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English 217

Formalist Criticism

Meter in the Murderer's Mutterings: Proof of Insanity in "Porphyria's Lover"

Psychotic murderers have a certain way about them. When the camera pans to the tight-lipped man muttering in the corner, glaring out from under heavy eyebrows, you just know: If he hasn't already put someone to death with a smile on his lips, he's about to. In "Porphyria's Lover," the reader lacks such a visual image of the speaker to reveal his insanity, but, under closer examination, his verbal patterns are just as telling. A closer look at the unique rhythms of his narration exposes the depth of his abnormal thinking more fully than a first reading would reveal; this is important because it shows that his actions stem from a deep-seated, inherent instability. His use of iambic tetrameter, as well as occasional variations from it, draws attention to his fragmented thinking, emotional tensions, and twisted priorities.

In English poetry—indeed, even in everyday English speech—the most common meter is iambic pentameter, so the fact that the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" communicates in tetrameter instead is an instant indicator that he is not quite normal. Tetrameter, having only four beats per line instead of the more natural five of pentameter, makes the speaker's tale read more quickly than the reader is used to. He builds up a sort of manic momentum that carries the reader through his awkward line breaks. Such instances of enjambment and caesura let him keep talking in a uniform four feet per line, even when his narrative would better fit a less homogeneous meter. In the following lines, the speaker barrels on, ignoring the natural tendency for end-stopped lines:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do. (31-35)

A more comfortable breakdown for the reader, where the pauses fall at the ends of the lines, would make this section follow a pattern of four beats, two beats, five beats, three beats, and six beats, like so:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud
At last I knew Porphyria worshiped me
Surprise made my heart swell
And still it grew while I debated what to do.

Of course, from the poet's point of view, the rhyme scheme also dictates that the lines end where they do, but forcing the speaker's phrases to break also shows the fragmentation of his thought processes.

Such instances of enjambment, a phrase that "carries over to the next line without a pause," and caesura, a "pause that falls near the middle" of the line (Mason and Nims), are present throughout the poem. However, the greatest concentration falls in the cited section, lines 31-35, when the speaker is faced with the challenge of keeping Porphyria with him and "perfectly pure and good" forever (37). If the fact that his solution is to strangle her and dote on her dead body is not enough, his fragmented thinking at this crucial moment of the poem shows that he lacks the capacity to reason clearly.

Though Porphyria's lover is consistent in his quick tetrameter, he occasionally deviates from the driving iambic feet. The instances where he falls into another pattern of stresses are significant because they direct the ear to the details and moments that excite him emotionally. Unsurprisingly, the speaker's agitation is at its height at the emotional climax of the poem: right after he strangles Porphyria and cautiously checks to be sure she is dead. Just as his confidence falters, so do his iambic feet. He says, "As a shut bud that holds a bee,/ I warily oped her lids: again/ laughed the blue eyes without a stain" (43-45). Instead of the regular iambs of the previous lines, this passage contains not only iambic but also pyrrhic, spondaic, trochaic, and amphibrachic feet. These stammering syllables emphasize his wariness and belie any vestige of self-composure.

The spondaic foot, which consists of two stressed syllables together, tends to call attention to itself and emphasize whatever idea it contains, so a look at the spondaic feet in "Porphyria's Lover" shows what is really important to the speaker. In addition to the instance in line 43, the spondee shows up three times in the poem. The first two occur while Porphyria is taking off her outerwear: "And laid her soiled *gloves by*, untied/ Her hat and let the damp *hair fall*" (12-13 emphasis added). The general placement of these lines shows the speaker's intense interest in her undressing, even though only her gloves and shawl come off. More specifically, the extra emphasis on "hair" shows the speaker's extra attention to the object that, though at the moment it seems to be a passing detail, will later become the instrument of Porphyria's death. The third, and perhaps most telling, spondee is in line 36: "That moment she was mine, *mine, fair*" (emphasis added). This line shows just how important it is to the speaker to have ownership over Porphyria, and he will later go to great lengths to preserve the dominance he feels in that moment. The emphasis the speaker places on these particular phrases by breaking

from iambic tetrameter shows that he does not care for Porphyria as a proper lover should but instead only sees her as an object—and the more naked the better—over which he is obsessed with having definite ownership.

Just as the stressed syllables reveal the speaker's priorities, the unstressed syllables show what the speaker does not value. The word "heart" in line 5 and the word "God" in line 60 both fall on the unaccented syllable of the iambic foot, a place usually reserved for articles, pronouns, and other insignificant words. Yet, "heart" and "God," the center of the self and the divine, which sane men would hold most holy and sacred, get buried within the rhythm of the poem. The speaker thereby shows that he does not value the spiritual or emotive aspects of life, just as he does not value them in Porphyria, which again reveals how deeply twisted his priorities are.

Perhaps the most disturbing deviation from the iambic foot is that which occurs every time the speaker mentions the name of his lover. "Porphyria," with its unstressed-stressed-unstressed-unstressed syllable pattern, can never fall neatly into an iambic meter; the extra unstressed syllable will always throw it off. Therefore, the speaker cannot even mention Porphyria without revealing his insanity. She does not fit into his monologue any more than she fits into his idea of the woman she ought to be.

The speaker's mad struggle to force Porphyria to be the type of woman that he values, that is, an object to be possessed and not a human being with a spiritual and emotive side, culminates in murder but is evident throughout the poem. The rhythm of his rant—iambic tetrameter—reveals that he is abnormal from the very start, and the passages in which the meter falters give deeper insight into his insanity.

Works Cited

Mason, David, and John Frederick Nims. *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006. Print.