

## **PATRIARCHY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses four poems, which portray violence against women resulting from patriarchy. These poems are *The Ring and the Book*, "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria, s Lover", and "The Laboratory". Using the liberal feminist and psychological theories the paper argues that while women fight to challenge tradition and convention put by men / patriarchy to impede their freedom, men on their part, are bent on maintaining this tradition and convention put in place by patriarchy, a system which favours them. The paper reveals that women who challenge this tradition and convention put by men/patriarchy, end up paying with their lives. In this connection, Robert Browning's stand is that women should fight for their freedom even if it means dying for it. By presenting these scenarios in these poems, Browning seeks to show the injustice done to women and in the process, calls the attention of the powers that be for a review or revision of social habits that will enable the woman to fully realize herself in the process, and humanity in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchy, Violence, Feminism, Tradition, Convention

### **INTRODUCTION**

Before we analyze *The Ring and the Book*, "My Last Duchess" " , Porphyria's Lover" and "The Laboratory" to show how violence is portrayed against women in these poems, let us first of all ask and answer these questions: Why is Robert Browning interested in violence against women? What does this violence against women represent to him? What do we mean by violence against women? How many kinds of violence against women, do we have? And lastly, what do we understand by patriarchy?

Violence against women has been an interesting and rich area for feminists. There are three categories of violence against women: physical violence, verbal violence and sexual violence. Physical violence will refer to the beating of one's spouse. Verbal violence refers to insulting or threatening one's spouse. Many feminists have focused on pornography. To Robin Morgan "pornography is the theory, and rape the practice" (134). Hartmann says: "In pornography, women are depicted as sexual objects and men rendered as consumers who, says Mackinnon, "desperately want women to desperately want possession and cruelty and dehumanization" (132]. Incest and rape are a recurrent theme in feminist circles. There are many men who have forced their own daughters, sisters and sisters-in-law to go to bed with them. Many men use force to have sex with women. Sexual mutilation equals female genital mutilation as is seen in Africa and other Third World countries. Although it is a kind of patriarchal oppression of women, it is usually carried out by women who have been brainwashed by this patriarchy. This old women who do this female genital mutilation think that they are doing good to other women which is not the case.

Browning wrote, many poems in which, we see murders because, as Baugh says in *A Literary History of England*: "He seeks to understand people of the most varied sorts, and because the "good" present fewer problems, he is fascinated by the "bad". His poems of most lasting appeal are psychological stories. The intricacies of motives are

disentangled and light is thrown upon the self-deceiver, even as she seeks to justify himself (1402). Secondly, Browning Junior had developed a liking for tales of crime from his father. Lastly and most importantly, Melissa Martin explains it in *Spark notes on Robert Browning*. In these notes, the question is asked: “Why Robert Browning is so interested in violence against women. What symbolic purpose might it serve?” Women, particularly for the Victorians, symbolize the home – the repository of traditional values. Their violent death can stand in for the death of society. The women in Browning’s poetry in particular are often depicted as sexually open: this may show that society has transformed so radically that even the domestic and the tradition, have been altered and corrupted. This violence also suggests the struggle between aesthetics and morals in Victorian art.

Violence against women by men in Browning’s poetry, mostly or always ends in death. Houglund says, “Men use violence when women don’t pay attention to them”. She thinks that “protecting and predation emerge from the same ideology of male dominance (175).

## **PATRIARCHY: THE SOURCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Patriarchy comes from the Greek word patria, meaning father and arché meaning rule. *The Wikipedia Free Encyclopaedia* sees patriarchy is an anthropological term used to define the sociological condition, where, the male members of a society tend to predominate in positions of power, with the more powerful the position, the more likely it is that a male will hold that position... Patriarchal rule still governs most of the world’s religious, school, and family systems.

Patriarchy therefore refers to male dominance, male supremacy, male rule, male privileges, male values or male hierarchy. The majority of the higher economic, political, industrial, financial, religious, and social positions are held by men. The term is used today by feminist to replace the old words “Male chauvinism” and “Sexism”. Patriarchy is perpetuated mostly by men and a small proportion of women. The term patriarchy, is different from patrilineality and patrilocality just like the word matriarchy is different from the word matrilineality and matrilocality.

In “Understanding Patriarchy” Bell Hooks says that she has been standing at podiums for more than thirty years talking about patriarchy, but something surprises her: most men do not use the word patriarchy in everyday life. Most men never think about patriarchy, what it means, how it is created and sustained. Bell Hooks holds that patriarchy is a politician – social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.

In his article “The Role of Patriarchy in Domestic Violence” Charles E. Corry says, patriarchy is a form of social organization in which, the father is the supreme authority in the family, clan or tribe and descent is reckoned in the male lines, with the children belonging to the father’s clan or tribe. Patriarchy also refers to a society, community, or country based on this social organization. Gloria Steinem has asserted that patriarchy required violence or the subliminal threat of violence in order to maintain itself.

In the poems, *The Ring and the Book*, “My last Duchess”, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “The Laboratory” Robert Browning sets out to portray and condemn violence against women perpetrated by men in the name or as a result of patriarchy. This application of patriarchy by men is conscious or unconscious.

“The Ring and the Book” are presented as the best work of Robert Browning and Victorian poetry. The story of the poem is woven in a simple plot summarized by Abrams et al as follows:

The Browning's poem tells the story of a brutally sadistic husband, Count Guido Francheschini (who has much in common with the duke in “My Last Duchess”). The middle-age Guido grows dissatisfied with his young wife, Pompilia, and accuses her of having adulterous relations with a handsome priest who, like St George, had tried to rescue her from the dragon's den in which her husband confined her. Eventually Guido stabs his wife to death and is himself executed. In a series of twelve books Browning retells this tale of violence, presenting it from the contrasting points of view of participants and spectators (2038).

*The Ring and the Book* is a poem which is made up of twelve books and ten monologues. Yet, as Bryson says it is more than another collection of separate monologues. To him, it has the organic shape and unity of a great work and this is achieved by the well – considered placing and relationship of its parts. It is an architectural whole carefully planned; and a grasp of the vast ground plan makes the reading and comprehension easier. Book 1 is entitled “The Ring and the Book”, Book II is entitled “Half – Rome”, Book III “The Other Half – Rome”, Book IV “Tertium Quid”, Book V “Count Guido Francheschini”, Book VI “Guiseppa Caponsacchi”, Book VII “Pompila”, Book VIII “Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Pauperum Procurator...”, Book IX “Juris Doctor Jahannes – Baptista Bottinius, Fiscus et Rev. Cam. Apostol. Advocatus”, Book X “The Pope”, Book XI “Guido” and Book XII are entitled like Book I “The Ring and the Book”.

In Book I, which is deliberately personal and miscellaneous, the poet explains the significance of the title, outlines the different situations and concludes with the invocation to his wife. Browning speaking in his own voice tells us how he got *The Old Yellow* – “Roman Homicidiorum” translated into English as “A Roman Murder – Case”. Briefly *The Old Yellow Book* tells us how the impoverished Count Guido Francheschini of Arezzo, having been tricked in his marriage to the secretly adopted daughter of a childless Roman couple Pietro and Violante Comparini, by his cruelty and persecution drives her to leave his house. She is helped in her flight to Rome by a young priest the Canon Caponsacchi. Accusing her of infidelity, Guido murders his girl – wife and her supposed parents in circumstances of the most brutality. Then when handed over to justice, he appeals from the civil court of Rome to the Pope and by him is found guilty and condemned to death (Bryson 28 – 29).

Browning, in this introduction to this poem paints the characters of Guido and Pompilia. He writes: “We pronounce / Count Guido devilish and damnable” and “His wife Pompilia in thought, word and deed / was perfect, pure, he murdered her for that”. Still in this introduction, he describes Guido as a poor, “beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord” who is very lean, pallid and low of stature yet is robust. He is fifty years old. He married the young Pompilia four years ago, but now they live an unhappy life. Guido's “bushy-bearded black” hair already suggests or tells us how black or evil his character is...

In Book I, Bryson says, Browning is careful to label Pompilia explicitly as well and to make it pretty clear that for reasons not yet understood, she was right in what she did and that Guido was wrong. The story of the murder will be told again and again from different points of view. Some of these points of view, such as the speeches of the “Three Halves” of Rome, of the lawyers and of Guido are exercises in dramatic irony, in which the speaker betrays himself and his own weaknesses, and in doing so makes clear the senses in which, in his version the truth is being distorted. This is to help us see what the truth is. In this poem, Browning found in life the great principle of the apparent relativity of truth: “Truth is this to them and that to me”.

In “No Way to Tell a Story: “Multiple Narrators and the Law in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*” Laura Struve says that L. J. Swingle has noted, we do not need to sift and weigh these narratives in order to understand who is who and what is what. Browning himself tells us exactly what happened in Book I. We know who did what to whom and when, and if we were at all unsure, Guido’s speech indicates that he is a villain and a Pompilia’s monologue illustrates her saintliness. Like the Pope, readers see events in black and white.

In this introduction, Browning describes Guido as the “tiger-cat” screaming “in prison”. He describes his town Arezzo as “the man’s town. / The woman’s trap and cage and torture place”. Guido is also referred to by Browning as a wolf and Lucifer or the devil.

Browning tells us that Guido is very cunning. He pretended that he was the priest Caponsacchi: “Open to Caponsacchi!” Guido cried: / “Gabriel!” cried Lucifer at Eden-gate”. Guido is Lucifer, who cried that he was the angel Gabriel at the Eden-gate because he wanted it to be opened to him. If he said he was Lucifer, the Eden-gate would not be opened to him. Guido did this on a Christmas Eve. That is why Browning says that in a lone villa on Christmas night Pietro and his wife opened the door to “welcome as it were an angel-guest / come in Christ’s name to knock and enter, sup / And satisfy the loving ones he saved” but instead welcomed devils and their death. Browning in his poetry uses biblical typology as we have seen above. This is the concern of George P. Landow in his article “Robert Browning’s Use of Biblical Typology in *The Ring and the Book*.”

Browning wonders aloud, how a man like Guido can kill a woman bearing his son and heir: “Why must the father kill the mother thus / because she bore his son and saved himself?” The birth of this son “turned his night to day”. Guido’s killing of Pompilia raises another argument: “Wherein, it is disputed if and when, / Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet escape / The customary forfeit”. This quotation is asking a simple question: if a husband who feels that his wife has committed or is guilty of adultery should take the law into his hands and kill her.

Stopford A. Brooke sees Pompilia as the image of natural goodness and its power (371). Pompilia, Brooke says, passes away and England’s men and women will always be grateful to Browning for her creation (364).

Charles W. Hodell in an “Introduction” to *The Ring and the Book* says that Browning has represented many evil men in his art, but all his other villains pale into insignificance beside the full, passionate, living portrayal of Guido Franceschini. Yet Guido to him is not a monster, nor an accidentally unfortunate man. He is the hideous outgrowth of a self-seeking, Christless society, in which mobility is no longer a spiritual attribute, but has become a mere merchantable asset and a shield for crouching littleness. In Pompilia, Hodell holds that Browning has achieved his master picture of woman. She is represented as a saint and martyr in the simple loveliness of character. He further endows her with the highest spiritual graces which may glorify the woman, the passion of maternity, the devoted love for the man who embodies her ideal of manly nobility, and her unquestioning of faith in God. These are greater and more essential to the highest womanhood than the intellect of Balaustion.

*The Ring and the Book* has some autobiographical elements in it. Browning wrote this poem for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He wrote this poem after the death of his wife. It is believed that he wrote the poem to purge his grief (catharsis) about the death of his wife. This is seen in the section of the “introduction” to the poem entitled “O Lyric Love” which is addressed directly to his dead wife.

To Bryson, "It is infect, the last memorial of the Italian years, and it is also his wife's poem... It is dedicated to her memory; the ring, symbol of truth, is her ring; and the warmth and tenderness shown in the portrayal of the heroine is a tribute to her too (29).

Browning's preferred tale or myth was that of "Andromeda's rescue by Perseus". This was a parallel of his own rescue of Elizabeth Barrett from her father's house which is the same as the rescue of Pompilia by the priest Caponsacchi from Guido's house. Canon Caponsacchi has much of Browning. Ian Jack writes: "There is a good deal of Browning himself in Caponsacchi, and he enunciates the poet's belief in the occasional need for the hero" (283). When in the poem Caponsacchi says "I am, on earth, as well as out of it / A relegated priest; when exile ends / I mean to do my duty and live long" is inspired by the manly recoil of Browning and his refusal to be crushed by his sorrow. Robert Browning in his life played the role of a saviour to Elizabeth Barrett Browning just like Canon Capon Sacchi does to Pompilia. We see the same male saviour figure in the poem "The Flight of the Duchess" who helps the Duchess to run away from the oppression of the Duke. Wylie Sypher in an Introduction to *The Ring and the Book* says "Guido in all his bestiality, is a version of the same Browning hero who appeared as a Porphyria's lover, or as the Duke in "The Statue and the Bust". All of them are what he calls "immoralists". To him "Guido is a devalued immoralist. He boasts of being a wolf by nature" (XII).

M. H. Abrams et al have compared the figure of Count Guido to that of the Duke in "My last Duchess". The figures of Count Guido and the Duke were created by Browning, critics believe, to show his hatred for his father-in-law and fathers who oppress their daughters. Browning called such fathers "domestic tyrants". That is why Sypher writes: "Browning's animus toward Guido might be read as his own animus against his father-in-law" (IX).

Sypher says, "clearly the poet's devotion to his wife – whom he did think of as Pompilia – type, has deeply influenced the character of this child-martyr, who seems as the Pope in her view of Guido, Caponsacchi, and her parents" (10). To Sypher Pompilia is one of the few good heroines of Victorian literature who triumphantly prove themselves free spirits. Usually the feminine immoralists of the age are wicked: Becky Sharp, or Emma Bovary or Edith Dombey. Pompilia is a different sort of fatal woman – angelic, not satanic (XIII). He says "Guido feeds on Pompilia's suffering with the rage of a sadist – or a masochist tormenting himself with endurance of his victim" (XVII).

"My Last Duchess" is a poem which Robert Browning wrote in 1842. Lizbeth Goodman in *Approaching Literature: Literature and Gender* writes:

This would have seemed quite topical to readers in Britain in 1850. The marriage market persisted in the upper levels of society. Conventionally a suitable "gentleman" – an "old" name was a great help – took another gentleman's daughter off his hands in return for a dowry in cash, kind or both. The husband then had full control of his wife's income as well as her person. Divorce was rare, and always scandalous, so that husbands might, and indeed did, resort to various cruel and coercive ways of punishing unsatisfactory partners. Browning's duke merely takes to an extreme a patriarchal and possessive view of women common enough in Victorian Britain (50).

"My Last Duchess" is a poem of fifty-six lines. Its subtitle is Ferrara, which is the setting of the poem. The speaker of the poem is the Duke of Ferrara is talking to the representative of a Count about his last Duchess and also the dowry of the Count's daughter he intends to marry.

In this poem, Goodman says we have an opposition between male control and female fluidity. Other overlapping

oppositions in the poem might be set out like this: masculine: power, pride, possessiveness, constraint, feminine: helplessness, joyousness. The possessiveness of the Duke is seen to the extent of controlling the picture of the Duchess: people must turn to him. The Duchess's picture has been painted by the artist Fra Pandolf.

In this poem, the Duke gives us the weaknesses or shortcomings of the Duchess and his unknowingly. These weaknesses run from lines thirteen to forty-five. The last part of the poem focuses on the dowry and the image of Neptune. When the Duke says: "The Count your master's known munificence / is ample warrant that no just pretense / of mine for dowry will be disallowed". Munificence means being extremely being generous (of a person) and of a thing given. It means it is in a large amount or splendid in quality. Although the Count's daughter is pretty, the Duke still wants a rich dowry. That is what is of much interest to him. In return for his "nine-hundred-years-old name" the Duke confidently expects a large dowry.

Matt Street makes it clear that, the poem can be interpreted in several different ways, but in all cases the Duke is a very controlling man. In "De-Centring and Re-Centring a Literary Classic" Rob Pope warns that the poem is very complex... Robert\_Browning's\_Poetry\_Message\_Board<sup>2</sup> which is on-line has produced very enriching articles or write-ups and reactions about the two poems of Browning – "My last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover". "Sparklebunny" sees the Duke as a cold-hearted man. He seems a "collector" of women. He has already disposed of his wife and seeks the count's daughter to "add" to his collection as if she were nothing more than an object of art. He is possessive of his wife even in death. He points out the suggestive look on her face inferring that she was having an affair with the painter. At the same time, this look, frozen by the picture now looks upon all other men. He punished her enjoyment of life. Because she took joy in simple things she was not worthy of the title of Duchess of his ancient lineage. He also seeks to dominate and control her apparent enjoyment of life which was a disregard of his authority. Lastly, the Duke seeks to control his wife by hiding the picture behind curtains so that only he can look upon her face.

"Madamefatalise" reveals that the Victorian era had certain rules to be observed strictly especially the upper classes. Women were not allowed to sign legal documents or own property. They were only "allowed" to do certain things at this time. More importantly, the class structure was very rigid. In the Victorian period you did not go against the class structure, as the consequences were disastrous. In "Porphyria's Lover" the girl persona goes against the class structure to have a lover who is a man of a lower class and because they would not be together openly in public, he killed her. It is thought that was her punishment. In "My last Duchess" we can see how important a name is. The Duke was very proud of his nine hundred year old name that originates from the Renaissance. He is continually reminding people how well off, he is and how he shall never stop.

Allingham asks the question how we might regard the statue of Neptune as representing the Duke. The statue of Neptune, "a rarity", taming a sea-horse is a symbol of brutal male domination of the beautiful and natural. The Duke also wants to control everything around him: women and objects. He says as an answer to one of the eleven questions he asks: In all likelihood, the Duke will not succeed in his suit because the envoy will warn his master about the dangerous possessiveness of the prospective son-in-law. Beaty and Matchell remind us that he may because: "If it may be objected that no father would marry off his daughter on such terms, it must be remembered that the Duke is higher up the ladder of nobility than the Count: the count cannot expect to climb without cost; the Duke is in a position to demand terms" (89).

The meter used in this poem is what we call iambic pentameter = five – foot iambic line which was the staple of Shakespeare's plays were a "weak" unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable five times.

The iambic pentameters in this poem are arranged in couplets: aa bb cc: what technique is referred to as heroic couplets in iambic pentameters. This rhyming iambic pentameter couplet imposes a stately pace appropriate to the Duke's dignity. To Mattstreet, "My last Duchess" comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The poem is comprised of heroic couplets which testify to the Duke's necessity to exert command over his words. He is no doubt, contriving language to impress the envoy in hopes of winning the hand of the count's daughter. Yet, the lack of end-stops demonstrates the Duke's inability to maintain control over his words. The enjambment of the lines shows how the Duke's imposition of control has paradoxically exposed control from his discourse.

"My Last Duchess" can be read or considered Browning's extraordinary portrait of a Renaissance murderer who would have been astonished had anyone called his conduct criminal.

Sparknotes on Robert Browning's Poetry which are on-line reveal that the renaissance was a time, when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians. The Duchess and Porphyria's lover are women who are "victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality". The desperate need to do this, mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mould the sexual behaviour of its individuals.

The poem "My Last Duchess", we can rightly say emphasizes the materialism of the Victorian age. In Writing Themes about Literature Edgar V., Roberts says Browning specifically was writing this poem for an age that had produced Napoleon and that a year before "My last Duchess" had seen the publication of Thomas Carlyle's lectures on Heroes, Hero\_Worship and the Heroic in History. From the character of Browning's Duke, who is callous and self-centred and who wields despotic power, it is apparent that Browning is suggesting that absolute power produces destructive results on both, the individual wielding it and those around him.

In an enriching article "Applying Modern Critical Theory to Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'", Philip V. Allingham analyses the poem using the various approaches which as George P. Landow says in the introduction to this article are meant to complement, not to contradict one another. These readings are: formalist / structuralist, rhetorical, New Criticism, psychological / psychoanalytical / Freudian, New Historicist, deconstruction, archetypal / Jungian, Marxist / sociological, reader – response, philological and of course feminist.

Shortjonathan in his article "'Porphyria's Lover' and 'My last Duchess'" compares the two poems. What do they reveal about attitudes to women and relationships in the nineteenth century? "Both poems show a similarity because they are both narrated from the male lover's point of view". "In both poems, there are similarities in the narrator's attitudes towards their women". Both narrators show an unnatural possessiveness towards their women, presenting an unattractive, all encompassing jealousy that could eclipse all other interests that their women may have. It means that in each poem, the narrators end up killing their wives.

Keunjung Cho in an article on-line: "English 151 Brown University, 2003" says as in "My last Duchess", the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" murders his mistress and reflects upon his act while contemplating the image of her beautiful face. Like the Duke, who states that the painting of his Duchess "stands as if alive", Porphyria's lover suggests that the girl's death was meant to immortalize her, as well as her feelings for him, rather than to "kill her".

Other similarities as revealed by "Bumfuzzled" in Robert Browning's Poetry Message Board are "both these poems are rather similar in that they have a male that is trying to dominate the female in their lives". In both poems it is the man's domination that eventually kills the woman. Their structures are similar in that they both use

enjambment which is when one line flows into the next without periods or stops. They both use imagery to show that women were pure and frail and lastly both are dramatic monologues. The differences are that the Duke is considered to be a more respectable figure than the madman in *Porphyria's lover*. The narrator of "*Porphyria's Lover*" is also aware of his wrong doing because he repeatedly mentions that God does not say a thing as if he is waiting to be punished. The Duke believes he is right to kill his Duchess and displays this through his use of language. *Porphyria's lover* uses *Porphyria's* hair to strangle her, but the Duke kills his wife in a cold, sophisticated and calculated manner. The two poems have different rhyme scheme. "*My last Duchess*" has this rhyming pattern: a bb cc and "*Porphyria's Lover*" a b a bb.

In the poem "*Porphyria's Lover*", Browning does not only explore the theme of murder, but another theme in man-woman relationship is revealed. This is what I may call "Sexual Revolution" or freedom to confess love on the part of the woman. August Bebel in "*Woman and Socialism*" says a woman has the right to confess love or woo a man: "In the choice of love she is as free and unhampered as a man. She woos or is wooed, and enters into a union prompted by no other consideration but her own feelings" (502). Women believe today with the coming of feminism that they have the right to woo a man if they love him. American women do this. That is why, the Duchess of Malfi is usually described as the first English feminist character. In "*Porphyria's Lover*", we see a woman wooing a man like the Duchess of Malfi wooing Antonio in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Reviewers have also considered Charlotte Brontë for allowing Jane Eyre take the initiative by Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.

In "*Porphyria's Lover*", when the woman – *Porphyria* has succeeded in making her lover emotionally awake, she becomes dormant and at the middle of the poem, we see the male lover wooing her instead. It means that he had understood her. This poem, therefore deals with the lover's trick or the lover's game. Love is sweet when the two lovers participate. This shows equality in love. It cannot and should not be a one way traffic if it is to be palatable. The regrettable thing is that the male lover strangles the female at the end of the poem. That is why Browning entitled this poem and another in a pair as *Madhouse Cells*, a title that emphasizes the abnormal state of the mind of the speaker.

"*Porphyria's Lover*", which first appeared in 1836, is one of the earliest and most shocking of Browning's dramatic monologues. The speaker lives in a cottage in the country-side. His lover, a blooming young woman named *Porphyria*, comes in out of a storm and proceeds to make a fire and bring cheer to the cottage. She embraces the speaker offering him her bare shoulder. He tells us that he does not speak to her. Instead, he says, she begins to tell him how she momentarily overcame societal strictures to be with him. He realizes that she "worship" him at this instant. Realizing that she will eventually give in to society's pressures, and wanting to preserve the moment, he wraps her hair around her neck and strangles her. He then toys with her corpse, opening the eyes and propping the body up against his side. He sits with her body this way the entire night, the speaker remarking that God has not yet moved to punish him. This is the "plot" of the poem.

Catherine Maxwell also confirms the active role of *Porphyria* in this poem. *Porphyria* enters the poem as the dominant partner, the maker and doer, while her sullen lover is silent and recalcitrantly passive. She composes the scene, even choreographing his posture, in order to rouse his response, to "bring him to life" again. All this is narrated, crucially and with a certain amount of implied criticism by the lover, whose sudden inversion of the roles and attitudes might initially be seen to be a kind of rough justice: the woman is manipulating him, now he turns the tables on her.

"Hillyw" using psychoanalysis asks the question, whether it is possible that the speaker of the poem is a patient in an insane asylum, and Porphyria is a nurse. Could the speaker has been insane to the point of misunderstanding, love and killing a woman who didn't care for him? Porphyria cared for her lover. This interpretation is far-fetched. Kimberly Davis in "Negative Energy" maintains that "within this poem there are two main characters, the villain, the man, and the angel, the woman". Augustenberg Amanda in "Explication on Porphyria's Lover" says that the meter in the poem is iambic pentameter, which aids in reading the poem with more ease noting that it is not divided into stanzas. The rhyme scheme of this poem is a b a b b which shows Porphyria's lover's determination to have Porphyria under his control.

The speaker of the dramatic monologue "The Laboratory" is a murderer who has gone to the laboratory, soothsayer or the "marabout" to get poison to kill his lover. This poem is a twelve stanza poem of four lines each, in each stanza all of them making up forty-eight lines. The poem reads like a mystical means of eliminating his lover. He is given a mask to wear in the soothsayer's laboratory, where the poison is mixed. This is very clear in the first stanza:

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,  
 My gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely  
 As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's – smithy  
 This is the poison to poison her, prithee. (1 – 4)

He wants to kill her because; she has gone out with another man. He is as jealous as the Duke in "My Last Duchess".

He is with her, and they know that I know  
 Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow.  
 While they laugh, laugh at me, fled to the drear  
 Empty church, to pray God in, for them! I am here. (5 – 8)

While they have gone to the church to pray and laugh at him, he is with the soothsayer – "I am here" – in the laboratory. In stanza three he urges the soothsayer to mix the poison. He prefers to sit and watch the concoction in the laboratory than to go to where men are waiting for him and dancing at the palace. In stanza four, he wonders if the oozing of the tree which the soothsayer calls, gum is also poisonous

In stanza five, he is marvelled by the mystical power of the soothsayer who can carry death in an earring, a casket, a signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket. If he had these powers, he would kill Pauline and Elise at the king's Palace. He says the soothsayer to hasten up in stanza seven and that the colour is not good. He should change the colour.

Quick – is it finished? The colour's too grim!  
 Why not soft like the phial's enticing and dim?  
 Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir  
 And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer. (25 – 28)

In stanza eight, he reveals why she seduced his rival: "she's not little, no minion like me... / that's why she

ensnared him". He remarks that "This review will free / the soul from those masculine eyes – say, no!" He looked at his lover straight in the face last night to kill her but she did not fall. The poison will do it as he reveals in stanza nine.

For only last night, as they whispered, I brought  
 My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought  
 Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall?  
 Shrivelled; she fell not, yet this does it all! (33 – 36)

The above lines make it appear to us that the poison has been sent mystically to her. He instructs the soothsayer, not to spare her the pain. Death should be felt and the proof should remain so that his rival should remember her dying face.

In stanza eleven, he asks the soothsayer if the deed is already done and whether he should take off his mask. It had killed her and the mask prevents seeing it closely. In the last stanza he plays the "Oldman" and asks him to cleanse him, for he will go and dance with the king.

The rhyme scheme of this poem is the heroic couplets: aa bb... These heroic couplets show the effectiveness of the poison in killing his mistress as other means have failed to achieve his aim. A mystical solution always comes at the end when we have tried all other physical means and failed.

After analyzing *The Ring and the Book*, "My Last Duchess" "Porphyria's Lover" and "The Laboratory", we discover or realize that using the women in these three poems, Browning wants to underscore the fundamental liberal principle that it is contrary to the natural, innate and inalienable right and liberty and dignity of women to subject themselves to an authority, the, rule, measure, and sanction of which is not in themselves. This principle implies the denial of all true authority like patriarchy which is above women and binds them morally. There is violence against women in Browning's poetry because women have refused to conform to the authority of patriarchy

## **DEATH: THE PRICE FOR LIBERTY FIGHT FOR WOMEN**

How do women in "The Ring and the Book", "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover" and "The Laboratory" fight for their liberty? In other words, how does Pompilia fight for her freedom? How does the Duchess fight for her liberty? How does Porphyria fight for her freedom? And how does Pauline fight for her liberty?

In *The Ring and the Book*, Pompilia in order to escape from Guido's oppression leaves his house which to her is a kind of prison. She is like a prisoner in Guido's house. Guido is an oppressor who is compared to animals of prey like the tiger, the cat and the wolf. Pompilia goes to many religious people to ask for help but they refuse to help her because they believe in patriarchy. Only the young priest Caponsacchi decides to help her flee away from her husband's prison house. The price she has to pay for this act is death as Guido accuses her and the priest of adultery, which patriarchy says tantamount to death for women who commit it.

In "Porphyria's Lover", Porphyria fights for her liberty by defying societal rules to go down the social ladder to meet the man she loves. She believes, she has the right to woo a man she loves and she actually does this in this poem. This is unbelievable in a patriarchal class society like hers. The price she pays for this act is death.

In "The Laboratory", Pauline fights for her liberty by going out with another man. She refuses to be the prisoner of one man by obeying him slavishly or like a minion. The reason she goes out with another man, the speaker says, is that she is not less, "no minion like" him the speaker. A minion is a servant who, in order to win favour, obeys a master slavishly. This means that she refuses to obey her lover slavishly. This also means that the speaker oppressed her. The price she pays for this rebellion is death. In patriarchy, women are entitled to only one man. Going out with two men is promoting polyandry. This is a sacrilege in a patriarchal system like hers. She wants to be "polygamous" like men. This is unacceptable the men of her society.

In "My Last Duchess", the Duchess fights for her liberty by smiling indiscriminately to everybody. She is just as pleasant to her husband as to everyone else. The problem as the Duke sees it is that she is no more pleasant to him than to others, and he feels she should have been. She also refuses to be a prisoner of the Duke's name. She is a Duchess because of the Duke's title. She refuses to behave as a Duchess. The horse she rides around also shows her quest for liberty. The price she pays for this is death.

In the poems *The Ring and the Book*, "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover" and "The Laboratory" Browning gives us the impression that the price women get from fighting for their liberty is death. This death comes when men fail to have control over their wives /or lovers. If the woman does not want to be controlled by patriarchy, the only way left is to kill her. When women do not accept the control of men, it means that they are against patriarchy which gives men privileges over women and every man will do everything to maintain this domination granted him by patriarchy.

## CONCLUSIONS

When we look at the three kinds of violence, we outlined at the beginning of this chapter: physical, verbal and sexual, we realize that the dominant violence in Browning's poetry is physical. Pompilia is killed with hands (a knife), the Duchess, Porphyria and Pauline in "The Laboratory" with poison delivered by the hands. In Browning's poetry, verbal and sexual violence is absent. Of all these three kinds of violence, the one which kills most is physical violence. Verbal and sexual violence hardly kill. What kills is physical violence as we see in the poetry of Robert Browning. Liberal feminism is against patriarchy because it is patriarchy that encourages and perpetuates violence against women. The fundamental human rights that all liberals support include the right to life, liberty and property. When men use patriarchy to kill women and refuse them any liberty and property rights, Browning is against this kind of system. Browning made it clear in his poetry that he does not see why any emancipated man should hold any woman under subjection. He reminds us that little is achieved in life without liberty. Men will benefit if they give their women liberty.

## NOTES

1. Violence against women, others have been talking of excision, I would like to talk of episiotomy".
2. *Robert Browning's Poetry Message Board is part of Sparknotes on Robert Browning's Poetry.* *Sparknotes on Robert Browning's Poetry* are written by a woman called Melissa Walker. *Robert Browning's Poetry Message Board* is the world's "Largest Literary Café". A researcher who has a research problem on the poetry of Robert Browning simply writes on this board and is helped by experts and lovers of Browning all over the world.

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