluded lover, the one who can declare himself "An honorable murderer, . . . / For nought I did in hate, but all in honor" (5.2.294–95). We are only too aware that "honor" is a face-saver; "honor" represents Othello's attempt to protect his identity when under seeming threat. Browning shows us how apparently reasoned justification is founded on misprision, on fantasy, jealousy, fear, and aggression. The paradigm of Othello alerts us to the emotional disorder that underlies the logic of Browning's controlled and controlling lover.

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NOTES

1. "Porphyria's Lover," *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 380–81. Line references are given parenthetically in the text.

2. Michael Mason, "Browning and the Dramatic Monologue," *Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974) 255–57.

3. The text of *Othello* is taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

4. "Ode to a Nightingale," *Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and New York: Longman, 1970) 529.

5. Mason 257.

Browning's AN EPISTLE . . . OF KARSHISH

The explication of Robert Browning's "An Epistle . . . of Karshish" (hereinafter "Karshish") has been strongly influenced by Richard D. Altick's article, "Browning's 'Karshish' and St. Paul,"¹ which argues that the poem should be read not only as a satiric comment on the intellectual-theological attacks against traditional Christianity in the Victorian age but also as a "reconstruction of a significant, albeit imaginary, event in the history of religion." When read in the latter sense, "the poem acquires extra edge if we detect the hovering presence of St. Paul" (494). Altick's argument for Pauline presence in "Karshish" hinges on three main points: (1) the stylistic resemblance of the poem's opening lines to the letters of Paul; (2) parallels between the careers of Paul