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Brief Articles and Notes

Sexual Meaning in "The Last Ride Together"

RUSSELL M. GOLDFARB

In 1915 William Lyon Phelps wrote that Robert Browning's "The Last Ride Together" was "one of the greatest love-poems in all literature."[1] Yale's Lampson Professor of English may have been somewhat too enthusiastic, but through the years his voice has been merely one of a chorus of the poem's admirers: in 1897 Edward Berdoe noted, "This poem is considered by many critics to be the noblest of all Browning's love poems." Arthur Symons wrote in 1906, " 'The Last Ride Together' is one of those love-poems which I have spoken of as specially noble and unique, and it is, I think, the noblest and most truly unique of them all." Almost jealous of its many readers, and perhaps unknowingly defensive, in 1956 Henry C. Duffin said, "No amount of analysis can rob this poem of the deservedly high place it holds with Browning devotees."[2] The poem has had a good deal of analysis from both early and recent critics,[3] and their admiration cannot be robbed of its fervor. To ask devotees for a fresh reading of this Victorian masterpiece, however, one must speak in distinct tones. My paper suggests a new understanding of "The Last Ride Together" based upon the now vulgar coitional meaning of the word "ride." With a necessary qualification, the title as metaphor relates significantly to the act of sex.

The qualification, of course, is that one cannot say with certainty that Robert Browning intended his poem to convey a highly charged sexual meaning. In fact, L. N. Broughton and B. F. Stelter's *A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning* will guide readers to poems in which the word "ride" is used with an unmistakably literal intent. In all probability, Browning was not conscious of the word's metaphoric extension. This probability does not preclude my interpretation, but it should be clear that one of the sexual dimensions of "The Last Ride Together" was most likely hidden from the poet. Sexual references are present, however, and they lead implicity to an interpretation which involves the sex act.

[1] *Robert Browning, How to Know Him* (Indianapolis, 1915), p. 146.

[2] Edward Berdoe, *The Browning Cyclopaedia* (London, 1897), p. 252; Arthur Symons, *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (London, 1906), p. 125; Henry C. Duffin, *Amphibian* (London, 1956), p. 58.

[3] Recent comments on the poem may be found in William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955); Irving Orenstein, "A Fresh Interpretation of 'The Last Ride Together'," *Baylor Browning Interests*, No. 18 (May, 1961); Dallas Kenmare, *An End To Darkness* (London, 1962).

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No one in print understands the poem this way. The first stanza has been read as a rejected lover's plea to his lady for their last time together to be spent horseback riding. The lady thinks about this for a "breathing-while" in stanza two, and then agrees. The next two stanzas prepare for and begin the ride. Now the speaker thinks about failure and success as he rides and sees his companion's bosom heave (l. 60). Stanzas seven and eight decide that the artist – the poet, sculptor, musician – deals less with life than men such as the speaker who personally experience exhilarating moments as they really happen. The poet may sing about the joy of riding, but the speaker actually rides. He is depressed in stanza nine, for his earthly ride has been so enjoyable that he wonders if there could possibly be a more perfect bliss in heaven. "Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?" The last stanza asks if heaven might virtually be "The instant made eternity," – the climax of the ride prolonged eternally. "And heaven just prove that I and she / Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

Manly resolution characterizes the narrator, for readers have observed that despite immediate failure in courtship, the man is brave and generous. He accepts his situation without any trace of petty vindictiveness; in fact, he blesses the woman for giving him the memory of a past romance. With optimistic cheerfulness, he prepares to relish their last moments together. Browning manages successfully to fuse dramatic intensity and philosophic speculation in a scene that presents both emotional and intellectual involvement. While the narrator rides physically, he mentally ponders the relationship between life and art, and the theory of imperfection which Browning worked on in poems such as "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "Old Pictures in Florence." But in "The Last Ride Together" there is more, insist Browning enthusiasts. The metrical handling evokes the very breath and blood of equestrian activity. As C. H. Herford has it, "In the wonderful long-drawn rhythm of the verse we hear the steady stride of the horses as they bear their riders farther and farther into the visionary land of Romance."[4]

This poem's rhythmical mastery of riding has sexual overtones that have been ignored. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records usage from 1250 to 1719 of the verb "to ride" as "To mount the female; to copulate." A variant is recorded to the nineteenth century, from 1500 to 1808: "To mount or cover (the female)." There is no date telling when the word in this sense became used only in low and indecent language. Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* provides an approximate date of 1780 when a definition of "ride" in Standard English was "To mount a woman in

[4] C. H. Herford, *Robert Browning* (Edinburgh, 1905), p. 139.

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copulation." This meaning in colloquial English extends to the twentieth century. Also colloquial in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is "ride" as "an act of coition." The colloquial significance of "ride" was recognized at least once in Victorian literary history, and the word was censored.

On September 12, 1857, Christina Rossetti wrote part of a poem she called "Nightmare." William Michael first discovered the fragment after his sister's death. When he published the poem, he changed words in the first and last part:

> I have a *love* in ghostland—
> Early found, ah me how early lost!—
> Blood-red seaweeds drip along that coastland
> By the strong sea wrenched and tost . . . .
>
> . . .
>
> If I wake he *rides* me like a nightmare:
> I feel my hair stand up, my body creep:
> Without light I see a blasting sight there,
> See a secret I must keep.

The word "love" became "friend"; the word "rides" became "hunts." Professor Lona Mosk Packer, who told this story in *Christina Rossetti,* observed, "William's substitution in the printed text of two mild and conventional words for the two more psychologically revealing words in manuscript becomes in context a highly significant alteration."[5] In short, William censored the image of intercourse which Christina had drawn in frank and very personal terms.

No passage in Robert Browning's poem is quite as sexually explicit as "he rides me," and my interest in "The Last Ride Together" does not extend to drawing biographical inferences from psychologically revealing words. Professor Packer has helpfully shown where a Victorian poem used an ordinary word in a special sense that was recognized by a Victorian reader. Whether or not Browning and his particular readers were consciously aware of the word's overtones, the point is that the poem he wrote contains a semantically vital sex meaning. This meaning significantly influences one interpretation.

"The Last Ride Together" opens as the speaker recalls being told by his beloved that their intimacy must end. Since "this was written," he accepts his fate, for it "needs must be." His immediate response is to bless the lady's name "in pride and thankfulness," and to request, if she "will not blame," her leave for "one more last ride." His apologetic tone is no less ambiguous than the wording of his request. Does asking a loved one for a final moment's company merit blame? Does asking for one *more* last ride mean that there have been

[5] (Berkeley, 1963), p. 113.

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other last rides? Does "last" have the same various meanings it has in "My Last Duchess"? The adjective might be simply redundant, or it might be ironic. But if each time the lovers part they go horseback riding, this is indeed too fanciful. If the woman has agreed to intercourse "for the last time," as she might have done several times in the past, then the tone of the proposition is understandable. This reading has the further advantage of providing a smooth transition to stanza two.

The lady, whom the speaker calls "My mistress," bends her brow and fixes the man with "deep dark eyes where pride demurs / When pity would be softening through." She is annoyed, or thoughtfully considering the proposition. While the man waits for her reply "With life or death in the balance," his very blood seems to leave him. Seeing her lover in such emotional distress, would the proud lady object or raise scruples to going horseback riding? Or would pride cause her to reject the expediency of copulation? Pity for the man's emotional condition makes her submit. With "blood replenished" her lover feels "one day more am I deified." The sex act more than any other achievement has "deified" the host of men.

Before the act begins, the man pulls the lady to him, and "thus lay she a moment on my breast." The sensual imagery of stanza three is much more fitting a sexual embrace than the preparations for horseback riding. The speaker asks the reader to imagine a "billowy-bosomed" western cloud blessed by the sun, the moon, the evening-star. As the reader, "looking and loving best," grew conscious of the scene, his passion would draw the night's beauties down on him "near and yet more near, / Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!" Thus does the lady lean and linger in the speaker's embrace, an embrace that has fleshly-spiritual aspects which in part clarify the idea of a physically initiated deification.

When flesh fades, then soul is released, and as the couple began to ride the man's soul "Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll / Freshening and fluttering in the wind." In mundane terms, the soul's revitalization may be pictured as occurring when the lady moves from her position on the man's breast to a position more suitable to intercourse and the "ride" begins. The alternative is to imagine the pair, probably dressed in Victorian habits, as they awkwardly hug on horseback and gallop away.

Stanza five suggests that the two do not move physically across the countryside. "It seemed my spirit flew," the speaker says "Saw other regions, cities new, / As the world rushed by on either side." Key words are "seemed" and "spirit." The man does not literally travel

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over miles of ground, nor is there any mention here or anywhere else in the entire poem of a journey taken specifically or solely by horse. One reading of the last line in the stanza actually pinpoints a stationary location: "I hoped she would love me; here we ride." Like other men, the speaker had striven for a certain goal, had failed, and now had to "Bear up beneath [his] unsuccess." His hopeful past contrasts with the present: instead of a life-long love, he must be content with a momentary intimacy. The terms of the bargain are consistently amatory.

Thoughts of success and failure now lead the man to extended philosophizing which he punctuates at intervals by returning to his immediate pleasure. Who has ever lived up to his hopes, to his aspirations? Who has ever been able to execute fully what the mind designed? What the heart conceived? Who has never been thwarted by bodily limitations? "We ride and I see her bosom heave." Posterity crowns success with joyless rewards—biographies, memorials, name plates. "My riding is better, by their leave."

Stanzas seven and eight contrast apprehensions of reality. The poet intellectually fashions a meaning to life; the speaker emotionally lives. The poet's "brains beat into rhythm" and "tell / What we felt only." Browning gives us a poet's view in "Cleon," where the artist writes to a king,

> Indeed, to know is something, and to prove
> How all this beauty might be enjoyed, is more:
> But, knowing naught, to enjoy is something too.
> Yon rower, with the moulded muscles there,
> Lowering the sail, is nearer it than I.
> I can write love-odes: thy fair slave's an ode.
> I get to sing of love, when grown too gray
> For being beloved: she turns to that young man,
> The muscles all a-ripple on his back.
> I know the joy of kingship: Well, thou art king!
> (ll. 291-300)

The non-artistic speaker of "The Last Ride Together" agrees that the "maker's" life is incomplete. He scores his point with a comparison based upon one of the most telling of human experiences: "Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride."

The sculptor deals with lifeless matter. The musician's opera goes out of fashion. Although time stores all things, including the speaker's youth, the artist has less to enjoy of his days than the person caught up in the present, the actual, the physical. A statue pales before its human equivalent and the past gives way to the moment. "We ride, in fine."

Since all men fail, and some can make the most of failure, the speaker has seen himself to be man's equal, or a little more than his

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equal. He has been confident in his material achievement and in his argument. But as the ride comes to an end in stanza nine, he feels empty and depressed; his previous assurance changes to a questioning hesitancy. The emotional letdown which attends the completion of sexual intercourse might account for the despondent mood. First, he asks "Who knows what's fit for us?" There is a life after death which should provide one with the highest moments of bliss. This end, though "dim-descried," should surpass the happiness life has to offer. If he approaches this bliss, he wonders, "Could I descry such?" The answer comes quickly: "I sink back shuddering from the quest." What concerns the speaker is literally a matter of religious faith. Celestial promises are suspect if they are prematurely fulfilled in this world. And this is precisely the spiritual problem: "Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?" The good experience which was capable of sublimating his being had to have happened within the course of the poem, for it is this earthly experience which bothers him because of its heavenly perfection. At this point, it seems to be a rhetorical question to ask whether a man's being would be exalted to its highest pitch by the sex act or by horseback riding.

In stanza ten the speaker assures himself that the *summum bonum* is reserved for heaven, that failure or a lesser good is a positive condition of life. He knows that without earthly failure there would be no need for heavenly perfection, and what he had thought was perfection a moment ago merely approached it in degree. He apparently glimpsed heaven at the climax of intercourse; the life beyond would be the emotional feeling infinitely prolonged: "Change not in kind but in degree, / The instant made eternity." The temporal "instant" can be taken plainly as the moment of sexual bliss, an emotional moment which fulfills both the speaker's secular and religious desires. Earlier he had said, "Flesh must fade for heaven was here." Now the physical and spiritual terms are reversed as the poem ends with the lines, "And heaven prove that I and she / Ride, ride together, forever ride."

The sexual meaning in "The Last Ride Together" complements traditional interpretations: there is still at the heart of the poem the optimistic theory of imperfection, the glory of failure, the notion that the earthly race is better than the earthly prize. A compensatory afterlife rewards mundane defeat; it even increases the value of defeat. Unsuccess in certain moments gives a tantalizing, soul-satisfying vision of heavenly success. Further, faith in real life experience is a religious necessity which points towards spiritual ideals. A concrete example of sexual participation makes this point.

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But if for some readers the concrete example has in this paper been taken too literally, it still exists as submerged symbolism. There may be fantasied intercourse in the hero's conscious or semi-conscious mind. "The Last Ride Together" does somehow raise the image of copulation to accompany and to evoke a heavenly vision. The image seems perfectly suitable as a fundamental physical achievement in human experience, and the poem says that fleshly sensation is a concomitant to spiritual deification.

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A NOTE ON THE IMAGERY IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "A BIRTHDAY"

RICHARD D. LYNDE

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "A Birthday" first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in April, 1861, and was reissued the following year in the collection *Goblin Market.* This lyric, one of the author's most popular, has been recognized by critics as a declaration of love and has been cited as its author's greatest effusion of undiluted joy. Margaret Sawtell quotes William Michael Rossetti as having been unable to account for the exuberance of "A Birthday," supposing it to have corresponded to his sister's emotion at the time.[1] Christina herself provided no clues to its composition, even if later readers have speculated that it either derives from a renascence of her old love for James Collinson (Sawtell, p. 53) or represents the dawning of the new passion for Charles Cayley.[2]

Whatever the reasons for its existence, an examination of the natural and artificially made objects which it embodies will provide a fascinating glimpse into the associative method of the mind which produced it. The three natural objects of the first stanza, the singing bird, the apple tree, and the rainbow shell, appear in their native settings. As Christina herself said: "Common things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured."[3] The objects found in the second stanza, the doves and pomegranates, the peacocks, the gold and silver grapes, and the leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys, either do not appear in their natural settings or else are artistic renderings of natural objects. They are commanded by the

[1] *Christina Rossetti* (London, 1955), p. 53.

[2] Paul Elmer More, "Christina Rossetti," in *Shelburne Essays,* 3rd Series, (New York, 1905), pp. 130-131.

[3] *Seek and Find* (London, 1879), p. 14.

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