NINETEENTH-CENTURY PERCEPTIONS OF ROBERT BROWNING: THE POET THROUGH HIS OWN EYES AND THOSE OF HIS VICTORIAN CRITICS AND DEVOTED READERS

By

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# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: The Good, the Bad, and the Fanatical: Browning and His Nineteenth-

Century Reception ........................................................................................................... 5

Chapter Two: Going Where No Victorians Have Gone Before: The London Browning

Society .................................................................................................................................. 29

Chapter Three: Being Robert Browning: The Autobiographical Poems of the Poet .... 52

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 81

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 85
Abstract

Thesis under the direction of Melissa Jenkins, Ph.D., Professor of English.

The London Browning Society has been addressed by scholars in modern biographies such as *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography* (1996) by Clyde De L. Ryals, and it was studied in a 1969 book by William S. Peterson titled *Interrogating The Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society*. However, this thesis goes further by approaching the Society as the equivalent of a modern day “fan” community, and by providing a close look at some of the Society’s published documents. The purpose of doing so is to form a picture of Browning’s reputation during his life and career based on the perceptions of the critics of the day, the Society members, and the thoughts he had on himself and his own works. The thesis examines nineteenth-century reviews from journals contemporary to the time, the history and activities of the London Browning Society, and Browning’s interaction with both found in his letters. Lastly, the thesis looks at some of Browning’s most ambiguously autobiographical poetry, all of which are largely neglected by modern scholars in favor of the more obviously dramatic works, to see how he composed on topics with connections to his personal life, and how he influenced perceptions about his own character.
Introduction

I was first drawn to Robert Browning’s poetry because of my interest in his handling of dramatic speakers in his most famous and studied poetry such as “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church.” However, as I read through his collection of works, I began to find myself fascinated by poems that I never knew existed because of their relative obscurity in the world of academia. Many of Browning’s less dramatic and later poems such as “Prospice” (published in 1864), “House” (published after 1876), and his earlier non-dramatic poem “One Word More” (published in 1855) lack the rich and subtle development of characterization offered in his dramatic monologues, but this is because they alternatively appear to provide examples of Browning composing on topics closer to his life, mind, and heart. “Prospice” can be interpreted as concerning Browning’s feelings about dying and the possibility of a spiritual afterlife. “House” deals metaphorically with Browning’s opinions on biography and privacy as a poet, and “One Word More” is the primary example of a poem by Browning in which he openly admits to being the speaker. Despite the potential depth of their subject matter, combined together only eleven published articles relating to these four poems are included in the MLA database with the latest being from 2000. In comparison, “My Last Duchess” boasts sixty-two, “Fra Lippo Lippi” forty-four, and “The Ring and the Book” has 228. Browning’s reputation has well-established his skill as a composer of the dramatic monologue, but critically examining his later and non-dramatic poems will allow me to gain a better understanding of Browning’s skills in his more personal forms.
The overall purpose of this thesis is to examine the relationship among Robert Browning, his critics, and his most devoted readers during the time that he was alive and publishing. Exploring the type of criticism that was published in response to his works during his career also help to develop a picture of how his reputation as an “underappreciated” poet came about, and the immediate effects it had on his reputation, such as the development of a small, but devoted following. I also closely examine the relationship that he shared with the London Browning Society and how their scholarly approach to Browning is affected by their close proximity to the poet. Studying the Society also highlights how they may have helped to shape the general opinion of him based on the inferences they made concerning his personality with his poetry as their source. Because societies formed for living artists were rare at the time, and according to biographers Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair the London Browning Society was the first of its kind devoted to a living poet (366), a study of this relationship will allow for an examination of a Victorian era version of the artist-and-fan base relationship that is much more common in today’s society of electronic media.

The primary methodology of this thesis is to go straight to the nineteenth-century sources and examine them in order to study the opinions of Victorian critics, Browning, and the Browning Society members for myself. In Chapter One, the major criticisms aimed at Browning are studied in order to determine the effect that Browning’s mediocre popular support had on him and his small but devoted readership. For example, an 1848 retrospective review of *Bells and Pomegranates in Sharpe’s London Magazine*, includes the observation that “a certain needless obscurity is but too characteristic of Browning’s strains, and suffices in some degree to account for the slow progress he has made in
popular estimation” (122). Reading the reviews helps to determine the accuracy of such criticisms, how the reviewers fed off of each other’s opinions, and determine if the general view of Browning’s poetry changed overtime. I will also look at how the state of Browning’s reputation helped lead to the creation of the London Browning Society.

In Chapter Two, I will focus on the published materials left behind by the Browning Society members such as their essays and the minutes to some of their early meetings. Doing this helps to examine a nineteenth-century group of early Browning scholars and discover the themes and methodologies popular among them. While all of the current biographical sources that I used, including *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: a Literary Life* (2007) by Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair, *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography* (1996) by Clyde De L. Ryals, and *Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (2001) by Sarah Wood feature information on the Browning Society, they do not closely study the actual essays written and published by the members. The only source available to me that featured an in-depth look at the Society, its members, and some of its scholarly work was *Interrogating The Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society* by William S. Peterson. However, this work, though a valuable resource, was published in 1969, and features an approach that mainly presents the Society’s most ardent members as borderline religious fanatics. My research differs by approaching the Society and its members as a nineteenth-century equivalent of a twenty or twenty-first century “fan” community, and I use my knowledge of those to understand some of the beliefs and actions of Browning’s Victorian devotees.

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1 This is a commonly used term to best describe devoted followers of an artist and his or her creations.
Chapter Three features close readings of poems that appear, based on biographical information, to feature topics personal to Browning. The purpose of this chapter is to question the sometimes thin line between dramatic and autobiographical works when the poet composes on topics important to him. The drought of current criticism on the selected poems, including the previously mentioned “House” and “One Word More,” allows me to offer my own personal readings, which I compare to the nineteenth-century opinions of the Society members and critics in order to explore how the perceptions we have of poems affects their accepted interpretations.
Chapter One: The Good, the Bad, and the Fanatical: Browning and His Nineteenth-Century Reception

A major part of Robert Browning’s reputation in academia today is the well-known fact that despite now being considered one of the most important poets of Victorian England, he was not greeted with such critical acclaim and popularity during the better part of his publishing career. Such a contradiction is not entirely unheard of in the world of literature. However, in the age when Browning’s contemporary, in period and to an extent in poetic style, Alfred Lord Tennyson was a living legend, the issue is a puzzle worth exploring. The purpose of this chapter is to examine exactly what sort of critical reception Browning’s work received during his lifetime, how it affected him personally as a poet and a man, and how it influenced his readership. The last point may appear to already possess the obvious conclusion that poor reviews resulted in lower readership, and this is true for a large part of the general public. However, with a poet that can rather safely, based on his current importance in Victorian studies, be considered to have been ahead of his time, a third outcome arose in which the lack of appreciation resulted in the development of passionately devoted followers who formed a society in his honor. In this chapter, these three major factors will be introduced and examined to determine the relationships that they share.

Critical Reception

Throughout Browning’s career, his poetry was greeted with the same two major criticisms: his poems lacked beauty and were too difficult for the average reader to
understand. Specifically, the terms “rough” and “obscure” were consistently used to describe his poetry in the nineteenth-century. Barrett Browning and Tennyson even had concerns over the “rough” quality of Browning’s compositions (Wood 76), and later in his career, some of his most devoted readers, members of the London Browning Society, admitted to finding his poetry to be lacking in beauty (Peterson 64). When *Men and Women* was published in 1855, many critics objected to an obscurity in the content and the style of the poetry, which in many cases simply meant that it was too difficult to understand. The novelist, Margaret Oliphant, was one of these critics, and she wrote an anonymous article in which she confessed to only being able to “make out” some of his poems. In the review she said, “There is no getting through the confused crowd of Browning’s *Men and Women*” (Kennedy and Hair 276). A more specific complaint concerning the difficulty of the poetry can be found in the December 1855 issue of *Leader* magazine in which the critic stated: “He bears unfamiliar accents, and [a reader] must learn to accommodate his ear to them” (“Robert Browning’s *Men and Women*” 1157). Issues with the “unintelligible” nature of Browning’s poetry consisted of everything from his syntax and diction to his dramatic characterizations and literary allusions.

Eventually, Browning’s reputation as a poet grew simply from the length of time he had been active in his career and the amount of work he had published. As a result, his poetry’s perceived flaws also grew as a part of his reputation, and some later critics began to take enjoyment in pointing out how incomprehensible they found him to be. In a review from 1887 of *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance* for the *Saturday

\footnote{The term used by Browning in his letters from the 1880s to describe how he feels his poetry is generally viewed (Hood 202).}
Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art, the critic remarked that, “Mr. Browning knows what he is doing, though perhaps he has no serious purpose than to startle and irritate ordinary readers, or to compel the Browning Society\textsuperscript{3} to invent some farfetched apologies for a strange, though not a poetical, license” (303). In the same review, the critic considered the difficulty of Browning’s poetry to be out of an intentional desire to force his readers to work, while also warning that not every reader will bother:

Mr. Browning, who often amuses himself by writing in a cipher to which he alone has the key, has seldom propounded to his disciples a more hopeless puzzle than the connection between the two dramatic interludes and the poetical discourses which occupy the greater part of the volume. The secret will probably remain with its author, and in any case the uninitiated critic is not required to trouble himself with the solution of the riddle. (302)

The attitude that readers were in some way owed a certain type of easily accessible art from Browning introduces the idea, found in many of the reviews, that a poet’s work was expected to stay within the bounds of commonly accepted literary standards and any deviations could be easily dismissed.

In Browning’s case, his deviations from the guidelines of “true” poetry, resulting in his signature “roughness” and “obscurity,” is implied in many of the Victorian reviews to be the result of a lack of discipline on his part as a poet. This idea not only strongly suggests a lack of flexibility in accepting new forms of poetry on the part of many of his contemporary critics, but it also helps to explain how such a highly regarded poet in

\textsuperscript{3} The Society’s relationship with critics will be discussed later in the chapter.
current academia did not receive universal praise during the time he was actively publishing. An early example of this concept in the reviews can be seen in the 1855 *Leader* article. The writer remarks on the issue of obscurity concerning Browning’s use of allusions, and hints at the possibility that Browning lacks discipline in his use of such poetic adornments when he stated: “He obscures what might otherwise be intelligible by some whimsical turn or titles, which carry the mind away from the obvious meaning” (“Robert Browning’s *Men and Women*” 1157). Further demonstrating this point, a critic for the July 1856 issue of the *London Quarterly Review* felt that Browning was a genius, but one who was “so confirmed in his poetic ways, as to be far beyond the reach of salutary discipline” (“Art. VIII-1. *Men and Women*” 494). This opinion is further explored when he states: “The new poems of Mr. Browning are only so many new examples of his peculiar style, a style still harsh, in spite of intimations of a hidden music, and still obscure, in spite of occasional gleams of happiest meaning” (495). Browning’s own friend, Henry Chorley, wrote along a similar vane when he published an anonymous review for the *Athenaeum* on November 17, 1855 that called *Men and Women* “energy wasted and power misspent” (Kennedy and Hair 274). Another reviewer, signing his work as G. B. – T. C. C., used even harsher words to get this point across in an 1856 article for *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country*:

Endowed by nature with those gifts which, duly cultivate, enable a man to become a fine poet, he has chosen to let them run wild; and what might have been a beautiful garden is but a wilderness overgrown with a rank and riotous vegetation. Writer of plays of philosophical poems, of dramatic lyrics, he has in each class given evidence of strong natural
powers weakened by self-indulgence, by caprice, by hankering after originality, by all the mental vices which are but so many names of vanity and self-seeking. (105)

For critics such as this, Browning was never going to be a success. Rather than viewing him as an artist attempting to create a new type of poetry, or as someone not willing to compromise his artistic integrity by completely selling-out to the masses, Browning was simply viewed as an arrogant artist who could not conform to the literary standards of the day. G. B. – T. C. C. even went as far as to accuse Browning of selfishness because of style of poetry:

And Mr. Browning not seeming to care for the enjoyment, or the instruction he could afford his fellow-creatures, but only to ease his own conceiving mind and fervent heart, naturally enough refuses to submit to toil, which after all, would probably lessen the actual pleasure of composition, and by refining his taste, lower his estimate of his own productions. (105)

The idea that Browning has a responsibility as a poet with talent to create a certain type of art demonstrates a very restrictive definition of poetry on the part of the critic. This criticism calls to mind the idea popular in nineteenth-century England, and in the works of Tennyson, of the responsibilities of the poet as a type of profit to the people. G. B. – T. C. C. seems to believe that someone possessing the power of poetic genius also has a responsibility to the public, and that it is his responsibility to produce works that can improve the minds of Victorian readers. However, as a primarily self-confessed,

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A point addressed by Browning in his poem “Popularity,” which will be discussed in Chapter Three.
dramatic poet, Browning seemed unconcerned with strictly instructing his readers in matters of philosophy, even though later the London Browning Society members took it upon themselves to spread the wealth of such knowledge.

The viewpoint that Browning was a disappointment as a poet, rather than a talentless one, did not fade away later in his career. By 1886, many reviewers continued to criticize Browning’s style for not matching their traditional standards for poetry. For instance, in a review for the London Quarterly Review in 1886, one critic stated:

And in Browning, as perhaps in Eschylus, the result is a certain roughness—a certain apparent obscurity and hardness, which are really serious faults in art, and do most forcibly tell against the chances of popular admiration. Has Browning really made the best of his gifts? One often thinks; and it is difficult not to answer, No. (‘Art. III. –Three Contemporary Poets’ 239)

The critic also addressed Browning’s nonconformity explicitly when he wrote in the same review, “Browning has not possessed the art of always clothing his thought in the garb of grace which should belong to poetry” (241). An 1887 review from the Athenaeum offered mixed praise by calling Browning’s style “the poetry of idiosyncrasy” (“Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day” 247) and put forth the idea that art can also be used for idiosyncrasy simply because “otherwise the world would have to lose the splendid fruits of Mr. Browning’s genius, and surely that would be a loss indeed” (247). However, also following the trend of being disappointed by Browning, the critic also noted that while the “expression of idiosyncrasy is one of the legitimate functions of art” it is not “its highest function” (247). This representative sample of
critical reviews helps to demonstrate the attitude that prevented Browning from reaching the levels of critical and financial popularity for which he wished. They seem to have not been interested in the effort and patience required to appreciate new forms of literary art. Instead, critics who purported to recognize his “strong genius” in their reviews, also claimed that he lacks “a fastidious taste,” and that “he has not naturally the perfect touch of the artist in minute matters; he has, moreover, no patience in amending or correcting” (London Quarterly Review 238) or, as an 1883 critic put it in The British Quarterly Review, “our wonder at his wealth of conception and ingenuity is often qualified by a sense of some alien element which is ever intruding, and will not come under ordinary rule” (“Book Review” 490). For Browning, and many of his supporters, poetry did not need to be beautiful. For critics who could not accept that fact, Browning’s work would always be found lacking. However, there was hope for Browning in the possibility of being appreciated by later literary scholars. One particularly insightful critic wrote in an 1887 article for the Academy magazine, “We hold, indeed, that Mr. Browning’s genius is of the kind that possesses its soul in patience, awaiting its larger audience among those who are yet unborn; that not to admire him now will be to be admired in another sense by later generations” (Garrod 103).

Of course, not all of the reviews for Browning’s poetry were negative, and it should be noted that Browning scholars such as William DeVane⁵ consider the poet’s reputation to have increased as he grew older along with the number of positive reviews and sales figures. Also, while Browning was obviously not pleased by the many negative

reviews he received,\(^6\) most, even the harshest reviewers, acknowledged his raw talent even if they objected to how he used it. Some even recognized that what he was doing was worthwhile, even if it was not what would have been considered traditional. For instance, despite G.B. – T. C. C. considering it a sign of vanity, Browning’s originality is mentioned in many of the reviews as, at the least, a back-handed compliment to him as a poet. In the 1855 review from *Leader* magazine it is stated that, “Robert Browning seems to us unmistakably the most original poet of the day. We do not say the highest in reach, the most perfect in art, but the most distinctively original” (1157). A positive 1856 critique in the *New Quarterly Review* considered Browning’s work to be “alive with a bold and vivid beauty” and called his principles of poetry “altogether novel” (“*Men and Women*” 17).

Other reviewers even defended him against the recurring criticisms. For instance, a reviewer for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* wrote an article in 1856 that attempted to specifically refute the claim that Browning’s poetry was too obscure:

> Then they say, too, that Browning is so obscure as not to be understood by any one. Now, I know well enough what they mean by “obscure,” and I know also that they use the word wrongly; meaning difficult to understand fully at first reading, or, say at second reading, even: yet, taken so, in what a cloud of obscurity would “Hamlet” be! (“*Men and Women*” 172)

He also wrote disappointingly concerning how negative beliefs concerning Browning’s poetry kept it from being widely read:

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\(^6\) As shown in his letters to various acquaintances, which are examined later in the chapter.
However, this accusation against Browning of carelessness, and consequent roughness in rhythm, and obscurity in language and thought, has come to be pretty generally believed; and people, as a rule, do not read him; this evil spreading so, that many, almost unconsciously, are kept from reading him, who, if they did read, would sympathize with him thoroughly. (172)

Reviews such as this one help determine that the accusations of “obscurity” and “roughness” were recurring themes in the reviews of Browning’s poetry. It also supports the idea that Browning’s poetry was neglected by the general public for the majority of his career because the negative reviews perpetuated perceptions of his poetry that were largely accepted as fact by audiences and other critics without allowing it the attentive readings it is now largely considered to deserve. At the same time, some critics recognized this issue, but they considered Browning to at least be somewhat at fault for expecting too much from Victorian England. For instance, in an 1876 review, a critic for the Athenaeum states: “His mistake all through has been to suppose that people will take the trouble to wrestle with difficulties; that because his longer poems are worth understanding, the public would try to understand them” (“Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper: with Other Poems” 101).

Not every critic saw Browning’s high expectations in a negative light. An 1887 review of Parleyings in The Scottish Review acknowledges the fact that Browning’s poetry was well worth the effort required of readers and placed the blame on those who would criticize Browning’s poetry without attempting to really understand it:
Whatever pains we may be put to in order to make out his meaning, even though unsuccessful, the labour is always well spent. Whether it is not a part of the poet’s art and business to make himself easily intelligible, is a question we do no care at present to discuss. When considering it there is always that other question, probably not less important, but not very flattering to the reader, to encounter, whether the obscurity complained of is not in the reader’s mind rather than in the poet’s words. (425)

Another 1887 reviewer compared him to Dante and Goethe by stating, “To begin with, it [his poetry] is not obscure. It requires close application, in-deed, as much of Dante must have exacted even from his own contemporaries, as much of Goethe demands” (Garrod 103). Browning would seem to have agreed with these particular viewers because he obviously expected a great deal from his audience, and he did not appear to have any regrets in doing so. According to Alfred Domett when he asked Browning why he could not present the theme of “Aristophane’s Apology (1875)” in a “plain straightforward statement,” Browning responded with “As if this did not just make all the difference between a poet’s treatment of a subject and a historian’s or a rhetorician’s” (Domett 161).

Simply stating his purpose would make him no different than a teacher writing a textbook because to Browning real art requires the reader to actively arrive at an understanding of the writer’s theme through their own efforts (Kennedy and Hair 335).

**Browning’s Reaction to His Critics**

An understanding of the general state of criticism surrounding Browning’s poetry in Victorian England means very little without also examining Browning’s feelings towards his poetry’s reception. To start, Browning did show concern over the types of
reviews he received, and not just out of a sense of wanting his poetry to be critically appreciated. As he was responsible for taking care of a family, he also worried about how reviews would affect the sales of *Men and Women*. In a letter to Edward Chapman on December 5, 1855, he wrote: “The serious notices are to come, it is to be hoped. How this style of thing helps or hinders the sale, is what you must counsel me about” (DeVane, *New Letters of Robert Browning* 84). After he and Barrett Browning eloped to Italy, he developed a strong sense of finance, and so it makes sense that he would hope for both critical and financial success. These issues lead him to at least attempt to incorporate into his works topics that he felt might appeal to the public while still maintaining his personal identity as a poet. *Men and Women* was the most obvious example of this attempt as evidenced by him telling his friend Joseph Milsand that the volume was “a first step towards popularity” that would include “lyrics with more music and painting than before” (Ryals 113). Such a statement also shows that Browning had taken at least some of the negative reviews prior to 1855 to heart, and he had tried at least somewhat to appeal to more general audiences.

Despite his admitted effort, the same complaints were attached to his work, and he was clearly frustrated by that fact. He told Chapman in a letter dated January 17, 1856, “I have read heaps of critiques at Galignani’s, mostly stupid and spiteful, self-contradicting and contradictory of each other.” Of course, Browning also got to enjoy more positive accolades for his reviews as shown by his also writing to Chapman that “Your four reviews arrived safely- many thanks for them. *The British Quarterly Review* was just what I had not seen and would have lost most by missing” (DeVane, *New Letters* 87). However, the positive reviews could not do away with the negative, nor could they
save the sales of the volume, which were also disappointing. While the cost of production was made back in the first three days, the sales quickly slowed, and the first edition of the collection never sold out (Kennedy and Hair 279).

The disappointment with *Men and Women* appears to have been a large blow for Browning. He seems to have viewed the collection as his chance to truly break into mainstream popularity and acclaim, but he was greatly disappointed by a continuance of critics accusing him of the same faults as earlier in his career. The result, despite some improvement in financial and critical success with the likes of *Dramates Personae* (1864), which did sale enough for a second edition, and *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), which received still mixed but also very positive reviews (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* 395), the poet only continued to develop a negative and pessimistic attitude towards the state of Victorian critical reception. In 1876, Browning allowed his feelings to leak through into his poetry with his volume titled *Pacchiarotto*. At least, that is how many biographers, and the critics of the time, interpreted the collection, which includes a satirical titular poem that contains a biting commentary of London’s reviewers. Supporting the view that *Pacchiarotto* was an attack on his critics is the account by Domett in which he objected to Browning’s treatment of the reviewers. The poet reportedly responded by stating, “I don’t mind leaving on record that I had just that fancy about the people who ‘forty years long in the wilderness’ criticized my works” (DeVane, *New Letters* 349). Such a statement confirms how much the negative reviews of his work bothered and frustrated him.

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7 Most likely a reference to “One Word More” from *Men and Women*, in which Browning alludes to Moses’s role as leader during Exodus. “One Word More” is examined in Chapter Three.
Many of the critics certainly assumed that the poems were addressed to them. A critic for the *Examiner* acknowledged in good humor the fact that Browning was taking jabs at his critics, and stated, “What is the good of being a poet, what is the good of having all language as one’s province, if one cannot use it to vex and confound one’s enemies?” (“Mr. Browning and His Critics” 904-5). Not every review took Browning’s reverse-criticism in stride, however. The critic for *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* took particular offense and had rather harsh words for Browning in return:

The present volume abounds in proofs of the sensitiveness with which he repels the imputation of that obscurity and harshness which might seem to be natural results of excessive volubility. If the immunity from criticism which Mr. Browning claims were conceded in personal deference to his genius, it would still be a legitimate cause for regret that he should of late seldom have taken time to embody in intelligible forms the conclusions of a subtle and imaginative intellect. (“Browning’s Pacchiarotto” 205)

The reviewer goes on to claim that while Browning pretends to be indifferent to criticism, he most likely enjoys positive reviews but wants to censure negative ones. Whether or not the accusation is true, Browning had much earlier shown signs of no longer wanting to listen to negative critics. In a letter dated December 17, 1855, Browning says to his friend Edward Chapman:

Don’t take to heart the zoological utterances I have stopped my ears against at Galignani’s of late. ‘Whoo-oo-oo-oo’ mouths the big monkey—‘Whee-ee-ee-ee’ squeaks the little monkey and such a dig with the end of
my umbrella as I should give the brutes if I couldn’t keep my temper, and consider how they miss their nut and gingerbread! (DeVane, *New Letters* 85).

By 1876, Browning had simply come to accept the state of his popularity, and he seems to have given up ever achieving his desired success as a current poet. In response to the efforts of one Frederick James Furnivall to increase sales by suggesting cheaper editions of his poetry, he stated: “There is no help for what you consider my ill case, and what I am used to acquiesce in as my natural portion” (Peterson 35). With this sort of attitude, it seems clear why Browning struck out against critics in his volume of poetry from the same year. However, his unluckiness with reception took an interesting turn a few years later, led by the efforts of Furnivall, with the birth of a society dedicated to his poetry and his teachings.

**The Birth of the London Browning Society**

Over the course of his career, what Browning most failed to acquire was a strong casual following among the general reading public. Nevertheless, he began to acquire a small, but passionately devoted group of admirers that strongly resembles what would today be considered a “fan-base” or “fandom” (Pugh 25). Such an occurrence, an artist underappreciated by the general public gaining a small group of passionate “fans,” is not a phenomenon unique to Browning’s situation. It can be observed in modern examples such as the start of the infamous *Star Trek* fandom where the original television series managed to garner thousands of devotees despite only having a three-season run. The development of such is also often referred to as a “cult following,” and for some of Browning’s most ardent readers, this term came close to being a literal description inside
the London Browning Society, which was formed in 1881 by Frederick James Furnivall. The information left behind by the group of early Browning scholars shows that the Society was largely born out of dissatisfaction on their part concerning how Browning was being treated by critics and the general public. In an introduction to an 1895 collection of Society essays, Edward Berdoe, a physician and one of the Society’s most devoted members (Peterson 60), explains the atmosphere in which they had begun their task of furthering Browning’s popularity with the public:

When the Browning Society was founded fourteen years ago, the works of the great poet were read by comparatively few general readers in England, although they had long been familiar to the American public and had secured a great number of earnest students who united themselves into societies and reading clubs for the discussion of a literature which even then was voluminous. At that time it was considered in England an affectation of erudition to pretend to any wider acquaintance with Browning’s works than was involved in knowing the “Pied Piper of Homelin,” “How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,” and having a nodding acquaintance with “Rabbi Ben Ezra.” (v)

According to him, Browning was in many ways a joke for people who were not truly familiar with his works, but who thought that they knew his poetry through his reputation: “Everybody had a cheap joke about Browning, and if people knew nothing else of the poet, they could at least raise a laugh against those who pretended to know him” (v).
However, like any other fandom, the potential biases of the group have to be taken into account when considering the reliability of the information provided by them concerning the outside reception of their subject of devotion. Therefore, it has to be said that Berdoe appears to exaggerate somewhat the outright dislike for Browning by critics and English society. He declares that reviewers “conclusively settled that he could write neither grammatically nor intelligibly, and that having no “form” his works could not possibly be poetry” (v). While it is true that Browning’s reviews did not consist of the level of praise that he is now considered to deserve, this fact does not mean that there were no critics who did greatly appreciate his abilities even if they also viewed him as possessing flaws as a poet. To further demonstrate this point, Berdoe’s introduction also contains the following statement:

There is no more remarkable fact in the history of literature, and no greater disgrace to English criticism, than the treatment meted out to Robert Browning for half a century. Here was the greatest English poet since Shakespeare living amongst us, pouring out treasures of thought and disseminating germs of “wholesome ferment” for other minds, as Mr. Lowell has happily said, and England would have none of him. (v-vi)

The exaggeration on Berdoe’s part can be explained by his role as something of an extremist among the Society members, so it should also not be assumed that all of the Society shared these viewpoints. According to Browning scholar William S. Peterson, the Society was made up of a rather eclectic group ranging from those simply interested in the poetic criticism of the day to full-own Browning devotees, which he, taking a cue
from Browning himself (Hood 212)\(^8\) refers to as Browningites. Berdoe was among the Browningites and approached his passion for Browning’s poetry with nearly literally religious overtones. After moving away from the Christian faith, he was pulled back again when he heard a lecture on Browning’s *Paracelsus* (Peterson 60). However, rather than returning to Christian services in a church, he looked for his religious and philosophical instruction in Browning’s works through the examinations conducted by the Society. Such devotion originating in something other than literary interest has the potential to skew the view that he, and other Society members like him, had concerning Browning’s work and reputation.

Going by statements such as those of Berdoe, one would now think that Browning had been completely rejected outright by all but a few enlightened individuals who saw his true worth. Instead, what actually appears to have happened was that the negative criticism created an environment in which Browning’s most avid readers could form the first society dedicated to a living poet (Kennedy and Hair 366). Browning’s frustration was well-known with the publication of *Pacchiarotto*, and his pessimism concerning eventual success was known to important Society members such as Furnivall through Browning’s letters. The years of mediocre, and sometimes very negative, reviews by critics swayed the general public from reading his poetry, a fact that was acknowledged by some reviewers. These factors combined created a sense of an offensively undeserved lack of appreciation for Browning’s work. Some of those who most strongly responded to Browning’s poetry apparently came to feel that even good reviews were not positive enough and that steps needed to be taken to rectify the situation and what was perceived

\(^8\) While talking about the Society in a letter to Edmond Yates in 1882, Browning remarked: “I am quite other than a Browningite.”
by them, and Browning himself, to be his poetry’s negative reputation. A strongly biased London Browning Society was thus formed with members who, based on many of their published essays, felt that they were Browning’s only “true” fans.

The Browningite members felt so strongly that action was necessary in order to counter-act the damage done by critics to Browning’s reputation among casual readers that part of their founding purpose was to promote the reading and studying of Browning’s poems and plays. Most current biographers consider them to have succeeded, and within three years of the Society’s establishment, there were a total of twenty-two Browning groups around the world (Ryals 217). Browning himself even gave them a great deal of credit for the positive changes to his reputation in the last decade of his life. For instance, he showed gratitude towards them in a letter to member J. T. Nettleship for the positive effects on his sales figures: "I cannot but be very grateful for the institution of the Society; for to what else but the eight years' persistent calling attention to my works can one attribute the present demand for them?" (Griffen and Minchin 270).

A desire to promote Browning was not the only motive that the founding members, particularly Furnivall, had for the Society. The London Browning Society was the first such group to form concerning a living poet (Kennedy and Hair 366), and the other purpose of creating such a group was so that the poet would be available for questions concerning his work. In his opening speech for the Browning Society, Furnivall stated:

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9 The London Browning Society essays are examined in Chapter Two.

10 A fact that makes it in many ways a Victorian equivalent of modern fan-bases found in clubs and Internet groups.
One of the most general [objections to the society] is, that no Society should be founded to study and illustrate the works of a living poet. As a ducal correspondent of mine put it, ‘My dear Mr. Furnivall, I think it is 300 years too early for a Browning Society.’ To all such folk, I can only say: ‘You’ve never founded a Chaucer or Shakespeare Society, and had to worry and bother over this word and that, this allusion and the other.’

(Furnivall 1)

Furnivall envisioned with his Society the opportunity to study the works of a genius with him still around to answer the types of questions that forever confound scholars such as the identity of “the man Shakespere’s Sonnets were written to” (Furnivall 1). As a scholar, he was not interested in the infinite possible interpretations subjective to various readers. He wanted to study the poems and completely decipher them. When he had questions, he wanted to be able to go to Browning himself to have them answered. Furnivall saw the Society as having a very distinct role in the development of Browning’s lasting legacy. He wanted the members to set Browning’s poetry up to be appreciated by present and future readers by using the poet’s availability to clear up any ambiguity concerning his works. Furnivall believed that this should be the role of literary scholarship and “That posterity will thank us for our work at Browning is certain” (Furnivall 1).

For his part, Browning appears to have had a complex relationship with the society formed in his honor. For one thing, there appears to be some contradiction concerning how informed Browning was about its initial creation. In his opening statement during the first London Browning Society meeting on October 28, 1881,
Furnivall stated that his co-founder, Emily Hickey, had insisted that they ask Browning his opinion on the matter in case he had any objections. According to Furnivall, he “had to mention the fact to him [Browning] in Miss Hickey’s presence; and when he at once laught good-humouredly and talkt about something else, our excellent Hon, Sec. had clearly freed her soul and could set to work, as she did, splendidly” (Furnivall 1).

However, in a letter to member E. Dickenson West, dated November 12, 1881, Browning stated that the Browning Society was “instituted without my knowledge,” though he also did not appear to object to the idea (Orr 269). There are a number of interpretations that can explain the situation. It would seem from Browning’s amused reaction in Furnivall’s version of events that the poet did not take the creation of a society dedicated to the study of his works seriously. Also possible is that Browning did not want people to get the impression that he had played a role in the creation of the Society because it could appear as if he simply wanted to gain attention. This interpretation is supported by the fact that he points out in a letter that according to a write-up in The World none of his personal friends were among members. He was pleased by this because “Had I persuaded them to do so, the objection would have been more cogent,’ only a clique- the man’s personal following!” (Orr 269). Also, Furnivall asked Sarianna, Browning’s sister, for a list of the names of friends who might join and she refused to give them (Kennedy and Hair 371). He also told the member West in the 1881 letter: “Exactly what has touched me is the sudden assemblage of men and women to whose names, for the most part, I am a stranger” (Hood 202), and in 1884 he told the Secretary of the Society, J. Dykes Campbell, that though he was being sent “proofs” of the group’s activities, he did not want to be seen as having authorized the write-ups (Hood 227). What all of this suggests
is that while Browning clearly appreciated the efforts of the Society, he also wished to maintain a suitable distance from it.

Browning’s relationship with the Society was also not exactly how Furnivall had envisioned it. Furnivall had wanted the opportunity to promote and study a living artist in part so that he would be able to ask him questions about the poetry. He also believed in interpreting an artist’s work through the events of his or her life, which was something that Browning openly rejected. Nevertheless, Browning was willing to answer some questions to provide facts about “occasions, publications, references and allusions, sources, the genesis of poems, and metrics” (Kennedy and Hair 367) because, as he wrote in a letter in 1884, “I must attribute a very great part indeed of the increase of care about it to his energetic trumpet-blowing” (Kennedy and Hair 368). Browning was much more reluctant to talk about the details of interpretation, however. While he would sometimes respond to questions concerning the meanings of poems, his answers generally only consisted of “a few sentences about the meaning of a poem or passage, a paraphrase of theme or a brief analysis of the motivation of one of his characters” (Kennedy and Hair 369). Also, at the same time he criticized some of the Browningite’s tendencies when he wrote to Nettleship in 1889, “I never understood that the Society was originally instituted for the purpose of even elucidating dark passages or disinterring deep meanings; but rather from a desire to get together certain people likely to sympathize in obtaining more interest than existed for works generally supposed to be unintelligible or nearly so” (Hood 303). Browning, despite feeling that his works were thought of as “unintelligible,”

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11 This issue is discussed in Chapter Three with the poem “House.”
clearly had little interest in divulging all of his poetry’s secrets to his readers because doing so would take away the active part of the reading process.

Browning’s decision to maintain a distance from the Browningites turned out to be a wise one because while the Society garnered a great deal of attention, it was also met with mocking and annoyance by reviewers. Sometimes they were viewed as the group most (and sometimes solely) likely to make the effort to truly study and understand Browning’s poetry. Some critics, such as the author of the 1887 Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art, used it as a means of mocking the poet. Others, such as a review of Jocoseria in 1883 from the Scottish Review referenced his followers as a means of showing their level of dissatisfaction with Browning’s latest work:

This latest little volume from the pen of Mr. Browning will appeal mainly not to the profane vulgar of the reading world, but to the smaller-though growing-circle of Browning-lovers and students; and even they are hardly likely to regard it as one of his most noteworthy and characteristic performances. (“Book Review” 397)

The group’s passionate defense of Browning’s greatness was not always greeted by others with the same gratitude displayed by the poet. Some critics expressed that the poet’s fandom of devoted followers were a source of annoyance for those who did not express a full appreciation for his work. An 1887 reviewer for the Athenaeum expressed this sentiment when he stated: “Mr. Browning’s friends have of late rendered it extremely difficult for calm criticism, that respects itself and art, to deal with him, and, of course, there are those who will angrily reply that all we have been saying simply redounds to his

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12 See page 7 of this chapter.
glory” (247). Another example of this response to the Browningite’s “passion” is Matthew Arnold refusing to review any of Browning’s later volumes because he wanted to avoid the wrath of the Browningites (Peterson 97-8). Of course, depending on the point-of-view, the somewhat exasperated reactions of some of the reviewers was not greeted as a downside to the Society’s function. The poet in question certainly seemed to gain some enjoyment over the fact that his newfound fan-base was causing his critics some irritation. In a letter to Furnivall dated January 12, 1882, he stated:

I am beginning to enjoy the results of the institution of the “Society” (quite over and above the sympathy and kindness of its promoter and adherents) in the evident annoyance it is giving my dear old critics who have gone on gibing and gibbering at me time out of mind. If these worthies could point to a single performance in which they had themselves “read and studied” anything of mine, far less induced others to do so, there might be a reason for their wrath. (Hood 207)

Overall, while the response to Browning’s poetry during the majority of his lifetime was no where near the level of appreciation it is given in modern scholarship, it also appears that both Browning and the Browningites, were too emotionally close to his work to see the high praise that already existed. Browning’s pessimism and frustration in regards to critics and general audiences explains the gratitude he felt for finally having a group of people who, for the first time in his career, desired to give his poetry the amount of time and careful attention he had always intended it to receive. On multiple occasions he expressed how much they had helped to improve his reception, and his feelings
concerning his fan-base and his critics are summed up in this statement to Nettleship in the last year of his life:

If Johnson showed his good sense in telling somebody who deprecated the appearance of an adverse criticism on something he had just brought out “Sir, if the critics did not notice me, I should starve,” – well, I am justified in fancying that, but for what was done by Furnivall and his colleagues, I should have no more readers than ten years ago. (Hood 304)

For their part, the Browningites, typical of devoted fandoms, sometimes allowed their passion for Browning’s genius to result in overly feverish attempts to defend their poet. As a result, they ran the risk of doing more damage than good to his reputation by association. Overall, their contribution to the poet’s legacy is fascinating because of not only his opinions of their amount of success, but also because of the hundreds of pages of early attempts at Browning scholarship that they left behind.
Chapter Two: Boldly Going Where No Victorians Had Gone Before: The London Browning Society

Chapter One introduced the origins of the London Browning Society, and the general reaction to it by England’s critics and Robert Browning, but to really understand the motivations of the members and the fascination they had for the poet, one has to examine the materials that they left behind. A large number of the Browning Society essays are available in the collection *Browning Studies: Being Select Papers by Members of the Browning Society*, which was edited and published by prominent member Edward Berdoe\(^\text{13}\) in 1895. While a complete survey of the published Society papers would be too large for the current project at hand, this chapter will attempt to collect together the information found in the essays that provides the most knowledge concerning the inner-workings of the Society and the most popularly explored themes among the members. The topics, along with the language used to explore them, aid in the understanding of why these particular individuals were so devoted to Browning and his poetry.

**Inner-Workings of the Society: Motivations and Disagreements**

In Chapter One, it was discussed that the London Browning Society, led by Frederick James Furnivall, began with clear goals concerning their role in the advancement of interest in Browning’s poetry. The Society consisted of a variety of members ranging from educators and scholars, such as Hiram Corson and John Bury, to reverends attracted to the religious themes in a number of Browning’s poems (Peterson

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\(^\text{13}\) See Chapter One, page 19 for his introduction.
Women also made up a large percentage of the members, and according to William S. Peterson, they tended to be interested in issues concerning religion and women’s education (52). One such member, Dorothea Beale, was an important figure in the advancement of women’s education in the last half of the nineteenth century and was the principal of Cheltenham Ladies’ College at the time she joined the London Browning Society (Beaumont).14 Some members, especially aspiring writers, joined more for the purpose of taking part in what was, at the time, an unusual literary opportunity than because of an intense interest in Browning. Other members, many of whom are the authors of the papers referenced in this chapter, came from a variety of backgrounds and occupations such as painting and medicine. Also, despite Browning’s statements concerning not knowing most of the members of the Society, several of his friends and acquaintances did, at least eventually, join such as Alfred Domett, John Milsand, and Sutherland Orr (Peterson 50-2).

Summaries of the meetings for the first three years of the Society’s existence are still available and make it clear that the leaders of the Society were dedicated to spreading the appreciation of Browning’s works. They also at times showed a great deal of insight into the state of Browning’s legacy as a poet. For instance, included in the minutes for the Second Meeting on November 25, 1881 is the statement: “He is not master of the arts, which are essential to the acquisition of popularity; critics enlarge upon his perversities of thought and diction, yet there can be little doubt that posterity – which ‘sees with other eyes than ours’ – will award him great and lasting fame” (The Browning Society Papers 7). It is also clear that from early on the Society members had

14 The other women included in this chapter because of their published papers could not be found in the database due to the fact that they used abbreviated versions of their names.
the purpose of using their meetings and papers to help non-Browningites understand the poet’s “unintelligible” poetry. At the Third Meeting in 1881, it was said, “Very many are unable to enter into Browning’s thought without assistance, and to such the Browning Society’s papers are a real help” (The Browning Society Papers 11). Furnivall in particular angled the activities of the Society to help posterity to read Browning’s poems more easily. The minutes for the Fourth Meeting reveal that after a Society essay was voted on in order to determine if the presenter should be thanked for the contribution, an act that shows that not every paper was accepted, Furnivall proposed that the essay be divided into labeled sections so that it would be easier to read (The Browning Society Papers 17). Some of the longer essays in Berdoe’s collection are broken up into such chapters. While access to the original papers is no longer possible, it can be inferred that such editing was done deliberately to make the essays easier to navigate. Clearly, the best papers were seen as having the potential for eventual publication with the intention of them being used as tools by future Browning audiences.

Other indications of the papers being perceived as guides or tools for understanding the poetry are found in the texts of the actual essays. The first essay presented at a London Browning Society meeting, which was by Reverend Joshua Kirkman, consisted of ideas on how to introduce beginning Browning readers to the poetry. Some of his ideas included tasks that the Society itself should perform to aid in the process such as: creating a “lexicon” of allusions and important names found in Browning’s poetry, organizing public lectures on the works, and including “arguments” to begin the poems and give them each a clear thesis (Peterson 117). The last was a task that Furnivall actually approached Browning with, but the poet eventually decided
against after some consideration (Kennedy and Hair 369). Sometimes a paper was
considered not helpful enough to be an adequate contribution to the Society. An example
of such a complaint can be found in the minutes for the Fourth Meeting when F. D.
Matthew stated that a paper on “Fifine at the Fair,” though containing “helpful and
useful” analysis, “does not seem to me to help people over what is the real difficulty of
the poem” (Browning Society Papers 18). These types of concerns were not exclusive to
the Society’s early years either. In 1888, Berdoe suggested at a meeting that sometimes
simpler papers should be presented in order to help new members ease into Browning’s
complex world (Peterson 62), and one of the later essays included in his collection
functions almost solely as a research paper on the titular figure of “Abt Vogler.”

The published essays also help to reveal attempts by the leaders to introduce some
regulation when Society members began to stray from the leaders’ intended focus of the
group. In her essay, “Numpholeptos and Browning’s Women,” a woman credited as only
Mrs. Blaxebrook, remarks that the secretary of the society, “wished members would more
frequently make short studies of single poems than discuss Browning at large” (196).
While many of the published essays with earlier dates, the most common themes of
which will be discussed later in the chapter, use Browning’s poetry to discuss larger ideas
about the poet himself, such as his philosophical and religious beliefs, the later ones tend
to more commonly limit their examinations to one or two poems. It can be inferred from
Blaxebrook’s statement that this was a result of the urgings of the Society’s leadership.
However, it also reveals that focusing on particular poems, rather than discussing more
general ideas about the poet, was apparently not the natural inclination of many of the
members. The fact that this is the case helps to indicate that though the Society and the
most prominent members had certain goals in mind, the Society itself consisted of a wide variety of individuals who did not all share the same motivation or reasons for being devotees of the poet.

Several years worth of Society papers are not available in Berdoe’s collection, so it is not a complete view of what was happening in the Society’s later years. Browning Society scholar, William S. Peterson, suggests that issues concerning some preoccupation with Browning’s religious philosophies on the part of many of the members were a source of contention in the group’s final seasons. According to Peterson, Berdoe, who it was discussed in Chapter One approached Browning’s poetry as something of a guide to religious philosophy, entered into a feud with a fellow member, Edward Gonner over the issue, which resulted in the later introducing an amendment to disband the Society after the end of the 1888-89 year. The report of the incident states: “He had an idea that this Society was instituted with something of a literary aim and basis, Gonner said; ‘but if it was as a kind of auxiliary missionary society for spreading abroad the gospel of Browning, then he would regard himself as being out of place as a member of it.’”(Peterson 63) The amendment was defeated, but it does demonstrate some of what was going on at the meetings that is not represented in Berdoe’s later publication. The essays that were chosen to represent the Society by Berdoe suggest that in the later years he had a clear vision of not just how he wanted Browning to be remembered by posterity but the Society formed in his honor as well.

Other disagreements in the Society resulted from differing opinions concerning the types of criticism in the papers that was deemed acceptable. For instance, the minutes for the Sixth Meeting in 1882 include remarks about the suitability of including the
philosophy of Hegel in a paper about Browning. The paraphrase given of the Chairman’s words are: “He did not think it a special joy to have to master Hegel before we could understand or enjoy Browning. It seemed to him that Browning was better when not diluted with Hegel” (*The Browning Society Papers* 28). This event helps to show that in the early days of Browning criticism there were already debates on critical theory and how useful it should be considered while examining the poet’s work. It also once again demonstrates the desires of some of the Society leadership to maintain a sense of purity in the type of scholarly work they wanted done with the poetry out of a desire to promote and explain the texts in a way that would open them up to new readers.

Browning’s own opinions concerning the proper approaches to studying his work did not always matter to the Society leadership either. For instance, in 1887 he responded to a particular allegorical interpretation of “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” by stating in response to whether he agreed with it: “Oh, no, not at all. Understand, I don’t repudiate it, either. I only mean I was conscious of no allegorical intention in writing it” (DeVane, *New Letters of Robert Browning* 229). For the most part, Browning chose to not limit the potential ways of interpreting his poetry in order to maintain the active role he expected his audience to play in the reading process. Furnivall, on the other hand, sometimes caused problems in the Society by rejecting a proposed interpretation that he felt contradicted the poet’s stated intentions. In the specific case of the allegorical interpretation of “Childe Roland,” the minutes for the meeting in 1882 reveal that Furnivall strongly objected to it because Browning had stated that he had not purposefully composed the poem to be such. The author of the essay

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15 Some of the exceptions will be discussed in Chapter Three.
pointed out the limits that such a stance placed on the critical abilities of the Society and is reported in the minutes to have “remarked that by so doing there would be no need of the Browning Society” (*The Browning Society Papers* 26).

Some members even expressed disagreements concerning Browning’s own alterations to his poetry. A prime example of one such “Browningite conservative” is Reverend J. H. Bulkeley who, in his essay “James Lee’s Wife” in 1883, protests the fact that the poem originally titled “James Lee,” had been changed to “James Lee’s Wife” by Browning for a later reprint. He argues in his paper that just as *Julius Caesar* is named after the character that is not strictly the active protagonist, “James Lee” is just as appropriate because the titular character’s wife is so deeply affected by him in her character and motivation. He also criticizes other minor changes in the revised poem and suggests that Browning only made them out of an attempt to appeal to the public: “It [altercations to a specific line] was written in another mood, and probably was occasioned not by the flow of the thought, but by the supposed duty of making things clearer to the British public” (131). While doing just that is the primary goal of many of the Society members, Bulkeley objects to the manner in which Browning does so in this particular poem:

No doubt it is right that badly-turned verses should sometimes be rehammered on the anvil, that obscure poems should be made clearer, if this can be done without sacrifice of their first tone, of their original thought. But here the case is different. Here hammer and anvil have been used not to alter what was there at first, but to weld on to it something of different metal, of almost incongruous workmanship. (131)
In modern fan communities, it is not uncommon for members to begin to feel as if they have a better understanding of the primary materials than the original creator, or for them to accuse previously underappreciated artists of betraying their original integrity by making alterations to their work out of attempts to appeal to public favor. Looking at the Society through the lens of modern examples, though they wanted Browning to gain popular favor in England, they did not necessarily want him to alter his style in any way in order for that to happen. In many cases, popularity comes with a price that devoted fans are not willing to pay along with the artists, and Bulkeley’s statement is a good example of this sort of phenomenon occurring among the ranks of the Society.

**The Nature of the Society**

Chapter One explained the often extreme reactions that Society members, namely those who fell into the category of Browningites, had to negative criticisms directed at Browning’s work and the general lack of appreciation for him by the public audiences of England. Examples of this reactionary attitude can be found in many of the Society papers, which help to provide some additional understanding of the motivation behind the people willing to spend their time studying and writing on Browning’s work. For example, in the 1882 essay, “The Idea of Personality, As Embodied in Robert Browning’s Poetry,” Hiram Corson, who was a professor of English literature at Cornell University (Peterson 91), expresses his feelings concerning the significance of Browning’s work, and the neglect with which it had been greeted, in a somewhat overly praiseful manner: “The importance of Robert Browning’s poetry, as embodying the profoundest thought, the subtlest and most complex sentiment, and, above all, the most
quickening spirituality of the age, has, as yet, with the exception of a few special and devoted students, received but a niggardly recognition” (47).

The reference to “a few special and devoted students” implies a level of vanity may have been at play concerning the motivation of some of the members. Part of the appeal of such a “cult following” would be the satisfaction of knowing that they were on the right side of literary history. Being able to recognize Browning’s greatness ahead of the masses, and going so far as to create proof that would forever demonstrate that fact, could be a powerful driving force for some of the Society members. It would also logically result in the instances in which the Browningites either downplay the level of support he held among general English audiences, such as Berdœ16 does in the introduction to his collection of essays, or exaggerate Browning’s importance as a poet. Corson demonstrates the second point in his essay when he goes on to explain that “the range and thought and passion which it [Browning’s poetry] exhibits is greater than that of any other poet, without a single exception, since the days of Shakespeare” (47) and “he has taken for a worthier stage, the soul itself, its shifting fancies and celestial lights, more than any other poet of the age. And he has worked with a thought-and-passion capital greater than the combined thought-and-passion capital of the richest of his poetical contemporaries” (48).

Such high praise would not be as much of an issue if it was not also coupled with a tendency to dismiss or show no interest in examining any flaws in Browning’s poetry. For passionate fans of anything, it is unpleasant to acknowledge areas of fault in their subject. However, such an attitude could be seen as compromising the objectivity and

16 See pages 19-20 of Chapter One.
integrity of the Society members as critical scholars. A low key,\textsuperscript{17} but telling, example of this happening can be found in the 1889 essay, “Numpholetptos and Browning’s Women,” by the previously mentioned Mrs. Blaxebrook. She allows her interpretation of the poem to be influenced by her belief that Browning would not make a mistake of the kind the text of the poem in question is suggesting to her:

Thus it would seem that there is a certain anachronism in this protest of Mr. Browning’s - that he is fighting an enemy who no longer exists. But it is not like him to make a mistake of this kind. He maintains intimate communication with the “spirit of the age,” and seldom fails to discern its tendencies. (200)

Other members make it clear that their interests do not lie in the critical examination of Browning’s poetry but to discuss and promote the “messages” and “teachings” found within the poet’s words. Reverend Professor, B. F. Westcott demonstrates this in his paper, “Browning’s View of Life,” when he refers to his main topics of discussion as, “These thoughts, which I have endeavoured to set forth and not to criticize” (105).

Member Dorothea Beale makes a similar point concerning her priorities in her essay on Browning’s religious teachings: “we come to him for his philosophy, and we care not to dwell upon the shortcomings, of which he is doubtless more conscious than we are, upon the superficial faults, which every one can see; rather would we bring to light the hidden treasures” (76). Such an approach to poetry is not necessarily wrong, though it does add a subjective element to the essays that should be taken into account in the event that they were to be used to aid in the critical analysis of said works. The attitude also places them

\textsuperscript{17} Non-confrontational unlike the reactions that critics such as Matthew Arnold feared from the Browningites.
on the opposing side of reviewers at the time who acknowledged his genius but also felt that his defects in the technical areas of poetry made his talent a waste. Browningites such as Beale and others who chose to focus on the “messages” of Browning’s work demonstrate in their essays that they were not necessarily fans of him as a poet as much as followers of what they perceived to be his teachings.

**Browning as Religious Leader and Philosophical Teacher**

One of the most popular topics of discussion in the Society was Browning’s thoughts on theology and philosophy. Some of the earlier-dated essays in Berdoe’s collection demonstrate the difference in the critical study of Browning’s poetry and the examination of Browning through his poetry by giving broad overviews of what the members considered his thoughts on those subjects. For instance, in the 1882 essay, “Browning’s Philosophy,” by John Bury, the Society member gives an extensive look at his beliefs concerning Browning’s philosophical teachings including comparing his ideas to those of Hegel. He is also the first in this selection of papers, but not the last, to profile the type of religious reader who will most passionately respond to Browning’s poetry based on what he perceives to be their message: “it is not for “maw-crammed,” “crop-full” Christians, who never doubt, that Browning writes” (30). The idea that Browning’s views on theology appealed to a particular type of Christian dealing with doubts of faith is supported by the extreme devotion of members such as Edward Berdoe who re-found Christianity after being significantly exposed to Browning’s poetry.

Another significant essay that demonstrates this trend is “The Religious Teaching of Browning” by Dorothea Beale, which was originally presented to the Society in 1882. Her essay is riddled with language that gives the impression that Browning is more of a
spiritual leader for her than a poet. For instance, she begins her paper with what comes very close to sounding like a prayer:

We thank him for the comfort and strength he has given us. We know that he has enriched our sympathies, cheered us under failure and disappointment, and helped us to understand the meaning of life. But I think what draws most of us to him is this: we are struggling with the waves of doubt – storm-tost and ready to sink – and as we look at him, we see him with a smile on his face, calmly floating, his head above the waves, his body supported therein. (76)

She clearly intends to raise Browning up as more than a poet and make him a symbol that will help the Society members to navigate the complications of their lives. Alluding to John Milton and his epic *Paradise Lost*, she uses her essay to turn Browning into a religious teacher in the confusing and complex world of Victorian society when she states: “He is ever seeking to interpret the seen by the unseen to justify the ways of God to man” (79). No part of her essay makes her regard for Browning clearer than when she calls him “a prophet whom God has given to our storm-tost age” (79).

Like Bury, she feels that Browning is a religious teacher for the doubters among them, and not for those who have never questioned:

Yet to the religious consciousness of some Browning does not speak.

There are childlike souls who have ever looked up to God in simple loving faith, over whose being the storms of doubt have never swept, who have not known what it is to sit in the midst of a thick darkness, a darkness that
may be felt; an unquestioning faith is theirs, and they have never had to
wrestle with the problems of life. (79)

By making this observation, Bury and Beale provide insight into the personalities of
many of the Browningites. One of the most accepted perceptions about Browning among
his devoted readers is that he possesses an optimistic view of life. However, the
optimism is not just an example of a cheery nature or state of eternal happiness. It is a
feeling of hope that there is always some good in even the most wicked of individuals,
and faith can survive in the face of even the darkest of doubt. This belief in Browning
carries throughout the Society’s existence and is alluded to in many papers. Miss C. M.
Whitehead discusses it in her 1888 paper, “Browning as A Teacher of the Nineteenth
Century,” when she states:

To all morbidness Mr. Browning’s theories of life are the best tonic; and
his optimism (which has often been dwelt on) is not of that provokingly
persistent cheerful nature which refuses to recognize pain and suffering,
and denies their very existence. He realizes to the full the varied forms of
misery and anguish at the present time, and if he cannot give an absolute
answer hints at the line whence comfort may spring. (307)

In “Browning’s View of Life,” Reverend Professor, B. F. Westcott also speaks of
Browning’s power of optimism, and expresses his belief that through Browning’s poetry
people can be reassured in a spiritual sense:

He has laid bare what there is in man of sordid, selfish, impure, corrupt,
brutish, and he proclaims in spite of every disappointment and every
wound, that he still finds a spiritual power in him, answering to a spiritual
power without him, which restores assurance as to the destiny of creation.

(93)

It would seem that members like Bury, Beale, Westcott, and Whitehead are speaking from their own personal feelings and experiences when they describe how Browning’s poetry calls to their difficulties maintaining faith in the ever-changing Victorian world. They are not simply lovers of his work as an artist, and they do not read his poetry simply for pleasure. Their intense levels of devotion, extreme protectiveness of the poet, and drive to help his poetry reach larger audiences are fueled by the very real and deep emotional connection they feel towards Browning. For them, if Browning’s strong faith can persevere through doubts and darkness then so can theirs, and his poetry will be their guide.

What makes the papers of these particular Browningites so interesting to study is that they demonstrate a subtle difference in the type of scholarly work that interested many of the Society members and the type of modern critical work commonly done on Browning as an artist. Beale and the others are not studying Browning’s work to determine simply what he believed or what he chose to express through his poetry. This thesis, for instance, has required the studying of Browning’s life to aid in the understanding of his poetry. Chapter Three is an examination of a selection of Browning’s poems, and it is the poetry that I attempt to decipher. Recently published academic articles that I have read on these subjects, such as the 2003 article, “‘He Himself with his Human Air’: Browning Writes the ‘Body of Christ,’” by Andrew Tate, examine Browning’s religious poetry such as “Christmas Day.” For Tate, the poem is a dramatic puzzle to be solved by working within the various parts of the poem itself and
exploring its construction. Browning’s religious background is referenced but only as a source of clues to help decipher the text. The focus of the study is the poem, and Tate is not concerned with finding a message from Browning within the lines. In fact, his argument is that Browning is not describing “a personal experience of faith” in the poem and any revelation belongs to the dramatic speaker (40).

Of course, having a differing approach to literary study does not make the work of the theologically focused Browningites useless or wrong. However, it is worth exploring and understanding how their approach differed from that of many Browning scholars today in order to help see how they functioned as an early group of scholars. In a way, their approach resembles that of modern critical biographers, such as Richard S. Kennedy,18 who combine the study of the facts about the poet’s life with the themes of his poetry in order to form a complete picture of Browning as a person. Like Bury and Beale, they use the poetry to support claims about the man. However, there is still a significant difference between them, and that is their respective distances from Browning himself. Someone like Kennedy looks back at Browning’s life as a completed story with collections of letters and older biographers to aid him in his examination. He also has the emotional distance of nearly a hundred years to separate his life experiences and feelings from Browning’s own. Browningites like Beale lived at the same time as Browning, probably met him at one time or another, and could expect new works or thoughts to be produced as she studied him. He was an immediate and real presence in her life that she could use as a continuing source of inspiration and guidance. For Kennedy, there may be new discoveries of lost letters or unpublished poetry, but the distance of time weakens the

18 One of the authors of The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life (2007).
potential bond he can develop with the poet. He also, unlike the Browningites, is allowed a greater freedom towards objectivity, because while he obviously cares about Browning and his poetry (no one would devote so much time and effort to such a project if they did not), he can have no fear of offending the poet personally by offering any sort of negative critique. If he offers an unpopular opinion he may be criticized by fellow Browning scholars, but there is no potential shame associated with hurting Browning’s actual feelings or falling out of his favor. He also has the luxury of studying Browning in an age when the poet’s reputation as an important literary figure is firmly established.

For Beale, however, Browning is not just a great but dead literary figure. He is a living man whom she clearly looks up to and respects as an individual who can help her and others to navigate the difficult waters of very complicated lives. Her earlier statements about dismissing his flaws show that she is not a fan of Browning because she simply enjoys his poetry but because of what she believes his poetry teaches and promotes. As someone studying his poetry with him still alive, and somewhat available to her, she also has the added pressure of wanting him to be pleased with her work. Some of Browning’s letters reveal that he was made aware of some of the Society’s papers, and Beale’s was among them (Hood 211). Even in modern examples of fan communities it is rare for the members to have any relationship with their subject. However, when it does occur, the phenomenon of a shift from in-depth and sometimes critical discussion of the subject’s works towards something more praise-oriented is not uncommon. It is possible that too much access to Browning affected the type of scholarship performed by many of the Browningites.

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19 Browning told Furnivall in an 1882 letter that it was a “pleasure” to hear an “account” of Beale’s paper.
Studying Browning’s Poetry: Close Readings in the Essays

Not every Society member focused their papers on the argument that Browning is a teacher. Some produced papers that function as interesting and insightful critical analysis of his works or of him as a poet. The best example of this is the paper that Miss E. D. West presented, “One Aspect of Browning’s Villains,” at the April 27, 1883 meeting of the London Browning Society. West was an acquaintance of Browning, and his letter to her in 1881 is one of the primary sources available concerning his feelings on the Society. In his letter to her, he commented on a paper that she planned to write for the Society:

And now for your paper, the at least possible paper you may write. You know what I think of your writing, how deeply I shall be interested in this. Do honor me-and, let me say, benefit me-by writing on my poetry with the freedom and honesty which I hope I deserve! In whatever aspect, generally or in particular-that shall be at your pleasure. But I shall greatly appreciate your care to criticize me with whatever result. (Hood 203)

As her paper was not presented until 1883, it is unclear if the paper she had planned at that time is the same one that is preserved in Berdoe’s collection, but what this does demonstrate is that Browning did have connections with members of the Society and at times gave them his blessing personally. Perhaps because of his direct statement, while her paper is hardly critical in the negative sense, she steps away from the overly praising language of some of the religiously-themed papers and uses Browning’s personal characteristics, namely his optimism, to analyze his poetry. She offers valuable insight
into Browning’s method of dramatic characterization and composition rather than using the poetry as a means of studying his own character.

The focus of her essay is on the seeming contradictions of Browning’s apparent optimism and his habit of using evil or morally flawed individuals for the subject matter of his poetry: “What concord, we may ask, is there between these: a joyous, persistent faith in Good being somehow the final significance of all Creation; and a delight in the employing of artistic powers in the delineation of evilest aspects of Humanity!” (106).

While she is interested in some of his philosophical ideas, she also does not appear to be deliberately using her paper to promote him as a philosophical teacher. She simply wants to analyze how an “optimistic thinker” (106) such as Browning could compose about ugly and evil subjects at times rather than “dwell on the pleasant and loveable features of the human world” (106). With her thesis, she manages to address some of the complaints of the time that Browning’s poetry was not beautiful enough, in verse and subject-matter, to serve as true poetry and show how his perceived optimism is ultimately displayed even through his handling of darker themes.

While some of her fellow members make claims concerning Browning’s superiority to his contemporaries, West’s paper includes comparisons that manage to demonstrate how she believes Browning to be better while still acknowledging the talent of the other party. For instance, she gives credit to Charles Dickens and George Elliot for their ability to present the facts of human morality, but she also feels that they do not go as far as Browning with his willingness “not only to let perceptions of ideas float into him through the eye of the soul, but also to handle mental things with the hands of a craftsman, taking to pieces and putting together again” (109). His willingness to get inside of the
darkest and most evil of minds and find the potential for good there is the strength she finds in Browning. She also feels that the dynamic-natures of his morally ambiguous speakers position him as superior to Shakespeare in the ability to write villainous characters. Shakespeare’s villains are only in the story for the purpose of “appearing upon the scene as the agents required to bring about certain disastrous events or complications in the plots, there is not discernible in them any suggestiveness of irrelevant capacities. They seem as if their proper function in the world were the being a part of its evil force” (110). Browning’s villains are more unsettling because many of them are the figures in which “a soul’s tragedy is enacted” (112) rather than simply mechanisms for the fall of the protagonist: “It is only when the dramatic character is presented to our imagination as a human being turned to evil through misuse of potentialities for good, that we can by an appropriation of the villain’s ego (however swift and transient such exchange of personality may be) have a ‘real apprehension’ of the character’s individuality” (110). Average readers can identify with Browning’s villains, which can remind them that their choices could lead them down similar paths.

While she does examine Browning’s philosophical views, she uses her analysis of his character to aid in her understanding of his ability to create such villains:

The result of his attaining by his half-intellectual, half-emotional process to the faith that good will be, at the last, the issue of all that we see in the world around us, is, that this creed which (unproven though it be to him) he adopts as a working hypothesis, drives him into a region of deeper, more recondite psychology in his character-drawing. (113)
She uses her beliefs concerning Browning as a tool for better understanding him as a poet. For her, Browning’s inherent optimism drives him to find the potential for good or tragedy in the darkest souls because he “becomes forced into a more thorough analysis of those appearances, by the necessity to find warrant for the holding of his optimistic beliefs” (113).

**Modern Browning Societies**

The London Browning Society stopped meeting in 1892 (Peterson 154); however, it inspired the creation of countless others during its existence and afterwards. Just like in fan communities, the original members eventually lose interest or fade from the scene, but if the subject has the ability to survive the progression of time, new fans will eventually take their place and the cycle will begin again. For example, a modern group that exists today is called The Browning Society. According to the Society’s website, they were founded in 1969 “to provide a focus for contemporary interest in Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.” As a group they put together “an annual programme of lectures, visits, etc., in London and elsewhere, as well as publishing *Journal of Browning Studies*.” The *Journal of Browning Studies* is the successor to their earlier journal, the *Browning Society Notes*, which ran from 1969 to 2008. *Browning Society Notes* consists of a variety of subjects related to not only Robert Browning but Elizabeth Barrett Browning as well, which is a fact that separates it from the type of scholarly work performed by the original society. The journal is also not just a collection of critical examinations of their poetry, but it also covers papers on aspects of biography such as collections of letters. It also features articles such as “Directions in Browning Criticism” that look at the trends in Browning studies. Overall, it appears to be a free-for-all of
Browning subjects, and there is even an article about the poets’ son Pen Browning.

Though the site advertizes the creation of the new *Journal of Browning Studies*, there are no listings for papers published to it in the MLA or Academic Search Premiere databases. However, according to the Honorary Secretary of the Society, Dr. Rhian Williams, the group continues to meet annually and on special occasions such as the birth and death anniversaries of the poets.

One of the groups formed closer to the era of the London Browning Society is also still very prosperous and active. It is not located in the poet’s native land, however, but the United States of America. According to Peterson, Browning reading groups and societies formed all over the United States around the dawn of the twentieth century (Peterson 188). According to their website, The New York Browning Society was “founded in 1907 to study the poetry, life, and times of Robert Browning, and of his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning.” Like The Browning Society, their focus of scholarship included Barrett Browning, though as the society has been in existence for such a long time, it is unclear if this was legitimately the case in 1907. According to their calendar, this society still meets on a regular basis through the months of October through May, and anyone interested in the poets are allowed to attend. They also have special celebrations including the meeting and lunch held to commemorate Browning’s birthday on May 7th. They are also active in introducing literature to young people with events such as an annual high school poetry contest. Each regular meeting features an event or essay presentation. For instance, on February 10th of 2010, the “Gramercy Arts High School students read a Browning poem that moved them, and then their original poems inspired by our poet.” Special guest speakers have included Dr. Scott Lewis who talked
to the members about his project to work on Volume 18 of the projected forty-five volumes of complete annotated correspondence of the Brownings. Overall, this group proves that a Browning society can last for over a century and continue to strive and promote the Brownings’ works to new generations.

**Conclusions on a Victorian Fandom**

The London Browning Society slowly faded away in its final years, and eventually disbanded as a society for good in 1892. Peterson proposes in his book that the group’s growing preoccupation with theological debates over literary scholarship played a large role in the group’s demise. The published documents I have been able to read through do not give any indications of the group’s activities in the final years. Though it was published in 1895, Berdoe’s collection’s latest dated essay is from 1889, and I can only speculate for myself what happened without relying too heavily on the opinions of Peterson. However, it must also be pointed out that one of Furnivall’s main intentions with the Society was to study the works of a living poet. His creation gave the Society members a, then, unique experience that they passionately maintained until Browning’s death in 1889. I cannot say if it is a coincidence that Berdoe chose not to include any essays written after Browning’s death, but if none of the later essays were deemed worthy of being included in his sampling of the Society’s finest productions, it is possible that the scholarship greatly fell off after the poet passed away.

It is typical of modern fandoms, particularly in the age of the Internet where fan communities are primarily based in cyberspace, for the height of a fan group’s level of activity to be in the time when new works are still expected in the future. When a television show comes to an end, the majority of fans of the series inevitably lose interest
and move on to new subjects. If a currently working and popular writer retires or dies, it would also stand to reason that even the most devoted readers would move on from regular discussion of the author’s works. It is simply the inevitable consequence of time and human interest. As the essays demonstrate, many of the most passionate Browningites were drawn to Browning because of the inspiration they saw in him to aid in the present state of their lives.\textsuperscript{20} While they had goals to promote his works for future generations, members such as Beale’s passion and devotion were ultimately fueled by the intense connection they felt towards him as a living teacher to guide the people of Victorian England. After his death, it is possible that many of the early devotees simply transferred their attention elsewhere, especially if members such as West were apparently in the minority.

Of course, Browning has not been forgotten and discussion of his work has not ceased like they would for a television series from a previous decade. The reason for this is because his importance as a literary figure has since moved him into the world of serious academia. Today, we approach him with a level of respect as an established member of English literary canon, but for the Society members of the 1880s, he was an active poet whose future regard by posterity was yet to be determined. Their approach to studying and discussing him would more closely parallel the types of discussions that would be found in fan communities devoted to any living artist today than the articles published yearly by universities and academic journals.

\textsuperscript{20} After all, it was common for members to refer to him as their “master” (Peterson 64).
Chapter Three: Being Robert Browning: The Autobiographical Poems of the Poet

In Chapter One, I discussed the role that professional critics played in Browning’s career, and in Chapter Two, I analyzed the London Browning Society’s views on the poetry. The next logical step is to examine how Browning may have affected his own persona through ambiguously autobiographical poetry. Browning denied, on more than one occasion, the presence of his personal self in his poetry, but in an 1889 letter to Browning Society member T. J. Nettleship, he stated that his poems were all dramatic with “an exception or two” (Hood 303). This confession still leaves the identity of those poems unknown; however, circumstantial evidence helps to determine which poems were likely to have been, at the very least, inspired by his personal feelings or concerns about certain issues. This chapter will explore some of these poems, which all share the important lack of an identifiable dramatic speaker unlike more famous poems such as “Caliban,” and appear to be on topics that were personal to Browning. Performing such a task will help to examine Browning’s presentation of himself through his poetry, and some of the reactions of Browningites will demonstrate how his composing such poems affected the manner in which he is still viewed by audiences today regardless of what may have been his intentions.

Browning’s Love Song: One Word More

One of the earlier documentations of Browning’s stance that his work was primarily dramatic is found in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett during the time of their courtship: “You speak out, you, - I only make men and women speak – give you truth
broken into prismatic hues” (Wood 113). The reference to “men and women” later became the title of one of his most famous volumes of poetry, published in 1855, which also contains his openly non-dramatic dedication to his wife, “One Word More.” The poem was written for her because of her feelings that he needed to compose more directly in his own voice than always through his dramatic speakers (Loucks and Stauffer 275). The title of the work also confirms the poem’s function as a type of love letter to his wife as “One Word More” is a direct allusion to Barrett Browning’s response via letter to his second attempt at a marriage proposal. In her August 31, 1845 letter to him, Barrett Browning wrote: “Your life?.. if you gave it to me & I put my whole heart into it, what should I put but anxiety, & more sadness than you were born to? What could I give you, which it would not be ungenerous to give? – Therefore we must leave this subject…without one word more” (Kelley and Lewis, Vol II 439). The substance and title of this poem was most likely Browning’s way of publically declaring to his wife that he had no regrets concerning their life together or his decision to marry her.

The poem is particularly helpful to scholars examining Browning’s more personal poetry because not only does it provide a text in which he openly admits to being the speaker, a fact that is confirmed by the initials “RB” after the final line, but analyzing the manner in which he did so helps to determine the sort of situations in which he would most likely be willing to do so again. In 1855, the decision to compose a poem expressing such personal feelings of romantic love was likely a response to Barrett Browning’s 1850 Sonnets from the Portuguese (DeVane, A Browning Handbook 244), which is known to be about their relationship even though Browning insisted she make it look like merely a translation at the time of its publication. It also served as a unique
manner of concluding what was to be a volume of poetry in which he had high expectations concerning its place in his personal canon. The poem was written after the first fifty poems, composed in the voices of different men and women, had been sent to the publishers (Loucks and Stauffer 271). This fact not only helps to emphasize the different state of mind he was in when he wrote it, but the source for this information helps to indicate the exception that allowed him to so openly compose such a personal poem. The lateness of the composition is known because Barrett Browning told her sister Henrietta that her husband was working on a last minute poem dedicated to her (DeVane, A Browning Handbook 245). It would appear that his relationship with his wife, at least by 1855 and with the added pressure of knowing she had written poems dedicated to their love, was a topic in which he was temporarily willing to be more open to the public as a poet.

The poem itself is a declaration of his love to her by taking a single opportunity in his life to compose in a style that he would not consider his own. By doing so, he also connects himself to great artists of the past. He begins by introducing the “speakers” of his body of work: “There they are, my fifty men and women/ Naming me the fifty poems finished!” (1-2) He offers his collection to her, and to the readers of the volume, and hopes that she will accept them and approve of him as a poet: “Take them, Love, the book and me together” (3-4). One of the most important lines in the poem, in terms of understanding Browning’s intentions, is, “Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also” (4), which is repeated later as “Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!” (142). It is implied that he normally writes poetry from “his brain,” as in he works from a place of

21See Chapter One page 15.
creativity, but he does not necessarily include his feelings in his artistic equation.

However, for this poem, he is asking that “his heart” and “his brain” be together so that he can express his feelings through his words. This declaration is confirmation that the poem is not dramatic, and it is a rare chance to examine Browning’s attempt at presenting his honest feelings.

The poem is written in a trochaic pentameter, and according to Browning scholars James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer, it is the only poem in which Browning chose to use this metrical form (275). Trochaic meters were rare in modern poetry by Browning’s day because it was commonly accepted that the iambic pentameter form more realistically mimicked English speech patterns. Trochaic derives from the Greek words *trochee* and *choree*, meaning “running” and “belonging to the dance” (Preminger 1309). Though used rarely in poetry, trochaic meters were commonly used in more music-related art-forms such as songs and chants (Preminger 1309). Browning describes the rarity of the poem in his verse, and choosing to use such a form helps to back up his claim. However, there may also be a more personal reason between Browning and his wife that resulted in his decision. The two of them would read and offer criticism of each other’s poetry. Like many critics, Barrett Browning was concerned over the roughness of her husband’s verse. She even told her friend Mary Russell Mitford that his poetry could be “defective in harmony” (Kelley, *Vol. 6* 105). For instance, prior to their marriage, she offered a large number of suggestions for revising his poem “The Flight of the Duchess.” Her revisions, however, often ignored what would be best to reflect the personality of the speaker in favor of more “metrical regularity” (Kennedy and Hair 122). As this poem was written for her, it is possible that he chose a meter largely connected to music as a
way of offering her what he believed she wanted to see. As some of her other criticisms included objecting to his tendency of “making lines difficult for the reader to read” (Wood 76), his decision to use a meter common in nursery rhymes (Preminger 1309) may have been his way of playfully poking fun at her main complaints about his poetry.

What makes this poem important for study is not that it expresses his love for his wife because that can easily be confirmed by simply reading through their courtship letters. The poem also provides a look at Browning’s thoughts on the nature of art and artists. The “thesis” of the poem concerns the fact that great artists will set aside their true callings to express their feelings for their loves through another medium. For Browning, the act of doing so appears to be in order to make the work of dedication unique to his personal canon. Composing for the only time in trochaic pentameter and having this be the only poem in his collection of fifty men and women to be admittedly non-dramatic gives the poem a special quality. What is particularly revealing are the sections in which he uses great artists from the past in examples of this act of love.

First, he talks about Rafael and his love for his mistress. He remarks that despite his great art, Barrett Browning and he would rather see the lost sonnets that he dedicated to his love:

> You and I would rather read that volume,
> (Taken to his beating bosom by it)
> Lean and list the bosom-beats of Rafael,
> Would we not? Than wonder at Madonnas (18-21)

In this case, he refers to Rafael, who was known and praised as a painter, having written sonnets about his mistress that were later lost to time (Loucks and Stauffer 272).
Afterwards, he moves on to discuss Dante and states that they would rather see the artwork of his angel “Beatrice” than the works for which he is best known. The section on Dante is particularly interesting because of what can be inferred about Browning himself. While working on his angel, Dante is stopped from completing his task:

Dante, who loved well because he hated,

Hated wickedness that hinders loving,

Dante standing, studying his angel,-

In there broke, the folk of his Inferno.

Says he – “Certain people of importance”

(Such he gave his daily dreadful line to)

“Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet. (42-8)

The people of importance that seized him can be interpreted as not literal people but as the characters of his imagination. Much like Browning has his “men and women,” Dante is seized by the people found in the passages of the Inferno. His mental powers were taken over by them, and he was prevented from creating the artwork of his angel (Knowlton, Jr. 1). It is possible to view Browning as confessing that he too feels taken over by the men and women of his poetry in order to create a thematic connection between himself and Dante. By doing so, he may be attempting to establish himself as having the potential to be a great poet that will be appreciated by posterity in the manner that Rafael and Dante are regarded by his generation.

“One Word More” also features Browning opening up and describing his poetic methods. Through his words to his wife, readers can infer how he views his body of work:
Love, you saw me gather men and women,
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth,—the speech, a poem (129-32)

He sees the speakers of his poems as characters through which he conducts his art. Their individual voices provide a means of writing that does not require him to openly offer himself to the public. Because of the dramatic nature of these speakers, he can deny that he presents his personal thoughts and feelings to his readers:

Hardly shall I tell my joys and the sorrows,
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving:
I am mine and yours—the rest be all men’s,

Karshish, Cleon, Norbert and the fifty (133-36)

Of course, as the rest of the chapter will show, this only most strongly applies to poems in which the speakers can be identified as having traits that in some way differentiate themselves from the poet.

Why he chooses to be this type of poet is unknown, though “One Word More” hints at an insecurity on Browning’s part concerning intimate poetry: “Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!/ Poor the speech, be how I speak, for all things” (142-43). In fact, the poem implies that Browning does not feel that composing “personal” poetry is his calling. He uses the examples of Rafael and Dante to lead into his opinion that artists have gifts, and that though they will turn away from them in order to create something for the object of their affection, the new form of art will never be what they are meant to do

22 Unlike the tradition found in poetry of invoking a muse, Browning does not call upon his dramatic speakers. He simply embodies them fully in the monologues in which they are used.
with their lives. He refers to the specific talent as “his proper dowry” (66) and calls the other artwork attempted in the name of love to be “alien” (69) to each artist in question. However, this does not mean that Browning disapproves of such a project: "Once, and only once, and for one only,/ So to be the man and leave the artist,/ Gain the man’s joy, miss the artist’s sorrow” (70-2). To him, the alien work is an example of the artist as a man rather than as a painter or a dramatic poet. The fact that he tells Barrett Browning that the two of them would rather be witnesses to Rafael’s sonnets or Dante’s artwork of his angel than the works for which they are known indicates that Browning thinks quite highly of the willingness of an artist to make such an attempt. At the same time, he acknowledges that it is not their best work, and the hesitancy that he adds to “One Word More” with his acknowledgements of its possible failings indicates that he includes his own attempt in that claim.

**Ambiguous Speakers: Browning’s Potentially Personal Poems**

Barrett Browning’s letter concerning the purpose of “One Word More,” along with the poem’s address “To EBB,” indicates that at the time of its publication, it was no real secret that the poem was meant to be an expression of Browning’s feelings for his wife. However, the following poems discussed in this chapter are ones in which the personal nature of their lines is inconclusive. What can be certainly said about them is that they lack an identifiable speaker and audience unlike Browning’s most well-known dramatic monologues such as “My Last Duchess” and “Fra Lippo Lippi.” The themes discussed in the poems can also be connected back to events in Browning’s own life, which suggests that, though the speaker is not necessarily Browning himself, he quite
possibly used these poems to work through some of his personal issues with the help of his fiction.

Browning’s expressed feelings over his critics in Chapter One, and his appreciation for the interest and efforts of the London Browning Society in Chapter Two, show that his reputation and lack of mainstream appreciation were on Browning’s mind quite heavily throughout his life. Therefore, “Popularity” is an important poem to analyze because it offers an example of Browning composing on the subject of poetic fame and disappointment with a lack of success. The poem, which was published in 1855 in the volume *Men and Women*, does not feature an identifiable dramatic speaker, though Browning manages to distance himself from the topic by making the subject to whom the speaker is addressing somewhat identifiable as a real person. Based on the opening stanza, the poem seems to primarily be about John Keats:

> Stand still, true poet that you are!
> I know you; let me try and draw you.
> Some night you’ll fail us: when afar
> You rise, remember one man saw you,
> Knew you, and named a star! (1-4)

“Popularity” is generally considered to be a tribute to that poet because of the allusion to Percey Shelley’s “Adonais”\(^{23}\) in line four’s description of the “true poet” as a “star” (Kennedy and Hair 280). “Adonais” was likely Browning’s first introduction to Keats, and he may have wanted to compose his own ode (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* 236). Also, by implying that the subject of the poem is primarily someone else, he manages to

\(^{23}\) Also a tribute to Keats.
create some distance between the issues discussed in the poem and his personal feelings. The information presented in Chapter One concerning his intentions to make *Men and Women* appealing to the public,\(^{24}\) and his angry satirical send-up of critics in *Pacchiarotto*, serve as compelling evidence that Browning had personal reasons for sympathizing with Keats. By not creating a distinct character to serve as the speaker, readers can infer that the one speaking to the “true poet” (1) is an empathetic Browning. However, by making the subject of the poem another, he is at the same time able to maintain plausible deniability concerning how much of his own self is in the poem no matter how applicable it is to his own life.

Many of the ideas expressed in the poem concerning Keats were later expressed in the opinions of his “fans” in relation to himself. The speaker believes that Keats will be properly appreciated by all at a later date, and he indicates that a higher power will release the poet’s true light on the world: “His clenched hand shall unclose at last,/ I know, and let out all the beauty” (11-2). The idea that Browning would one day come to be appreciated for his true talents as a poet is also a hope believed in sincerely by members of the London Browning Society, particularly Furnivall. It is possible that this poem was the source of some of the Society member’s faith in his future value. Also in the poem, Browning goes so far as to suggest that Keats is in fact a gift from God when he alludes to the wine that Jesus made from water in the gospel of John:

That day, the earth’s feast-master brow

Shall clear, to God the chalice raising;

“Others give best at first, but thou

\(^{24}\) See Chapter One Page 15.
Forever set’st our table praising,
Keep’st the good wine till now!” (16-20)

Here, Browning may have influenced, albeit most likely without the intention of doing so, the beliefs expressed by some of his followers concerning his importance as a religious inspiration. The passage thematically relates to Dorothea Beale’s paper\textsuperscript{25} in which Browning is presented as a type of spiritual leader. This poem was published prior to Beale’s presentation of her essay by a number of years, and while she does not directly quote this poem, it is likely, based on her passionate interest in the poet, that she was familiar with it. As the Browningites tended to use his poetry to discuss his personal character, it is more than possible that such language used by Browning to describe a poet also inspired the more passionate Society members in the manner that they discussed him.

Like “One Word More,” “Popularity” provides an opportunity to study how Browning seems to define poetry. He compares the works of poets to the materials from the ocean that are used to make precious dyes for royalty. The dye is beloved by the people and held in high regard, but what is used to make it, murex,\textsuperscript{26} is rough and unpleasant before it is treated: “Yet there’s the dye, in that rough mesh,/ The sea has only just o’er whispered!” (36-7). Browning appears to view “true” poetry this way. He then criticizes those who pass judgment on poetry, but in his opinion do not really understand it, by comparing them to people who talk of the beauty of the dye without any knowledge of how it came into existence: “And each bystander of them all/ Could criticize, and quote tradition/ How depths of blue sublimed some pall” (31-3). One of

\textsuperscript{25} “The Religious Teaching of Browning.” See Chapter Two page 39.

\textsuperscript{26} A part of the genus of mollusk and used to make the purple dye. (Loucks and Stauffer 264)
the main criticisms of Browning’s work discussed in Chapter One was the roughness of his verses, so it would seem that Browning is using an analogy that is very close to the issues he has had with his own poetry. He is pointing out to critics, of himself and Keats, that just because they all know about the most beautiful poems in literary canon, they do not really comprehend all of the work, creativity, and experimentation that goes into the creation and advancement of great art. Because Keats and Browning’s poems are in many ways new, they are not always going to be the same as the traditional poetry to which people have grown accustomed.

He remarks on his feelings towards hack poets who do no creative work of their own, but only copy the greater thinkers when he says:

And there’s the extract, flaked and fine,
And priced and saleable at last!
And Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes combine
To paint the future from the past,
Put blue into their line (57-60)

These people are simply the imitators and hacks (Loucks and Stauffer 264) who do not put forth the effort of developing new ideas but simply repackage the beauty of real poets into something that is easy to sell to the general public. It seems to be his way of putting down poets who are more about pleasing the crowd than maintaining any artistic integrity. However, it could also be interpreted as him personally resenting that he is criticized when his poetry presents something different from the average, while another poet who simply composes “by the numbers” may be praised. In the last two lines he asks, “Who fished the murex up? (64). Browning likely emphasized with John Keats because he was
a similarly under-appreciated artist during his lifetime. In the poem, he seems to be suggesting that popularity comes from imitating those who do the real work, and that poets like Keats are the real artists who are not appreciated until later because they are, in a sense, a head of their time. They are the ones who fish out the murex and work to turn it into beauty even though what they create may not be accepted at the time as something great because it is different and possibly a form of experimentation. The hacks may have the immediate popularity by taking some of the new ideas and simply watering them down, but Keats, and thematically Browning as well, is the real artistic talent.

The Browning Society members, particularly those falling in the category of Browningites, seemed to be very interested in Browning’s opinions on faith and doubt, and more than one paper from Chapter Two expresses the belief that Browning was primarily for those who question and experience moments of darkness.27 “Prospice,” which means in Latin to “look forward” (Ryals 153), is a poem that seems to be tied into those issues in a very personal manner to Browning. The events described in the lines, along with the time of its creation, lend credence to the interpretation that the poem is Browning dealing with the death of his wife. Though “Prospice” involves an unidentifiable speaker looking forward to his death and transition into the afterlife where he is reunited with the other part of his soul, circumstantial evidence suggests that the speaker of the poem is at least inspired by Browning’s own feelings.

The poem was published in 1864 in the volume *Dramatis Personae*, but it is commonly accepted among biographical sources that it was probably written earlier in the fall of 1881 after the death of Barrett Browning (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*).

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27 See Chapter Two pages 39 and 40.
While there appears to be no direct proof of this, the assumption seems to be made in part because of how the poet presents his description of death and the afterlife, and by the fact that after Barrett Browning’s death, he wrote in her Testament a translation of Dante’s words to Beatrice from *Il Convito*: “Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another, there, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured” (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* 268). This quotation seems to be directly tied to the final line of the poem in which the speaker declares: “O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again./ And with God be the rest!” (27-8) Another reason for this assumption may go back to the time that the poem was printed, along with the essays of the Browning Society members several years later. For instance, in his essay, “The Wife-Love and Friend-love of Robert Browning,” in 1889, Reverend J. J. G. Graham includes “Prospice” in his list of Browning poems he considers autobiographical (Berdoe 205). He, like DeVane, considers the poem to be a way for Browning to deal with the loss of his wife. However, unlike the later scholars, Graham assumes that the poem was written quite awhile after her death when it was published. He wrote: “Three years after the sad blow, as we call it, he writes thus cheerfully and manfully, “Prospice,” Look Forward” (211). This is one situation in which the strict policies of the Browning Society help later scholars to generalize some of the overall beliefs of the members. As this essay comes from a later collection of papers that were presented to the Society, discussed, and edited to be read for publication, it can be somewhat assumed that others, most likely including Edward Berdoe, were in agreement with the assertion.

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28 While most of the source I came across presented this idea, I was never able to find an exact origin of the assumption.
Browning begins the poem, which Ryals calls a lyrical version of “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” in which the tower at the end is death (Ryals 153), by asking if he should fear the act of dying. The overall attitude of the speaker suggests that he does not despite the atmosphere Browning uses in his description of the act of approaching the season of death: “When the snows begin, and the blasts denote I am nearing the place” (3-4). The speaker seems rather resigned to the fact that he knows his death will come soon because he begins to make statements indicating that the time has arrived: “For the journey is done and the summit attained” (9). Browning appears to describe the act of dying as a sort of literal transition from one place to another. For instance, he literally declares, “And the barriers fall” (10). The imagery in this poem gives scholars an idea of at least how Browning would like to envision the transition from life into death, though later evidence also indicates that Browning himself is unsure of the existence of a real, tangible afterlife. However, Browning does not have to be completely sure of such matters to use a poem like “Prospice” to work through the grieving process.

In the poem, the speaker is resigned to the fact that he is going to die, but that does not mean that he will not do so without fighting if only for the sake of his honor:

Though a battle’s to fight ere the guerdon be gained,

The reward of it all.

I was ever a fighter, so ---one fight more,

The best and the last! (11-14)

However, for Browning, the end of the fight comes with the reward of a type of heaven. The poem is not just about some type of eternal peace, however. One of the reasons he wants to fight is because he wants to fully experience death. He does not want it to
happen in a way that he will be sheltered from the act. He says, “I would hate that Death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,/ And made me creep past” (15-16). He does not wish for a merciful death in his sleep, but he wants to completely feel what is happening to him:

No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers,

The heroes of old,

Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life’s arrears

Of pain, darkness and cold” (17-20)

At least one member of the Browning Society, Graham who calls it “manly,” views this passage as a romantic sentiment in which Browning wants to die like a “warrior” of old by fighting and experiencing dying as a highly courageous and dramatic act. However, a darker, and possibly more realistic, suggestion is that Browning wants to experience the journey on which his wife had already gone. She passed away in his arms, so it is possible that he is trying to imagine what it is like to die in order to try and understand what she went through.

The last portion of the poem is a description of the full transition. Death is apparently blackness, which could be interpreted as nothingness, but making it through death leads to another world:

The black minute’s at end,

And the element’s rage, the fiend voices that rave,

Shall dwindle, shall blend,

Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain (22-25)

Dying is a dark and messy process, but the rest and peace afterwards will make it worth it: “Then a light, then thy breast,/ O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,/ And
with God be the rest!” (26-8) The concluding lines show that the speaker is talking directly to his loved one who has previously died. Only Browning could tell us for sure if that person is meant to be Barrett Browning, but what can be safely assumed by the circumstantial evidence is that the poem is inspired by his desire to be with her again one day after his death.

A poem like this shows why the Society members considered Browning to be such an optimistic person in an era of religious doubt. Chapter Two explores how the Society members view many of the concepts, particularly those concerning religion and faith, presented in Browning’s poetry as indicative of his personal beliefs even if the speaker is not explicitly shown to be Browning. For instance, they take the positive themes in the poetry as representative of Browning’s outlook on life. Of course, this issue could also be viewed as an example of general assumptions about a poetic work over time becoming generally accepted facts about it. Browning Society members viewed the poem as being about Barrett Browning, so it is somewhat safe to assume that this might have been the typical interpretation at the time of its publication. Scholars throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have also come to this conclusion based on the implications of the poem, the time of its publication, and possibly even the general belief in Browning’s optimism in regards to faith. If nothing else, readers of the past one hundred and fifty years have continuously connected the closeness of the poem’s publication date with that of Barrett Browning’s death, along with the clear descriptions of a reunion in the afterlife, and assumed the same general interpretation. Readers have

29 Chapter Two, Section titled, “Browning as Religious Leader and Philosophical Teacher”

30 The poem’s connection to Barrett Browning is stated by scholars Kennedy and Hair, Loucks and Stauffer, and DeVane in their texts on Browning and his poetry.
tied this poem so closely to Browning’s feelings for his wife, that even if it was never intended to be so, it will most certainly always be associated with them now.

Not all of Browning’s poems dealing with issues of faith, such as the existence of an afterlife, is as optimistic in tone as “Prospice.” In 1876, Browning published a poem, “Fears and Scruples,” that deals with the issues of doubt that Society members began to speak of in their essays five years later. The poem was likely a way of addressing the rise in intellectually-based religious doubt during the nineteenth century (Hawlin 89), but it was also possibly inspired by Browning’s own feelings concerning the afterlife and its existence later in his life. In 1886, John Churton Collins had a conversation with Browning that he describes as the following: “If you don’t accept Revelation, he said, I honestly do not see, after all my thinking and experience, any indication to lead us to suppose that there is a life after this. It is a great desire, that is certain: but I see no reason to suppose that it will be fulfilled.” Browning also apparently stated that while Tennyson believed that there would be “an extension of individual consciousness after death,” he could not agree with him (Collins 80-2).

In the poem, God is referred to as the “unseen friend.” Browning says that he used to love his friend, and describes the situation of one who is loving out of an act of blind faith: “Dream there was none like him, none above him,/ Wake to hope and trust my dream was true” (3-4). However, it appears that now the speaker is dealing with a state of religious doubt and confusion. He talks of reading and believing the scriptures, but then he also calls the act of doing so “Pleasant fancy!”(9) and admits that he only knew of God’s actions by the words he read and stories he heard. Part of the doubt seems to have been caused by a feeling of neglect on the part of the speaker. He has been
waiting for his unseen friend to give him his day, “’Some day’ proving – no day! Here’s the puzzle./ Passed and passed my turn is. Why complain?”(13-14) and for others to stop talking in such a way that fuels his doubts: “If I could but muzzle/ People’s foolish mouths that give me pain!” (15-16) These people appear to be scientists and scholars of higher criticism who question the validity of the scriptures. Browning is very bothered by their claims that there is no proof of God’s existence, which is an opinion that Society members such as Beale would have likely appreciated in her insistence that he was someone to help them navigate such troubles. Browning has not completely given in to his doubts and gone along with the views of the non-believers. He still hopes for proof from his unseen friend that will contradict them: “I can simply wish I might refute you,/ Wish my friend would, - by a word, a wink-/ Bid me stop that foolish mouth, - you brute you!/ He keeps absent, - why, I cannot think” (25-28). He wants God to show the non-believers a sign, he is frustrated that he does not, and he cannot come up with an explanation for the silence.

The final five stanzas particularly help to show the sort of doubtful feelings that influence the Society members’ opinions that Browning was a source of optimistic light in the darkness of faltering faith. The speaker claims that despite his “foolishness” (29) he will go on believing. He will keep on as he has and continue to love his friend for his friend’s sake. However, Browning also presents a cynical idea that the Browningites most likely overlooked or ignored. In the last three stanzas, he ponders the idea that God watches him but hides whenever the speaker attempts to view Him in return. He also ponders the possibility that this is done just as a trick, and that the unseen friend will blame the person who suffers from doubt for not believing in someone who purposely
wishes to not be seen. However, the speaker is afraid to even suggest that this makes the
unseen friend a “monster” (45) because of the possibility that God does exist and that he
will be committing blasphemy.

Religious faith was not the only area in which Browning seems to have allowed
his brain to lie with his heart. “House” is ultimately a very telling poem about
Browning’s feelings concerning the invasion of privacy through posthumous biography
and poets blatantly displaying their feelings in their works. The poem is included in
Browning’s _Pacchiarotto_, in which the titular poem is a satire of Browning’s critics, so it
is featured in a volume along with Browning’s more personal poems. The imagery of the
house being toured in the poem may have been inspired by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The
House of Life.” According to the scholar William DeVane, Browning felt that the
poem “had betrayed the cause of personal privacy” ( _A Browning Handbook_ 357). In his
own work, Browning discusses issues of both poets putting their personal selves on
display in poetry and the desire of the public to dig into his personal life. He begins by
somewhat mocking the idea of poets putting forth their feelings in an obvious manner by
asking, “Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?” (1) The titular house is the focus of the
poem, and it serves as a metaphor representing a person’s, and in a lot of ways
Browning’s, inner-self where the most private of feelings are stored. To protest the idea
that he should be expected to put himself on display in his poetry, Browning compares
offering one’s personal life up for public consumption in their art to selling tickets for a
tour of one’s home:

‘Take notice: this building remains on view,

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31 Rossetti’s poem is not about privacy despite the connection. It is a poem dealing with married love and
largely addressed to the poet’s wife (DeVane, _A Browning Handbook_ 356).
Its suites of reception every one,
Its private apartment and bedroom too;
For a ticket, apply to the Publisher’ (6-9)

He declines to open his house up through his poetry and claims, “No, thanking the public, I must decline./ A peep through my window, if folk prefer;/ But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine!” (10-2). In other words, he does not mind a peek at the inner-workings of his life and mind, but he does not want to allow the general public to see everything, and he does not have plans to make money off of doing so with his poetry.

Browning was protective of his privacy, and he was not keen on the idea of biographies being written after his death. His public persona was that of a man “of the world,” and he “delighted in being mistaken for a financier” (Ryals 203). Thinking ahead to after his death, he even followed the common practice of burning many of his personal papers to limit the amount of information that would be available for perusal (Peterson 81). In the poem, he uses the metaphor to compare post-humus biographers to people who go through a dead man’s house to learn about his life. He seems particularly bothered by the fact that people want to casually judge the dead person without really caring that they were a real individual with feelings:

The owner? On, he had been crushed, no doubt!
Odd tables and chairs for a man of wealth!
What a parcel of musty old books about!
He smoked,-no wonder he lost his health! (21-4)

The people who go digging through the personal life of the man only care about the gossip that they can acquire from invading his private spaces. Browning does not appear
to want to be held under this kind of careless scrutiny after his death and instructs readers that:

Outside should suffice for evidence:
And whoso desires to penetrate
Deeper, must dive by the spirit-sense-
No optics like yours, at any rate!” (33-6)

The demand that those who wish to dive deeper must do so “by the spirit-sense” could mean that those who wish to attempt to gain knowledge about his innermost thoughts and feelings must be willing to do so in a genuine manner of respect that does not involve the gossip mongering of the examples he gave in the previous stanzas. “No optics like yours” could mean that he does not appreciate shallow attempts to dig into his privacy that are just for show without any real heart.

Like, “Prospice,” it appears that “House” was a poem commonly accepted by the Society members as being a reflection of Browning’s personal feelings. In his essay, “The Idea of Personality, As Embodied in Robert Browning’s Poetry,” Hiram Corson refers to the poem as Browning having “forcibly intimated” his belief “of the impossibility of penetrating to the Holy of Holies of this wondrous human heart” (48).

Also, Reverend J. G. Graham in his paper references the poem in a way that shows that he assumes that Browning is rejecting their attempts to see inside of his “house of life.” He respects Browning’s feelings though, and shows gratitude that he can at least glimpse as far inside as Browning has allowed (“The Wife-Love and Friend-Love of Robert Browning” 217). Outside of the Society, some reviews also acknowledge that Browning was speaking to them. For instance, one reviewer of Pacchiarotto expresses the belief
that the poem is speaking against the “prying curiosity of the profane world of critics” that come after the house is opened up (“Browning’s Pacchiarotto” 205). What these examples tell us is that his poetry has affected his reputation since the time of his career. This fact is still true today, as shown in the critical biography, The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning, in which “House” is used to make assumptions about Browning’s belief that his poetry should stand on its own free from the facts about his life (Kennedy and Hair 394). However, Browning’s desire is a nearly impossible task because of a combination of his own contradictory message. We look at the poem and assume that these are Browning’s actual feelings concerning biography, privacy, and poetic interpretation because not doing so would be to ignore what appears to be a very clear opinion. However, the message of the poem is not clear without first learning the context in which it was written. Because of the nature of scholarship, once we begin to study his works, they can no longer exist in a bubble. His poetry inevitably influences our thinking concerning his life, and the facts about his life in turn affect our interpretations of his poetry. After over a hundred years of scholarship done on his poetry, it is nearly impossible to determine where the cycle actually began.

Possibly the last poem written by Browning in his lifetime is the “Epilogue” of the volume Asolando, which was the last volume of Browning’s career and released on the day of his death. Because of this fact, it gets compared, including by editors of the Norton critical edition of Browning’s works, to Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar” (Loucks and Stauffer 485). Unlike Tennyson’s goodbye poem, however, only assumptions can be made concerning how seriously Browning wanted this poem to be taken as a self-retrospective of his life. The best evidence to this being Browning’s “Crossing the Bar,”
comes from the February 1, 1890 edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in which a story was told claiming that Browning was reading the proof of the poem to his sister and daughter-in-law, and in response to the third stanza of the poem he stated: “It almost sounds like bragging to say this, and as if I ought to cancel it; but it’s the simple truth; and as it’s true, it shall stand” (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* 499). The other evidence to support there being a personal nature to “Epilogue” is the health issues that Browning was suffering from during the time he would have composed the poem. In the last two years of his life, it was obvious even to Browning himself that his health was not what it had once been because he had begun to suffer from bad spells involving rheumatism and other respiratory problems (Kennedy and Hair 408).

The opening lines suggest that the speaker is talking from beyond the grave:

“Will they pass to where- by death, fools think imprisoned-/ Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so,/ - Pity me?” (3-5) He seems to be talking to a general you, and since he feared it was boastful, this could be seen as him stating that he loved his audience, and they him in return. This feeling on his part does not seem odd in 1889 when one considers that at that point he had experienced some actual success with sales and critics, but more importantly, he had also experienced direct interaction with rather intense fans in the form of the London Browning Society. Nearing the end of his life, he may have felt the need to let some of those fans, particularly the Browningites who viewed him as a teacher, know not to pity him in death.

The bragging portion of the poem appears when he declares:

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32 It is apparently a second-hand story, but the quote from Browning is repeated in the footnotes of the *Norton edition* by the editors, so it is apparently considered to be a fairly reliable piece of information.
As the poem is ambiguous, he could be talking about himself in general as a person, or he might also be referring to himself as a poet who was not always viewed as working within the norm. Despite his disappointments over the years in terms of sales and critical reception, he did not give up but continued composing, and he did so without abandoning his own vision. As the general sense of Browning, created by his most attentive reader’s interpretations of his poetry, is one of an optimistic nature, this portion of the poem is generally accepted to be sincere.

The majority of published Society members would likely see the poem as the final example of Browning’s unwavering optimism and faith, but because of the lack of published Browning Society papers from 1889 and 1890, it can not be known for sure. However, an 1890 review of *Asolando* in *Murray’s Magazine* stated that Browning “writes his own epitaph” with “Epilogue” (“Book Review” 284). As many of the reviewers were evaluating the volume of poetry shortly after Browning’s death, it is likely that this was a common opinion. The interpretation does not seem to have diminished with the distance of time either. In a 1903 retrospective on Browning, the writer, Mary Bradford Whiting, used lines from the poem as her final statement on the optimism and ever “looking forward” quality of the poet’s nature (“Prospice” 616). Whether or not the poem truly is an accurate representation of Browning’s most sincere
feelings is unknown, but what can be learned from examining it is that as the last poem in the final volume of an elderly man, it is likely the note on which he wanted to be remembered:

Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,
‘Strive and thrive!’ cry ‘Speed-fight on, fare ever
There as here!’’’ (17-20)

Reading Browning

Browning was accused of obscurity throughout his entire career, and for even the most die-hard of Browningites, past and present, it can be a valid criticism when trying to decipher the poet’s thoughts. Part of what makes it difficult is trying to determine exactly how Browning wanted his poetry to be read. In Chapter One, it was noted that Browning expects his reader to be active when reading his poetry as apposed to simply passively skimming his verse and moving on without stopping to think over it. However, other statements made by Browning in his lifetime create contradictions concerning how he expected readers to perform this task. The most interesting, and simultaneously confusing, case of this is found in an exchange of letters between him and Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald.

The letters reveal that she misunderstands his poem, “Adam, Lilith, and Eve,” by assuming that the allusions in the title have any bearing on the happenings within its story. She had thought that the man in the story had two wives, but Browning, who also gives her a summary of what actually happens in the poem, tells her, “Now, read the poem and tell me where is the least word about two ‘wives’? Had you let the Title alone and gone
on to the subject…” (Learned Lady 156-7). He also tells Mrs. Fitzgerald, concerning the apparent difficulty of his poetry, that trying to understand every one of his references and sources was “the exercise of industry in a wrong direction.” (Kennedy and Hair 384). Instead she should, “confine to the poems and nothing else, no extraneous matter at all, - I cannot but think you would find little difficulty: but your first business seems to be an inquiry into what will give no sort of help” (Learned Lady 156-7). Based on such an exchange, it is understandable why Browning felt so frustrated by the constant accusations of obscurity. He clearly did not feel that it was necessary for his readers to understand every single detail to follow the events in the poems. However, the fact that Browning sometimes feels even the title of the poem should be dismissed in the interpretation process creates a situation in which a reader has to constantly question how seriously they are supposed to take anything in the poetry. There does not appear to be any way of determining what allusions and other details are vital to understanding the personality of the dramatic speaker and what are simply Browning’s superfluous adornments.

Readers are left to wonder how seriously to take Browning’s claims, made all throughout his career, that his poetry was mostly dramatic when he composes on subjects with strong thematic allusions to his own life without an identifiably dramatic speaker to thoroughly separate himself from the topics. By not making use of one of his “fifty men and women,” he is, in a way, inviting readers to make assumptions while simultaneously dismissing them. This question was even more of an open matter for the Society in the 1880s. An 1885 article, titled, “Is Browning Dramatic?” on the poet’s monologues (Peterson 73), implies that the true nature of Browning’s dramatic monologues, a genre
he is largely credited with helping to establish, was still a matter of debate while members such as Dorothea Beale and Edward Berdoe based the Browning they held in such high esteem off of the man they saw in his poetry. Today, scholars largely take for granted the knowledge that Browning tended to prefer a dramatic style, and we can sometimes overlook the potentially sincere feelings that can be found within his verse. The fact that as a part of this thesis I felt the need to support my autobiographically inspired interpretations with facts about Browning’s life shows the contrast between modern Browning scholarship and that of the Browningites. Chapter Two alone demonstrates how judging the poet through his poetry was their commonly accepted *modus operandi*, which makes sense because without biographies and an already collected canon of academia, outside of the occasional interaction with him in person, his works were the only sources from which they could infer facts about him. Today, we can first glance at the footnotes of a critical edition or open a biography to learn the historical contexts of the poetry, which are both acts that strongly influence how we read them.

In conclusion, the poems of Robert Browning containing ambiguous levels of autobiographical information are important to study because even if they do not necessarily reveal to us completely authentic information about him, they do allow us to study how he approached themes that are considered important to him. They also help to determine the possible origins of some of the most commonly held beliefs about Browning in both the Browning Society of the 1880s and readers and scholars. As the Society members are viewed as having succeeded in many of their goals, it stands to reason that their opinions of Browning likely influenced how he was generally viewed by his new-found readers among the general population. While Browning wanted his works
to stand on their own, by creating poems such as the ones discussed in this chapter, his works have, in reality, most likely played a key role in the development of how his personal character is understood today.
Conclusion

From the beginning of my research, I have been interested in the fact that Robert Browning was not as highly respected as a poet during his lifetime as he currently is in the canon of English literature. The fact that Browning was underappreciated throughout his active career is as much a part of his reputation in modern academia as his high regard. When I discussed my project with a professor outside of my thesis committee, he even, unprompted, brought up Browning’s lack of popular success while he was alive. It is such an important part of Browning’s persona as a literary figure that I wanted to examine the origins of that notion. What I found was a complex portrait of a man’s career in which important aspects have been perpetuated, exaggerated, and even ignored to create the reputation of Robert Browning as we know it today. Actual nineteenth-century reviews reveal that the poet suffered from a lack of overwhelming praise and a few major criticisms from which he could never escape, but the viewpoint that he was completely ignored or even disliked by his contemporaries and the world is largely a product of Browning’s, and his most devoted fans’, overly personal discontent. Browning was not given the place of importance that he currently enjoys, but he was also not as looked down upon as the likes of Edward Berdoe, or even Browning’s personal letters, would have a modern day reader to believe. The poet and the Browningites were simply too close to the issue to give objective opinions on the matter.

The London Browning Society was another subject of interest that completely drew me in over the course of my studies. What started out as a potentially insightful digression became a source of fascinating study all on its own. The more that I read
about the Society, the more I came to realize how closely their group resembled the modern day fan communities that I had personally encountered. I decided to conduct an examination of the Society and the products of their “fan” devotion in order to understand why a poet such as Browning, who, in all fairness, truly did not command the sort of public adoration of the likes of Alfred Lord Tennyson, would be the first living poet to inspire the creation of a literary society. What I found was largely a group of individuals who were drawn to Browning for multiple reasons ranging from the opportunity to study a living poet or to spread the message of a great and overlooked teacher. However, the similarities among their papers that I was able to observe also present a group of people swept up in the excitement of being able to lay witness to an artist that they truly believed would one day be considered a master. I also found a group of literary scholars who tended to fall into the same traps lining the path of any community of devotees of any living subject. Ultimately, they play an important role in the history of Browning scholarship, but their relatively short existence and sometimes tense relationship with the general public and Browning himself show that they also suffered from the immediacy of their relationship with him.

In terms of Browning himself, I had originally planned to work with the poems I had considered my favorites at the beginning of my project. The dramatic monologues were what originally attracted me to Browning, but as I began to read through his works, I found myself more interested in the poems that could not easily be explained as dramatic characterizations or fictional stories. Poems such as “Prospice” and “Fears and Scruples” that seemed to relate closely to Browning’s life were the ones that I found inspiration in for further study. I wanted to know what these poems meant in relation to
his canon, and if they truly were reflections of his personal thoughts and feelings. What I have ultimately concluded is that being too concerned with the possibility that not every line of every poem is Browning’s genuine, autobiographical thought on an issue can get in the way of what else the poetry can show us. They have allowed me to explore the issue of authorial intent in relation to how poetry is perceived by readers, and I have discovered that I do not have to find Browning in his poetry in order for it to tell me about him as a person. I can learn just as much about him from what he does choose to present on each topic. For instance, I do not have to know for certain that Browning genuinely feels that God is a silent friend playing games with his faith in order to learn something about his feelings concerning religion in the poem “Fears and Scruples.” The fact that he even presents the possibility means that even if the thought is not a representation of his true beliefs, the very fact that he wrote a poem about it suggests that he has at least considered the possibility.

In the end, my thesis has come to feel more like a work-in-progress than a completed thought. For future research, I would especially like to expand my thoughts on the “fandom”-like qualities of the London Browning Society and provide more in-depth examples of those same characteristics in modern communities. I am also interested in exploring the implications that technology has on the issue of interaction among devotees, and how the advancements in communication technologies such as the Internet have created differences in the functions of fan communities now and in the nineteenth century. In relation to Browning’s poetry, I believe that a longer thesis would open up more room to explore issues of authorial intent and the role of the active reader. Browning’s own comments to his readers concerning the interpretation of his poetry
create confusing and somewhat contradictory instructions for the proper manner in which
to approach the works. At a later date, I would like to study the modern critical thoughts
on the importance of authorial intent in order to better determine how strongly a role
Browning should play in my examination of his poetry.
Bibliography


