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Holding Her Still:
Attachment Theory and Dependence in Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover"

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Abstract:

Psychological readings of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" have linked the speakers' possessiveness with insecurity, narcissism and fear of loss. This article uses attachment theory, which developed from psychoanalysis, to examine how each speaker's expectations of affection shape his account of the woman he describes. By analysing pronouns, qualifying phrases, assertions, syntax and rhyme, it shows how each speaker presents his own worth and interprets the woman's feelings. Dismissing and preoccupied attachment patterns guide its readings of the Duke and the Lover. The Duke takes his own worth for granted and resents what he sees as the Duchess's failure to value him above others. John Bowlby's account of compulsive self-reliance helps interpret his refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to the Duchess and his continuing grievance. His speech provides less direct evidence of attachment needs than the Lover's speech in "Porphyria's Lover." Porphyria's care for the distressed Lover suggests that he finds comfort in her presence, while his claims about her devotion raise the possibility that he relies on her love to feel valued. The discussion considers the envoy's unrecorded reply and the question of divine judgement raised by the Lover's report that God remains silent.

Keywords: Robert Browning; dramatic monologue; attachment theory; "My Last Duchess"; "Porphyria's Lover"

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Introduction

In Robert Browning's dramatic monologues "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover," two men give accounts of women whose voices readers hear only as the men report them. The Duke, showing the Duchess's portrait to an envoy representing the father of his intended bride, resents what he presents as her readiness to share her warmth with others and stresses that "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" (9–10). The Lover, sitting through the night with the woman he has strangled with her own hair (39–41), insists that "No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (41–42). Each man has replaced a woman who could give or withhold her affection with something that can do neither, the Duke a painting and the Lover a body. Earl G. Ingersoll reads both substitutions as attempts to prevent the loss of the women. The Duchess becomes an object that "can never be lost," and Porphyria becomes "a fetishistic object which can never leave" (156, 154). The Duke judges how the Duchess behaved when she was alive, whereas the Lover attributes feelings to Porphyria after her death. What do these accounts reveal about each man's dependence on the woman he describes? What can readers conclude when they have access only to the speaker's account?

These poems are read together because both speakers continue to interpret the women's affection, the Duke while retaining the Duchess's portrait and the Lover while keeping Porphyria's body beside him. Attachment theory provides a way to distinguish what each man expects from that affection. As John Bowlby formulated it, the theory concerns proximity to particular people, the security they may provide, and the expectations of self and others formed through attachment relationships (*A Secure Base* 29–30, 146). The Duke's speech gives less direct evidence of a need for comfort than the Lover's. He takes his own worth for granted and expects the Duchess to value him above others. His refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to her and his continuing resentment may be read through the dismissing attachment pattern described by Kim Bartholomew and Leonard Horowitz (227–28), although rank also helps explain his conduct. The Lover's opening scene gives more direct support for an attachment reading. He presents himself as distressed, and Porphyria warms the cottage and draws him close. His later account can be read through the pattern Bartholomew and Horowitz call preoccupied (227–28). The comparison therefore considers both how the speakers manage dependence and how directly their accounts support these interpretations.

The analysis examines pronouns, expressions of certainty and doubt, shifts of tense, and the actions each speaker assigns to himself and the woman. These features show how he presents his own worth and interprets the woman's affection. The analysis also considers how sentences work within and across the heroic couplets of "My Last Duchess" and the five-line rhyme groups of "Porphyria's Lover." Rhyme and syntax are read alongside the speakers' accounts, without treating verse form alone as evidence of an attachment pattern. The discussion then turns to the role of silence at the poems' endings. "My Last Duchess"

records no reply from the envoy, while the Lover reports that God remains silent. Neither ending establishes what response the speaker wants to hear.

Critical readings of sympathy, judgement and silence

Critical debate about sympathy and moral judgement raises the question of whether understanding a dramatic monologue requires readers to identify with its speaker. Robert Langbaum argues that the dramatic monologue produces a "disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment" as readers adopt "the speaker's point of view, both visual and moral" (131). He describes a tension between readers' enjoyment of that perspective and their judgement of it "on grounds of truth or morality" (134). Cynthia Scheinberg challenges Langbaum's assumption that readers suspend moral judgement because they prefer to participate in the Duke's power, describing it as "his assumption of a universalized reader" (176, 178). She explains that her moral judgement of the Duke's misogyny prevents her from identifying with him (178). The attachment reading does not require readers to sympathise with the Duke. Readers who differ in their moral and emotional responses to him can still attend to what his qualifications, accusations and claims to special regard suggest about the affection and recognition he expects from her.

Other critics examine how the presence or absence of a listener shapes the speakers' purposes. Dorothy Mermin associates the envoy's silence with the Duke's power and the Lover's lack of an auditor with weakness (49). Glennis Byron finds in the Lover's speech "no real auditor in the sense often expected of the form," although he "does seem to be awaiting some kind of response" (ch. 3). E. Warwick Slinn observes that Browning "provides neither speaker nor reader with an external judge" (12). Cornelia Pearsall restates her account of the dramatic monologue as speech through which a speaker seeks "to perform or effect some goal in the course of the monologue's temporal development" ("Implicated" 222), so that speaking may attempt to change the speaker's situation as well as describe it. Together, these readings raise questions about what the speakers seek to achieve and whether they expect a response. The present comparison distinguishes between the absence of a recorded reply from the envoy and the Lover's explicit report of God's silence, while leaving open what response either man seeks.

Herbert F. Tucker connects the speakers' desires with literary history by examining how dramatic monologues allow readers to overhear expressions of personal feeling. He describes Porphyria's lover as "a gruesomely literal-minded Petrarch bent on possessing the object of his desire" and the speakers in Browning's early dramatic monologues as each delivering "a monomaniacal manifesto that shows subjectivity up by betraying its situation in a history" ("Dramatic Monologue" 228). In "My Last Duchess," Tucker hears lines 21–34 as a "lyrical interlude" within the Duke's account and describes the surrounding narrative as expressing "a predatory envy that escapes his posture of condescension" ("Dramatic Monologue" 234). Returning to the poem later, he finds in it "the Duke's confession that in overmastering his Duchess he has nevertheless failed to understand her" ("Ever a Fighter" 38–39). His readings suggest that the Duke speaks as though the Duchess's pleasures are

beneath him, yet reveals both envy and a failure to understand her. The attachment reading asks whether his expectations of her affection help to explain that failure, examining how his possessives and qualifications make his assumed worth the measure of her response.

Existing readings of possession and insecurity provide further grounds for comparing the speakers. U. C. Knoepflmacher finds that the Duke's "previous effort to objectify a living woman into a frozen painting still seems to unsettle him" (154). Jennifer Gribble holds that he murders the Duchess "because her physical vitality challenges his need for absolute control" (23), and Britta Martens notes the difficulty of establishing how far the Duke's "paranoia and repressed insecurity" exaggerated the Duchess's appreciation of other men ("Dramatic Monologue" 205). Miriam Fernández-Santiago similarly suggests that the supposed adultery may arise from the Duke's obsession with his family's honour rather than from the Duchess's conduct (98). Ingersoll reads both speakers' efforts to turn the women into objects they can possess as attempts to prevent loss (154–56), and Tyler Efird reads the poems as implicating male readers in the speakers' narcissistic fantasies of possession (153–55, 159, 164–65).

Other readings make dependence more explicit, particularly in their accounts of the Lover. Renée Fox's account of reanimation draws a parallel between the inner lives the speakers invent for the dead women and those Browning creates for his fictional speakers (473–75). She reads the Lover's sense of self as dependent on the awareness he attributes to Porphyria's corpse (473), and the portrait as enabling "the Duke's fantasy of her ongoing capitulation to his will and to his language" (474). Gribble describes the figure the Lover says has "fled" as "the scorned lover dependent on the unpredictable attentions of Porphyria" (26), and in a reading informed by Spiritualism, Randa Helfield presents the Lover as possessed by the woman he claims to possess (17). Fox and Gribble already identify dependence in the Lover's account. The present comparison asks how expectations of affection relate to each speaker's sense of worth. The Duke demands recognition of a worth he assumes, while the Lover may rely on the devotion he attributes to Porphyria to feel valued.

Attachment theory as a reading of represented speech

Attachment theory connects a person's sense of security with the expectation that a particular attachment figure will be accessible and ready to give comfort when needed. "For a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive," Bowlby writes, "gives him a strong and pervasive feeling of security" (*A Secure Base* 30). Attachment behaviour is "any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world," and it is "most obvious whenever the person is frightened, fatigued, or sick, and is assuaged by comforting and caregiving" (29–30). Bowlby describes separation anxiety as "anxiety about losing, or becoming separated from, someone loved" (33). Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver extended the theory to adult romantic love, which provides a basis for considering the relationships in the poems (511–12). These concepts guide the comparison,

directing attention to whether each speaker seeks comfort from the woman, wishes to keep her close, and expresses concern about losing her.

Phillip Shaver and Mario Mikulincer place the attachment theory developed by Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth within the psychoanalytic tradition. It shares the psychoanalytic assumptions that conflicting feelings prompt defences and that mental representations of oneself and others influence behaviour in relationships. It also draws on ethology and developmental and cognitive psychology (25). The goal of the attachment system is "the attainment of actual or perceived protection and security," sought from "actual attachment figures or . . . internalized representations of them." Adults can also "gain comfort from symbolic representations of attachment figures" (26). Working models develop through experiences with attachment figures and shape expectations about whether others will offer care and whether the self is worthy of receiving it. They "allow a person to predict future interactions" and were viewed by Bowlby as "the main cause of continuity between early attachment experiences and . . . later relationships" (27).

Mikulincer and Shaver describe two secondary strategies for managing attachment insecurity that may develop when an attachment figure seems unavailable or unresponsive. Hyperactivation intensifies efforts to obtain closeness and support, while deactivation suppresses those efforts and leaves attachment insecurity unresolved ("Attachment Behavioral System" 63). The authors identify deactivation with Bowlby's "compulsive self-reliance" (63). In Bowlby's account, "disclaiming, perhaps even mocking, any desire for close relations" can coexist with an "unexpressed yearning for love and support" ("Making and Breaking" 207). Mikulincer and Shaver associate deactivation with maintaining distance, control and self-reliance in relationships, and with avoiding acknowledgement of a need for others' care and support (*Attachment in Adulthood* 41; "Attachment Theory as a Framework" 176). The strategy can also involve devaluing partners and keeping "anger and resentment alive internally" (*Attachment in Adulthood* 42). These features offer a basis for interpreting the Duke's refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to the Duchess alongside his continuing resentment towards her.

Bartholomew and Horowitz organise their model around beliefs about whether a person is worthy of love and whether others are trustworthy and available or unreliable and rejecting (227). Two of their four patterns guide this article, the dismissing pattern for the Duke and the preoccupied pattern for the Lover (227–28). The dismissing pattern combines "a sense of love-worthiness" with "a negative disposition toward other people" (227). It falls at the low end of their dependency dimension, where "a positive self-regard is established internally and does not require external validation" (228). The preoccupied pattern combines a negative model of self with a positive model of others. This combination "would lead the person to strive for self-acceptance by gaining the acceptance of valued others" (227). Bartholomew and Horowitz also report "a mix of tendencies across time and within and across relationships" in a student population whose patterns fall within the normal range

(241). These findings caution against treating the patterns as fixed categories or using them alone to explain the violence the poems describe or imply.

Literary critics have used attachment theory both to interpret relationships represented in texts and to reconsider the practice of criticism. Nancy Easterlin, observing that psychological approaches to literature had been "overwhelmingly psychoanalytic" (261), drew on Bowlby and Daniel Stern to reread the "infant Babe" passage of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* against its Freudian interpreters (267–74), and Joseph Carroll substitutes Bowlby's concept of attachment for the Oedipal account of Hamlet's bond with his mother (138–39). More recently, Theo Davis explores how attachment theory might reorient critical practice towards "critical attunement" and develops this approach through readings of nineteenth-century American prose (chs. 2–3). No published study appears to have examined "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" through attachment theory. This article follows Easterlin and Carroll in using attachment concepts to interpret represented relationships, while treating the speakers' wishes and fears as literary inferences.

Reading fictional speakers through attachment theory requires clear limits. Simon Petch warns that critics may create their own fictions when they supply motives and needs to make Browning's poems fit an interpretation (34–35). Esther Rashkin likewise cautions that fictional characters "can only appear to have reflective capacity and insight into their own and others' motives and emotions" (44). This article interprets expectations represented in the speakers' words. Claims about wishes and fears remain literary inferences supported by particular textual details. Attachment theory cannot establish a diagnosis or recover a history the poems do not provide. Within those limits, this article uses dependence in its ordinary sense of needing a response from a particular person. Bowlby resisted "dependency" because it carries a pejorative flavour and does not imply a relationship to "one or a very few clearly preferred individuals" (*A Secure Base* 30; "Making and Breaking" 204).

Browning's inclusion of "Porphyria's Lover" under the title "Madhouse Cells" provides a historical context for psychiatric readings of its speaker. He paired the poem with "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" under that heading from 1842 and removed it in 1863 (Petch 41), and Ekbert Faas records that the two poems "were thought of as objective, case-history-like studies" (14). Faas nevertheless finds "no proof" that psychological medicine prompted the poem (56), and he notes that Browning "seems to have paid little or no attention to that science" (57). The present reading interprets the Lover's expectations of affection as they appear in his speech, without assigning him a psychiatric diagnosis.

The Duke's assumed worth and his demand for preference

The reading turns first to "My Last Duchess," where the Duke's refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to the Duchess may reflect a reluctance to acknowledge that her response matters to him. That refusal can be read through deactivation, which involves suppressing efforts to obtain closeness and support (Mikulincer and Shaver, "Attachment Behavioral System" 63). His question, "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?" (34–35), rejects

the idea of speaking to her about it, yet he goes on to imagine what he would have said. He supplies the complaint, "Just this / Or that in you disgusts me" (37–38), and considers whether she might accept correction without setting "Her wits to yours, forsooth" (41). The scornful "forsooth" shows how little he values her judgement. Even if she submitted, he would regard the conversation as beneath him, insisting, "I choose / Never to stoop" (42–43). Helfield reads the three occurrences of "stoop" and "stooping" within ten lines as undermining his boast (14). He refuses an exchange in which his satisfaction would be seen to depend on her reply.

The Duke's refusal to explain his dissatisfaction is selective, since he discusses it with the envoy while directing their conversation. "Will't please you sit and look at her?" (5) and "Will't please you rise?" (47) frame instructions as courteous questions. With "Notice Neptune" (54), he turns the envoy's attention to another object in his collection, continuing to guide what he looks at and what they discuss. Rader observes that the Duke answers "not to a question which the listener has actually asked but to one which the Duke has gratuitously imputed to him" (137), so that he supplies both the question and the answer. His imagined conversation with the Duchess similarly allows him to set the terms of the exchange. Mermin connects his command of the conversation with his social authority, arguing that his "license to speak derives from, reinforces, and demonstrates his power" (49). Read through deactivation, the contrast suggests that he may withhold speech where speaking would expose a need for her regard.

The grievance the Duke describes to the envoy concerns preference, since he claims that the Duchess valued his favour no more than other pleasures. In "She had / A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed" (21–23), the repeated "too" judges her pleasure excessive before he names anything she enjoyed. He then places his own gift beside the others, "My favour at her breast, / The dropping of the daylight in the West" (25–26), and complains that "all and each / Would draw from her alike the approving speech" (29–30). The word "alike" makes clear that he objects to her placing his favour on the same level as a sunset. By presenting this equal appreciation as a fault, he maintains his claim to deserve special regard. Tucker argues that the "polymorphous perversity" the Duke attributes to the Duchess belongs as much to the Duke's own character as the "monomaniacal perversity" with which he stopped her smiles ("Dramatic Monologue" 234). This reading turns attention from her pleasures to what his accusations reveal about him. His assertion of his own value and his devaluation of the Duchess's judgement can be read through Bartholomew and Horowitz's dismissing pattern (227–28). On this reading, he takes his worth for granted but depends on the Duchess to give him the special regard he believes it deserves.

The Duke's possessive language suggests why he believed that preference was owed, and his reference to his inherited name links that expectation to his rank. "That's my last Duchess" (1) leads to "My favour at her breast" (25) and "My gift of a nine-hundred-years-

old name" (33), followed by "no just pretence / Of mine for dowry" (50–51), "my object" (53) and the sculpture "cast in bronze for me" (56). These expressions gather his wife, his name, his claims on the dowry and his possessions around him, presenting his importance as settled. That self-importance, read alongside his refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to the Duchess, supports the dismissing interpretation.

The Duke's continuing grievance suggests that the Duchess's regard matters to him despite his insistence that he will not stoop, and in the light of Ingersoll's account of loss (156) it may indicate a fear of losing the privileged place he expected in her regard. Rank, and the concern with family honour that Fernández-Santiago emphasises (98), remain plausible explanations for his expectation of preference and for his resentment when that expectation was not met. The imagined exchange and his return to the Duchess's smiles (35–45) show how closely his complaint remains tied to the preference he expected from her. Both features could also serve his warning about the next marriage, so they leave rank and family honour open as explanations. The attachment reading asks whether his continued rehearsal of the grievance also suggests dependence on regard that his position could not secure.

The Duke's account combines uncertainty about what the Duchess said or did with confidence in judging her feelings towards him. He introduces the painter's possible words with "perhaps / Frà Pandolf chanced to say" (15–16), while "she thought" (20) presents her interpretation as something he knows. "Somehow – I know not how" (32) leaves her manner of thanking unclear, yet he concludes that it ranked his name "With anybody's gift" (34). "No doubt" (43) concedes that she smiled at him, but "Much the same smile" (45) introduces his complaint that others received a similar response. The poem supplies no independent account against which his version can be checked (Martens, "Dramatic Monologue" 205). The Duke's assumption that his rank and worth entitle him to special regard shapes his interpretation of her smiles. This can be understood through working models, which guide expectations of others' responses (Shaver and Mikulincer 27). He judges them by whether they single him out and reads her warmth to others as a failure to recognise his value. By locating the fault in her judgement, he keeps his expectations of her intact. Bartholomew and Horowitz describe the dismissing pattern's positive self-regard as internally established and not requiring external validation (228). He may resent the Duchess's failure to acknowledge the worth he assumes without needing her to establish that worth.

The movement of the Duke's sentences across the couplets connects his account of the Duchess's smiles, his commands and her portrait. "My Last Duchess" is written in heroic couplets, but its syntax often runs across line endings, and Petch observes that Browning "has taken care to disguise his rhyme" (44). In the grievance passage, phrases run on in "She had / A heart" and "all and each / Would draw from her alike the approving speech" (21–22, 29–30). "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive" (45–47) places the commands and their result within the rhyming pair, then

carries the description of the portrait beyond it. This enjambment connects the ending of the smiles with the image that remains, although it cannot by itself establish a psychological need. Petch rejects reading the couplets as evidence of the Duke's need for order and control (44). Helfield likewise questions his mastery of the account, arguing that repetitions undermine his claims to control (14). For the attachment reading, the significance of these sentences running across the couplets depends on the surrounding account of the preference he wanted and the response the portrait cannot give.

Ingersoll links "I gave commands" with "I call" and "I said" as the verbs of a "masterful subject" (155). The lines imply that he ordered her death without saying so. He presents what happened as the stopping of the smiles he resented, yet "all" includes the smiles she gave him. If the commands ended her life, they also removed any possibility of the freely given preference he wanted. The deactivating strategy helps interpret his refusal to ask for her regard, and it does not explain the violence implied by the commands. As Fox observes, the object of remembrance "can never do more than look as if alive" (475). Control over her image cannot supply her response.

The Duke's control over the portrait does not settle his grievance about the Duchess's regard for others. The curtain lets him decide who sees her and when (9–10), yet his speech returns to the attention she gave to others. Knoepflmacher suggests that the Duke remains unsettled by his effort to turn a living woman into a fixed painting (154–55), and Tucker finds in the speech a confession that mastering her did not bring understanding of her ("Ever a Fighter" 38–39). Shaver and Mikulincer's account of comfort from "symbolic representations of attachment figures" (26) invites a comparison with the retained portrait, although the poem does not establish that she provided him with attachment security. Possession of the painting leaves unresolved whether she ever valued him above others. His continuing concern may reflect what Bowlby describes as an "unexpressed yearning for love and support," which may accompany disclaiming any desire for close relationships ("Making and Breaking" 207).

The Duke's account of the Duchess also sets the terms for the next marriage. Rader reads the speech as a warning to the new wife delivered through the envoy (138), and Martens likewise reads the commands as an admission of murder with "the clear function of a warning" to the next wife ("Execution Ballad" 97). Working models offer a way to interpret the warning, since they carry assumptions about oneself and others into later relationships (Shaver and Mikulincer 27). On this reading, the Duke uses his account of the Duchess's behaviour and its consequences to warn her successor that he expects special regard. The warning may also suggest that he anticipates disappointment in the next marriage, consistent with the dismissing pattern's negative view of others (Bartholomew and Horowitz 227–28).

The Lover's wish for comfort and lasting devotion

The reading now turns to "Porphyria's Lover," whose opening scene gives the clearest support for interpreting Porphyria as a source of comfort to the speaker in his

distress. Before she arrives, he listens "with heart fit to break" (5) to a wind that "tore the elm-tops down for spite, / And did its worst to vex the lake" (3–4). Between lines 6 and 20, Porphyria is the subject of sixteen finite verbs, from "glided" to "spread," as she builds the fire, removes her wet things and arranges how they sit. The only finite verb in those lines whose subject is not Porphyria records his silence, "no voice replied" (15). In "called me," "put my arm about her waist" and "made my cheek lie there" (15–19), he is the recipient of her actions. The sequence of his distress, her arrival and her care supports an attachment reading, since Bowlby describes attachment behaviour as heightened by distress and eased by comforting and caregiving (*A Secure Base* 29–30). Tucker reads the same silence as a bid for power, with the speaker "eliciting further vocal advances on her part" by leaving her greeting unanswered ("From Monomania" 125). The attachment interpretation can accommodate that possibility without assuming that the Lover feigns his distress or passivity. The Lover's complaint about the limits of Porphyria's devotion suggests that he wants the closeness she offers to last. Porphyria has come to him through a storm, yet he complains that her passion prevails only "sometimes" (26), while he wants her to give herself to him "for ever" (25). The passage that reports her words does not mark where her murmur ends and his explanation begins.

Murmuring how she loved me – she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever (21–25)

Readers therefore cannot tell whether she named these obstacles or he did. He faults her for being "Too weak" while crediting her with "all her heart's endeavour," presenting her as loving him completely while pride and "vainer ties" prevent her from committing to him. Ingersoll reads the murder as an attempt to avoid being "abandoned again as she may have many times before" (154). The poem does not say that Porphyria has left him before, but the Lover's emphasis on the limits of her availability can still be read through hyperactivation (Mikulincer and Shaver, "Attachment Behavioral System" 63). On this reading, his concern about whether she will remain with him may limit the reassurance he takes from her visit.

The Lover reads Porphyria's gaze as confirmation of her complete devotion, but confines that certainty to "That moment" (36). "Be sure I looked up at her eyes" (31) precedes "at last I knew / Porphyria worshipped me" (32–33). The words "at last" suggest that he has been waiting for this assurance, while "worshipped" may make her devotion a confirmation of his worth. "That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good" (36–37) stresses, through the doubled "mine," his claim that she belongs to him entirely. Yet the phrase limits that claim to a single point in the evening. Read beside the earlier "sometimes" (26), it may suggest that he cannot be sure her devotion will last. Bowlby's

account of separation anxiety offers a way to interpret this uncertainty as concern about losing someone he loves (*A Secure Base* 33). The concept also draws attention to his watchfulness, since "Be sure I looked up at her eyes," "at last I knew" and "That moment" record a man checking for the evidence of her devotion and locating his certainty in a single moment.

The Lover's description of the murder as "A thing to do" (38) can be read as his answer to that fear of separation. The hair she spread over him (20) becomes the means by which he strangles her (38–41), and the sequence "I found" (37), "I wound" (39), "strangled" (41) puts him in the active role that Porphyria held in the opening scene. By killing her, he makes her continued physical presence subject to his control. She can no longer withdraw the devotion he attributes to her, and she can no longer offer it. This reading relates the act to his wish for lasting closeness. A pattern that Bartholomew and Horowitz describe as part of ordinary variation in attachment (241) cannot by itself account for his choice of violence.

After killing Porphyria, the Lover describes her body as continuing to express affection for him. "No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (41–42) offers his certainty as support for a claim she cannot confirm, and "quite sure," like the earlier "Be sure" (31), asks for trust in his account. He opens her eyelids and reports that her eyes "Laughed" (44–45), then loosens the hair around her neck (46–47) and claims that her cheek "once more / Blushed" beneath his kiss (47–48). "Again" (44), "once more" (47) and "as before" (49) present these signs as a continuation of her earlier affection, a continuity he constructs by arranging her body and interpreting its appearance. He now supports the head that "droops upon it still" (51). Porphyria's care in the opening scene supports reading her as an attachment figure. After her death, the responses he attributes to her body may offer reassurance, inviting comparison with comfort drawn from an internalised representation of an attachment figure (Shaver and Mikulincer 26). Fox argues that the speaker derives a sense of self "only from his creation of the corpse's self-awareness" (473). A possible motive for that creation is that he seeks comfort in a version of Porphyria whose feelings he supplies himself.

The verse shapes how the Lover presents Porphyria's affection as continuing after her death. "Porphyria's Lover" follows a recurring five-line ABABB rhyme pattern. Petch describes the verse as "tightly organized into twelve five-line stanzas" (42), and Slinn argues that its regularity "reinforces his control over the retelling" (12). Helfield reads the same regularity differently, finding that Porphyria's movements run across the stanza divisions and that the closing rhymes, far from supplying order, make the reader suspect "a frenzied compulsion to repeat himself" (16–17). Sentences also continue across these rhyme groups. At lines 40–41, the account of winding the hair runs into "And strangled her." At lines 50–51, the description of his shoulder supporting her head continues into the next group. Within lines 41–45, he moves from insisting that she felt no pain to describing her eyes as laughing "without a stain." The rhyme joins "pain," "again" and "stain," connecting his denial of

suffering with the eyes he presents as showing affection and purity. Whether the regularity is read as control or as compulsion, it does not by itself establish an attachment need. The rhyme connects his denial of her suffering with his claims of her continuing affection. These claims may help sustain any reassurance he finds in his account (Shaver and Mikulincer 26). The Lover's claim that Porphyria has gained the person she wanted raises the question of how her acceptance, as he presents it, shapes his sense of worth. "And I, its love, am gained instead!" (55) can present him as the prize she has won. By calling her head "it" and giving it a "will" and a "love" (53, 55), he makes her acceptance something he reads into the body he holds, attributing his own wishes to her, as Knoepflmacher observes, "without any fear of contradiction" (152). Gribble reads what has "fled" (54) as "the scorned lover dependent on the unpredictable attentions of Porphyria" (26), the figure the speaker now claims to have ceased to be. She also finds that "Porphyria's love" (56) questions "the certitude with which he has interpreted the love she bears him" (26). Her reading identifies dependence on Porphyria's attention, while leaving open how that dependence relates to his sense of worth. In Bartholomew and Horowitz's model, the preoccupied pattern involves reliance on others' acceptance for a favourable sense of oneself (227–28). On this model, his claim that she now has the person she wanted may suggest that he relies on her acceptance to feel worthy of love. His wider account of worship and lasting devotion supports this reading, although "am gained" alone does not establish it.

The shifts into the present tense show the Lover continuing to claim certainty and companionship as he speaks. "I am quite sure" (42) is an assurance still being made. The head "droops upon it still" (51), and "And thus we sit together now" (58) presents their stillness as a shared experience. "And all night long we have not stirred" (59) extends that companionship across the night, although Porphyria can no longer choose to take part. Pearsall observes that such monologues serve "still more to prolong" their speakers' actions, detaining "these men and their lovers forever in the present tense" ("Dramatic Monologue" 78). These claims may suggest that he believes the threat of separation has ended. Any security he derives from that belief would be perceived security (Shaver and Mikulincer 26), although his account does not establish whether he feels reassured. The final rhyme of "stirred" and "word" connects the night's physical stillness with God's reported silence (59–60), and "and yet" leaves the meaning of that silence open.

The final line raises the possibility of a judgement beyond the Lover's own account. "And yet God has not said a word!" (60) names an authority who might judge his actions, although he does not address God. Slinn finds "a finely poised ambiguity" between the speaker's confidence that he is reporting facts and "his growing uncertainty about God's silence," carried by "and yet" (12). Tucker leaves open whether the Lover awaits "God's approval or reproof" ("From Monomania" 126), and Byron likewise finds "a divine note of congratulation" as likely as a "reprimand" (ch. 3). Gribble offers a different interpretation, hearing in the line "the expectation that God will not say a word" (27). The Lover may be surprised that God has not intervened, may take the silence as permission, may feel unease

about judgement, or may have expected nothing else. These readings leave open whether the Lover takes God's silence as reassurance or finds it unsettling. The ending therefore does not establish whether the telling has given him the lasting security he appears to seek. This reading treats God as a possible source of judgement rather than an attachment figure, and the poem does not establish that the Lover's sense of security depends on a divine reply.

Two silences and the reader's judgement

The poems leave readers to judge the men's interpretations without independent access to the women's feelings. The Duchess's pleasure in the cherries (27–31) and Porphyria's warming of the cottage and drawing of the Lover to her (6–20) reach readers only through the speakers' accounts. Scheinberg observes that the "truth" of the Duchess's life "exists only in a series of verbal and pictorial transactions by men" (178). The Duchess's warmth does not establish whether she preferred the Duke, and Porphyria's affection does not establish the complete devotion the Lover claims. The attachment reading connects these uncertainties to what each man expects from the woman's affection. Their qualifications and assertions give readers grounds to question how they interpret the women's feelings. Possession of the portrait or the body cannot confirm those interpretations. The envoy's unrecorded reply and God's reported silence raise a further question about whether either account receives confirmation from beyond the speaker.

The two speeches differ in whom they address and what response might follow. The Duke speaks to an envoy in the room, explaining "I said / 'Frà Pandolf' by design" (5–6) and recalling what earlier visitors "seemed as they would ask" (11). The envoy represents the Count in the proposed marriage negotiations. The Lover's "Be sure" (31) seems to ask for agreement without identifying anyone who could give it. Byron notes that the envoy's silent presence in "My Last Duchess" "could prompt speculation about his response" (ch. 2). The envoy's reply is unrecorded, while the Lover himself reports God's silence (60). In his discussion of Charlotte Mew's "Madeleine in Church," Tim Kendall illustrates the importance of address by imagining "Porphyria's Lover" ending "not by reporting God's silence, but by addressing God directly." He also observes that the Duke "might have been answered by the envoy" (648). A reply from the envoy could concern the Duke's account or the proposed marriage, while a divine response could pass judgement on the Lover's actions. Martens nevertheless identifies a formal connection between the silences. The envoy's silence, she argues, "obliges readers to fill the void with their own judgment rather than having a judgment handed down by an authoritative voice within the text" ("Execution Ballad" 97). Her comparison with God's silence places responsibility for assessing the speakers on readers. This returns the discussion to Langbaum's account of sympathy and judgement and Scheinberg's challenge to the assumption of a universal reader (Langbaum 134; Scheinberg 178). The distinction between actual and perceived security helps explain how the men might find reassurance in their accounts even if they misread the women's feelings (Shaver and Mikulincer 26). Keeping the portrait and describing continued companionship may offer reassurance without confirming the affection each man attributes to the woman. Neither a favourable response from the envoy nor divine approval could

supply that affection, and neither silence establishes that the speaker wants confirmation of what she felt. The attachment reading therefore rests chiefly on how the men describe their relationships. The Duke returns to the Duchess's preference while displaying her portrait, and the Lover continues to claim Porphyria's devotion while holding her body.

Conclusion

Reading the two poems through attachment theory suggests that the Duke seeks recognition of the worth he assumes, while the Lover may rely on Porphyria's devotion to feel valued. The portrait lets the Duke retain the Duchess's image and control its display, while his continuing grievance suggests a reliance on her preference that he does not acknowledge. The body lets the Lover maintain physical closeness while describing Porphyria as wholly devoted to him, and the comfort he may find there rests on an acceptance he now supplies himself. Dismissing and preoccupied attachment patterns help interpret these approaches by connecting each speaker's sense of his own worth with his expectations of affection.

The difference in the strength of the evidence is itself a finding of the comparison. Porphyria's care, the Lover's distress and his concern with the limits of her availability give relatively direct support for an attachment reading. This evidence supports a reading of his need for comfort and continued availability more directly than it supports the inference that his sense of worth depends on her acceptance. The interpretation of the Duke relies more heavily on his demand for preference, his devaluation of the Duchess's judgement and his refusal to explain his dissatisfaction to her. Rank remains a plausible explanation for much of his conduct. Working models and compulsive self-reliance help interpret these features without establishing an attachment history. The comparison shows how questions about availability and worth can guide close reading while requiring different degrees of confidence in the resulting interpretations.

The comparison adds a distinction between expectations of affection and assumptions about self-worth to Tucker's account of lyric, Knoepflmacher's account of objectification and Fox's account of reanimation. Rhyme and syntax shape the speakers' accounts without establishing a psychological classification. Neither ending supplies independent confirmation of the speaker's claims or establishes what response he wants to hear. Read alongside the Duke's continuing grievance and the Lover's claims of devotion, these silences invite readers to consider how each man manages dependence when the portrait or body cannot offer a freely given answer.

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