# ACTION AND THE MODERN TIMES: PORPHYRIA’S STUPEFIED SENSES

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## Abstract

Why did Porphyria, of Robert Browning’s Porphyria’s Lover, come straight from a storm, labored to improve the conditions in the cottage, and gave in to her lover’s whims while he lay inside, all the while, quite comfortably? What made her do nothing, as per the narrator of the poem, in response to being strangled? Why did she act like the puppet of a puppeteer and not like a person of will when being killed? As bizarre is her lover’s wish to love her unnaturally perpetually i.e. by murdering her, it is just as bizarre that Porphyria lets go of her life with the ease reported by the narrator.

Robert Browning’s Porphyria’s Lover may be narrated by the lover, but the actions of Porphyria speak for themselves and tell us of her struggle between the outer world and her inner self. Her actions, or lack thereof, can be taken as a microcosm for the modern woman living in a patriarchal world, where their existence, much like Porphyria’s—after whom the poem is named but much of the critical work present on it revolves around the lover—has been treated as secondary and whose realities also come to a halt in response to the gaze of the Other all too often. In the Madhouse Cell, Porphyria was an equal participant, and should be looked at that way.

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The mythological model of the clash between Athena, the rational, and Medusa, the so-called untamed, that forms the condition called The Medusa Complex, is employed for the explanation of symbols as seen in the poem, which in turn sheds light on the frequent trauma faced by the modern woman living in a patriarchal world.

The human body synthesizes a molecule called heme to maintain regular blood flow and transport oxygen to cells all around the body. But, if the synthesis of heme is disturbed and, say, the normal function of the human body is also disturbed, an

“intermediate” chemical accumulates in the cell (About Porphyria); a chemical that comes into being against the will of nature; a chemical that half the body avoids while the other half fights to create. That chemical messes with the heartbeat of a person, their digestion, and is found to even “freeze” subjects as they experience seizures and paralysis. It also manifests itself in certain psychiatric conditions like hysteria, anxiety and depression (Burgoyne et al.) etc. That intermediate chemical that causes all of this is, as a matter of fact, called porphyrin. And this medical condition is called Porphyria.

Around 70 years before the first case of Acute Porphyria was diagnosed, a Victorian poet named Robert Browning wrote a dramatic monologue about a crazed lover who, in hopes of preserving his love, strangles his beloved while they share an intimate moment in a cottage. The poet initially named it Madhouse Cells (in conjunction with another poem, now called Johannes Agricolica) but later renamed it to Porphyria’s Lover (qtd. in Gribble 32) – Porphyria being the name of the woman who is so loved. Porphyria, as a cluster of blood diseases, existed even before the first case of Acute Porphyria was diagnosed a good few decades after Robert Browning wrote his dramatic monologue, and it is safe to say that is not a mere coincidence that he used the same term so fittingly for the protagonist of the poem, whose actions, or lack thereof, leave the close reader baffled. Porphyria came to be a disease increasingly diagnosed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; did Browning know this would be the case when he chose night time as the setting of the poem? Could he have known that a common symptom among Porphyria patients is bruising of skin due to exposure to sunlight for which they are recommended to wear “tightly-knitted clothing” (About Porphyria) (like Porphyria’s “cloak”, “shawl”, “gloves” and “hat”) for protection? It is also not up for debate whether the character of Porphyria suffered the said condition or not. What is notable here is that this malady, that shares the name of the

woman who "shut the cold out and the storm" (Browning 7) for her lover, whose “blue eyes [laughed] without a stain” (Browning 45) and whose “rosy little head [was] smiling” (Browning 52) as she was being strangled to death, manifests itself through certain mental disorders too, some of which are depression and hysteria, the symptoms of which can also be seen in the character of Porphyria, as the close reader can note. An unintended but, nonetheless, striking connection between the woman who comforts a "heart fit to break" (Browning 5), "blaze(s) up" (Browning 9) the cottage and then quite abnormally gives in to death, and a disease named after her with similar mental conditions entailed as symptoms gives us a head start into a detailed analysis of her character. If it was not Porphyria that Porphyria suffered from, it was definitely something like it: something that brought on hopelessness, rendered her thinking faculties limp, her mind numb and her otherwise “glid[ing]”, “kneel[ing]” and “blaz[ing]” self unresponsive in the face of death.

It is established that Robert Browning was a poet of merit and it has been explained why. Critics have long sat with a hermeneutic microscope in their hands and been reading between his lines through it, discovering newer ways and methods by which his poetry is impactful. For a poet of his stature, the more is learned the less is known. The very open-endedness which makes his poetry great demands further fulfillment. The Psychoanalytic tradition and the work of Robert Browning have been walking hand-in-hand since his poems came to be. Critics have worked on and off on both, the reasons why Browning writes unusual characters and his portrayal of women in his poems. A plethora of work is done on the monologues, especially on a few renowned works like The Last Duchess, Andrea Del Sarto and Porphyria’s Lover. While most of the critics closely read the dynamics of the mad men’s minds and their psychologies in the poems, rarely any attention is paid to the subjects of their monologues, as to how their presence in the scenes came to be, how it fits in the scenes and why it fits the way it does.

We may not have direct dialogues by the subjects of said monologues, but their actions are capable of speaking louder than the words of men who speak in their absence. Despite his disagreement with Annie E. Ireland’s argument, Harold Bloom writes that her article on “Browning’s Types of

Womanhood” is “unusual” as it discusses not his “skill in the general depiction of character but specifically...his ability to portray women in his poetry” (50), which tells us that insight into the actions of Browning’s women may not be as common despite them being in the same Madhouse Cells as the men who speak, as it is in the case of Porphyria’s Lover.

It has been proven that Porphyria’s lover was a megalomaniac, was defensive (Sutton 289), had the saviour complex (Christ 398), belonged to a lower class than her (Maenhout 28), possessed the typical male gaze (Knoepflmacher 142) and whatnot. But, when it comes to Porphyria, little more than the obvious claim of her objectification and reduction to a source of gratification is made.

The few works that do not deal with Porphyria’s lover’s treatment of her, claim that it was either an inclination towards erotic asphyxiation that explains her unprotested strangling or the wish of her lonely upper-class self to be loved by someone more humble. I argue against these common hypotheses, and explain her condition through the model of the Medusa Complex. The term originally coined by Gaston Bachelard, psychologist Marion Woodman conducts a Jungian analysis of it in her book *Addiction to Perfection: the Still Unravished Bride: a Psychological Study* to expand on the fight between the “social and the personal” and the resulting burnout that tends to freeze its subjects. I argue that Porphyria was superimposed with a plethora of standards to stand up to—the gaze of the Other constantly on her—while her primitive and more personal desires fought to be fulfilled, resulting in the temporary stupefaction of her senses: her metaphorical death by asphyxiation.

I hypothesize that Porphyria was not her normal self or in her right mind in the events that take place in the poem; instead, she was fighting a mental battle all the while, the culmination of which is represented by her death in the poem; that she had what some psychologists and researchers call The Medusa Complex.

The Medusa complex is an informal symbolic name that is sometimes used by psychologists for better understanding of the cleft between “the head and the body”, the psychopathology of “affections and emotions, petrified expression of anger that has not been processed, . . . defense mechanisms of isolation

of affect.” etc. It is called The Medusa Complex not because the subject freezes as a result of cancelling opposites—which may seem like the case upon initial reading of the terminology in relation with the poem, but because of who those opposites are symbolized by and how they came to be.

The term Medusa Complex can be properly explained by breaking down the dynamics of the original mythological symbols that stand for the mental states in discussion. Athena, firstly, the goddess of War, turned the beautiful maiden Medusa into a snake-haired Gorgon, is symbolic of the rational, superego-tistic side of us, the one that gives a just, calculated judgment. Medusa, on the other hand, turns one man after another into stone without ever having her thirst quenched, is symbolic of the irrational, wild, id-like streak that exists in us.

According to the myth, notably, Athena punished Medusa for seducing Poseidon in her temple and breaking her vow of celibacy. Hence, Medusa was always the one who wanted more than what belonged to her, and Athena only did justice by penalizing a wrongful act. As Mento and Settineri put it in their paper ‘The Medusa Complex: The head separated from the body in the psychopathology of negative affects’, “The unconscious seduction is punished by the element of rational Athena” (2). But, even after she is cursed by Athena, Medusa continues to haunt men and take lives, making it near to impossible for anyone to come close to her, let alone slay her. This persistence in fight is symbolic of the back and forth interplay of a person’s conscious and unconscious desires; Athena curses, but Medusa persists in the form of a continuous fight. The interplay is furthered by more just, heroic figures trying their hand at beheading Medusa, most of whom failed, and when Perseus did succeed, Medusa’s head is still believed to be used to turn the Kraken into stone to save the life of Andromeda, symbolizing lack of an end to the cycle of interaction among the opposing forces. The human psyche, psychologists like Marion Woodman like to say, works just like that: we push behind our seducing desires which then fight our law-abiding faculties which then try to keep up the fight only to lose all over again. All of this keeps going on endlessly, and the loop only breaks when an event of a high magnitude disturbs the natural continuity of it all. The nature of this “event” is also what will be pointed out in the instance of Porphyria and her lover as we go along

to dissect the poem in the following paragraphs.

In order to effectively comprehend and take the analogy of Athena and Medusa into consideration, although, we have to keep aside the alternate myth that states that Medusa was raped by Poseidon, that she did not seduce him and that she was finally slain by Perseus for the rescue of Andromeda. It is only the ping pong effect of the condition between the Gorgon and the Goddess and the heroes that we are concerned with, because it is representative of what hypothetically went on in the mind of Porphyria.

All the action performed by Porphyria made up all the action performed by anyone in the monologue—the lover did not move at all: this compulsiveness on her part to be everywhere and do everything for everyone is one facet of the complex that resulted in her paralysis. The other facet is her need and wish to be at rest and not pander to the expectations and desires of the social institutions of which she is a part but be by herself and for herself. But, as Marion Woodman puts it in her book *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride*, there is an “outbreak of chaos as soon as the daily routine is completed” (12) for people obsessively going about life to ignore the reality of it and of themselves. People, especially women, have a snake-haired Gorgon in them who is constantly “reaching, reaching, reaching, wanting more and more and more.” (Woodman 9) out of life, and so they find things to attach themselves to. This is how addictions and compulsive behaviors come into being.

Porphyria enters the poem and the cottage in the very beginning of the poem after a good four lines have described the storm which “tore the elm-tops down for spite, / And did its worst to vex the lake” (Browning 3-4) to set the scene of her arrival marked by a natural rush, a rapid occurrence of uncontrollable phenomenon taking place one after another at their own will and pace, waiting for no man. The weather in the beginning of the poem has often been associated with Porphyria being “dominant” and “heroic” (Sinha 74) for she is the one who “shut the cold out and the storm,” (Browning 7) but this same dominance and heroism could be taken as an attempt to overcompensate for her lack of power in other matters of life that may or may not have taken place outside the cottage before she entered it, matters like the storm itself.

Moreover, shutting a storm out is not a small feat; it is an image that speaks of herculean or, in this cases, Perseus-like, capabilities, and surely a mere mortal soaked wet could only “shut out a storm” when they are trying to prove a point to either themselves or someone watching. Their action can be taken as “a symbol of a previous fault fixing” (Mento and Settineri 7). This overcompensation, Marion Woodman writes, is due to dissatisfaction with one’s own present state

(121) and compels one to do what would get them closest to the desired state of perfection against their faults. Note here that efforts are made to get close to the perfect, desired state but the perfection is not reached, for it is not humanly possible to be both, Athena *and* Medusa. The most one can do is try to behead the latter.

As Gribble puts it, “a succession of tasks must be performed before Porphyria can sit down by her lover and call his name” (26) and calls it a pattern by which “desire is deflected and denatured” (27). The same dominant Porphyria then “kneeled” to make “the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm” (Browning 8-9) which shows the “social dutifulness that separates her from him” (Gribble 26) and the “institutional surveillance operating on desire” (Gribble 31) which has shaped her wants to fit the social frame of dutifulness. If the cottage was the opposite of warm, was then the lover lying in cold all the while? If yes, why did he, a warm-blooded human after all, not light up the fire for himself, let alone Porphyria, as a humane if not romantic gesture, who he knew would be coming in from a storm? It was she who, after dealing with people outside the house, facing a storm, gliding in despite it and shutting it out, kneeled down to light a fire. She then withdrew “from her form” (Browning 10) the soaked clothes. One would think that her lover would at least get up to help her with the cloak and shawl and do the due diligence i.e. ask her if all is well or if she would like something warmer. When called, “no voice replied” (Browning 15) and so she took it upon herself to do what followed. All of this inaction could simply be taken as the idle mood of the lover or any other reason, but the sheer contrast of action in all spheres executed by Porphyria can easily mean this: she has taken it upon herself to be the responsible one, to take care of everything everywhere. “Porphyria conforms herself to the contemporary comfort-giving ideal of womanhood” (Gribble 27). The compulsion to do everything and fix all that needs fixing is a behavior close to obsession, and how does an obsessive person, or woman in this case, fare in a society where

their actions are either not valued by those most close to them or seen as unimportant in the face of the big picture i.e. the world outside the cottage? How do rationality and perfection go about and function in an environment that has varying values at play, where their existence is constantly questioned and their need contested?

As we see, on the other hand, there is the lover: a symbol of Porphyria’s more irrational, non-conforming self who breaks rules away from the eyes of people and hides in cottages with her lover. Gribble calls it her “preparedness to compromise herself by the indulgence of “struggling passion”” (27). It is theorized by Ross that Porphyria belonged to the upper class and her lover from a lower class: their relationship being a menial thing to Porphyria, only an escape from the keeping up of a societal facade, while it meant more to her lover. If that is taken to be true, it can be safely said that Porphyria’s lover was, actually, representative of her more irrational, untamed side—of which he was a tool—that did not care for the rules of the society and needed to indulge in sins of the soul. At the same time, her “feast” and life outside home, or “cottage” at least, was, like Ross puts it, the opposite of her baser self i.e. composed, conforming and disciplined. The theory of their class difference presents a possible reason behind the sharp contrast of their behaviours. Her compulsivity could be due to the shame felt in resorting to u means of pleasure. Despite all her need to stick to the rules set by society, be everywhere and achieve perfection in all her actions, there is more that Porphyria needs from her lived experiences and, to add to the questions posed above, how do perfection and the need to exist in spite of it exist in the spirit of the same person? What happens to the rope when it is pulled with great force from both ends?

The “cold outside world and a warm interior” and the fact that “the vermilion dye of porphyry is obtained by pulverizing ("porphyrizing") a hard red shell or equally hard red slab of rock” that Knoepflmacher points out (151) also corresponds to the two types of behaviours we are concerned with. It should be noted that while Porphyria’s rational side works compulsively, her secretive side functions in sheer contrast i.e. the warmth inside is tripled by the fire she lights, her long hair and the arms of her lover. The anxiety of perfection that she strives for as opposed to the peaceful state of comfort that she yearns for, “moral and market values” (Gribble 28), are the two opposites that are

constantly at war with each other, losing in the mid the normality and humanness of Porphyria.

The clash between the storm-shutting, cottage-blazing, compulsive and rational Porphyria and her sinning, looking-for-simple-pleasure, wilder self is made clear. While talking about Medusa as the representation of the darkest impulses of the psyche, Mento and Settineri also talk about its ability to paralyse and “annihilate the will” (7) which is what happens to one suffering from depression.

The causes of depression are multifarious and its symptoms sometimes resemble that of a burnout (Depression: What is burnout?) such as feeling down and experiencing reduced performance. After continuously working for others and ignoring her own health and well-being in the process, Porphyria, when faced with a moment of deep comfort and rest, gave in to it. She was “Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, / To set its struggling passion free” (Browning 22-23), that “passion” could be her compulsiveness to get everything done. Her lover saying “That moment she was mine, mine, fair,” (Browning 36) could be her final, unconscious, decision of staying where she was; her ego felt in that moment a strong pull from the passionate side and that which only wished to lie there and, as a result, could do neither but, instead, gave up in the moment. “Triumph, and a sardonic recognition of futility, jostle for space” (Gribble 12) as Porphyria rests between extremes, frozen, immobile. The narration of the lover dictates Porphyria’s intentions, her desires and her emotions while her actions throughout the poem tell a different story

“As a shut bud that holds a bee” (Browning 43) she rested, without a worry of what went on in the garden, and “Laughed the blue eyes without a stain” (Browning 45) as the burden of here and there, or work and play, or mind and heart vanished in that moment. “...all it scorned at once is fled,” (Browning 54) and all night long she has “not stirred” (Browning 59) for she is finally catching her breath in the scary face of the incapability of doing anything else. Even if she wished, she could not move, for in the battle that went on in her mind, the swords had struck the final blow in the fight to decide upon the supremacy of one force over another. As a result of that blow, neither of the forces won, and the body controlled by said mind froze. The stasis that is the end of the poem is not simply her physical death, but the final surrender of her ego. It is the ultimate

burnout. As a result of the constant clash between herself, her wishes and the gaze of the Other on her, her ego threw all the weapons in a ditch and lay down defenseless for anyone from either side to trample over her as they please.

What is seen in the poem could be the beginning of depression; clear signs of exhaustion and reduced performance already present can turn into any number of prolonged symptoms post-narrative. This state of stasis Mento and Settineri call “the fall of the head of Medusa,” which is marked by “the forces of disintegration of personality and a total slavery” (8). That is, in trying to balance the expectations of the people around us and our own wishes, what Gribble calls “social constraints and libidinous energies” (20), we sometimes end up doing neither due to the extremity of the confusion: the stupefaction of the ego takes place instead.

Gribble writes that “God progressively absents himself in nineteenth century discourse, this is perhaps because the religious function is being usurped by the”, note here what she calls, “power of other discourses operating on social experience.” Times were changing; it was the same century in which Sigmund Freud produced his major works in an effort to explain the workings of the human mind, and his tripartite model of consciousness, too, spoke of id, the pleasure principle, and superego, the reality principle. Dramatic social and psychological changes and discoveries can then be traced in the work of a poet who was, himself, known to explore the mind of man.

It is true that every action has an equal and opposite reaction and what can also be taken to be true is that some actions oppose themselves and the reaction is often a lack. When constant efforts find halt in the form of inaction, there is almost always an explanation behind the inaction. In the case of Porphyria and all the characters like her that exist fictionally (Ophelia, of Hamlet, for example) and in real life, the explanation usually resembles the one shared here: action usually stops not because the subject is exhausted, but because the subject does not have any other recourse other than being exhausted. It is the finality and the sharpness of the reaction that makes one rethink the nature of the action, much like the rethinking of Porphyria’s actions and all the action not performed by her lover in the beginning, at least, for the reader very well knows how our protagonist’s inaction in the end of the narration came to be.

To conclude, Porphyria—the pliant Porphyria, could neither suffer in the hell that are people, and nor could she simmer in the fountains of her personal heaven without feeling guilt coming from within herself; the struggle that went on in her head that had her give in quietly to a fatal embrace ended in a deafening silence of her soul. The constant choosing and doing, the picking between right and

wrong, society and personality, will and wishes ended in a stark state of darkness where neither of the dualities existed. Porphyria jammed her feet in the quicksand of purgatory, not being able and not wanting to enter heaven or hell, ready to be taken in and transported anywhere but away from the burden that is choice. She gave in and she gave up.

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