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Title of the Thesis: ‘Reconstructing the Renaissance: A Critical Study of Robert Browning’s Dramatic Monologues’

ABSTRACT

Key words: Victorian poetry, dramatic monologues, Renaissance, history, art, religion

The thesis “Reconstructing the Renaissance: A Critical Study of Robert Browning’s Dramatic Monologues” offers a close critical study of “Andrea del Sarto”, “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Pictor Ignotus”, “The Bishop orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church”, “My Last Duchess” and “A Grammarian’s Funeral”. The thesis examines the conceptualisation of European Renaissance in the selected dramatic monologues by Robert Browning. The thesis comprises seven chapters including the Introduction and the conclusion. Taking into consideration the radical changes that characterize the European civilization, the thesis examines the factors that supposedly led to the gradual disintegration of the feudal system and Christendom—the two dominant institutions of medieval Europe. The rise of Protestantism threatened the integrity of the Roman Catholic Church and a growing urban class strengthened by ‘money economy’ assumed political and economic power in the society. Thus, the changes that took place in the modern age mark a shifting socio-economic basis. The thesis examines varied manifestations of the European Renaissance as reflected in the writings of Jacob Burckhardt, J.A.Symonds, Stephen Greenblatt, and Wallace Ferguson.

The thesis examines Robert Browning’s keen interest in history, from where he borrows themes like art and aesthetics, religion and morality, knowledge and life, marriage and domesticity, sexuality and love. The thesis establishes that his special interest in the Renaissance may be attributed to his stay in Italy and his association with Ruskin with whom the Brownings had begun a correspondence during 1850s and Ruskin gave regular critical responses to the poetry of both Elizabeth and Robert Browning. The study establishes that the Renaissance with its complex history of cultural transition from medieval scholasticism steeped in orthodox theology to liberal humanism marking the centrality of man and attendant variety and multiplicity offered Browning a broader canvas on which he could paint the figures of his choice.

The thesis establishes that Robert Browning critically engages with the issues involving art and aesthetics in some of his popular dramatic monologues. Browning was keenly interested in exploring the theme of an artist’s conformity to changing social and cultural

norms. His own liberal thinking and non conformist attitude had become a source of pain for his mother at an early stage in his life. Browning skilfully uses the conversational forms to highlight the modernity of his characters and thus relates them with the age they belong to. By choosing a historical character from the revival of learning, Browning brings up the issue of conformity to history and convention in the paradigm of art and knowledge. Instead of endorsing history, he presents a critique of a historical model, which was re-emerging in the nineteenth century. The thesis establishes that Browning shares Carlyle's idea of history as the revelation of absolute truth. Browning reconstructs history in his poetry to understand the condition of his own time and to find a direction for future.