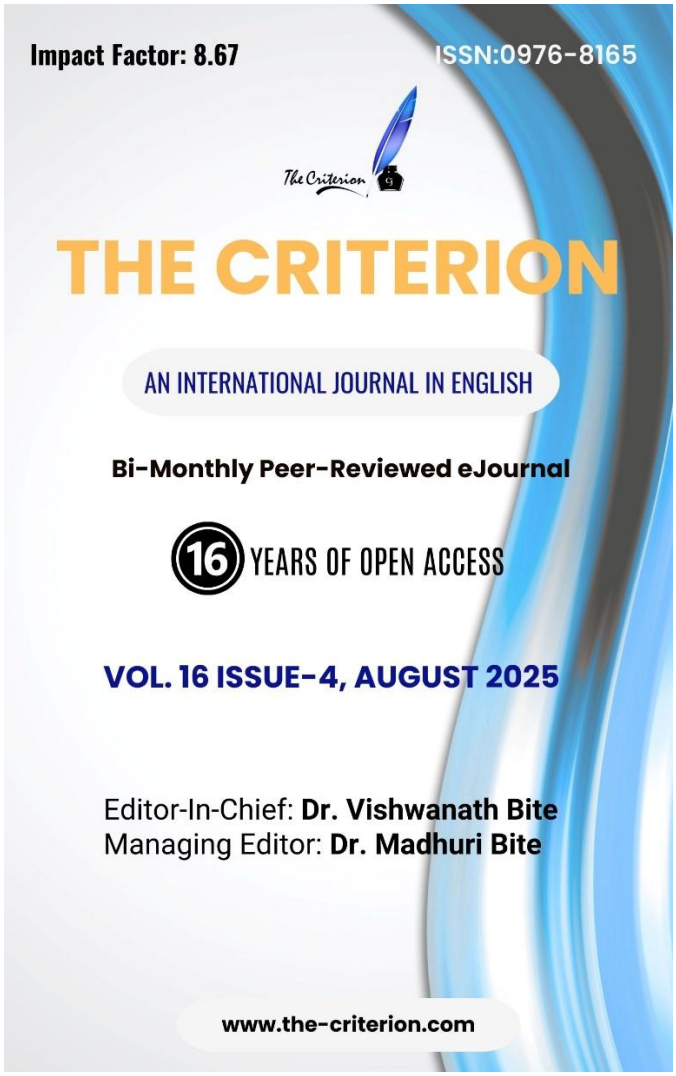


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# The Role of Art and Objectification in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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**Abstract:**

Robert Browning's dramatic monologue *"My Last Duchess"* (1842) presents a chilling portrait of patriarchal domination through the aestheticisation of female subjugation. This study employs feminist art criticism and historical contextual analysis to interrogate how Browning's Duke of Ferrara transforms his late wife into an object of artistic possession, thereby enacting posthumous control over her identity and narrative. The research investigates three key dimensions of objectification in the poem: (1) the material objectification of the Duchess through her reduction to a portrait, (2) the discursive objectification through the duke's manipulative narration, and (3) the institutional objectification within Renaissance aristocratic marriage customs. Drawing on John Berger's theories of the male gaze and Griselda Pollock's feminist art historiography, the analysis demonstrates how Browning critiques the intersection of aesthetic appreciation and gendered violence in nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. The paper further reveals how the poem's dramatic monologue form itself becomes complicit in the Duchess's silencing, as Browning crafts an ironic tension between the duke's self-revelation and his intended self-presentation. By situating the work within the tradition of ekphrastic poetry and Renaissance portraiture conventions, this study illuminates Browning's sophisticated commentary on how art functions simultaneously as a vehicle for

memorialization and as an instrument of patriarchal control. The findings suggest that *"My Last Duchess* offers a prescient critique of the gendered power dynamics inherent in both artistic representation and marital institutions that remains disturbingly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender and representation.

**Keywords: feminist art criticism, objectification, patriarchal power, ekphrasis, Renaissance portraiture, dramatic monologue, gendered violence, Victorian poetry.**

**Introduction:**

Robert Browning's *"My Last Duchess"* (1842) stands as one of the most psychologically complex and thematically rich poems of the Victorian era, offering a disturbing glimpse into the intersections of art, power, and gendered violence. Written in the form of a dramatic monologue, the poem presents the Duke of Ferrara as he guides an envoy through his private art collection, pausing to reflect on a portrait of his late wife. What begins as an apparent appreciation of Renaissance artistry gradually reveals itself as a confession of possessive jealousy and murderous intent. The duke's chilling revelation— *"I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together"* (Browning 45-46)—transforms the poem from an aesthetic meditation into a psychological case study of patriarchal domination. This paper argues that Browning uses the conventions of ekphrastic poetry (the literary description of visual art) to expose how art becomes complicit in the objectification and silencing of women within oppressive power structures.

The poem's enduring significance lies in its prescient critique of the male gaze—a concept later theorised by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which asserts that *"men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at"* (Berger 47). The duke's obsessive control over his wife's portrait literalizes this dynamic, reducing the Duchess to a static image that he can regulate and display at will. Unlike the living woman, whose kindness and warmth


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threatened his authority (*"She had / A heart—how shall I say? —too soon made glad"* [21-22]), the painted version exists solely for his possession. Browning's choice to frame the narrative through the duke's perspective forces readers into the uncomfortable position of deciphering the Duchess's fate through the distortions of her husband's rhetoric. In doing so, the poem becomes not just a character study of a tyrannical aristocrat but a broader indictment of how patriarchal societies aestheticise female subjugation.

This analysis builds upon three critical frameworks: feminist art criticism, historical materialism, and psychoanalytic theory. First, following scholars like Griselda Pollock and Laura Mulvey, I examine how the portrait functions as a site of gendered violence, where the Duchess's identity is overwritten by male authorship (Pollock 120). Second, I situate the poem within the historical context of Renaissance Italy, where aristocratic marriages were political transactions and women's portraits served as symbols of dynastic power (Jardine 78). Finally, through a psychoanalytic lens, I explore how the duke's narcissism manifests in his need to control both his wife's image and her narrative—a phenomenon that Freud would later term the *"fetishistic scopophilia"* of patriarchal domination (Freud 154).

By synthesising these approaches, this paper makes two key contributions to Browning scholarship. First, it reveals how *"My Last Duchess"* anticipates modern feminist critiques of representation, particularly in its exposure of how aesthetic appreciation can mask underlying violence. Second, it demonstrates how Browning's dramatic monologue form itself reinforces the poem's themes: just as the duke curates his wife's image, Browning carefully constructs the duke's speech to betray more than he intends. The irony of the poem lies in the gap between the duke's polished aristocratic demeanour and the horrifying subtext of his words—a gap that invites readers to question not only his character but the social structures that enable such tyranny.


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Ultimately, *"My Last Duchess"* remains urgently relevant in contemporary discourse about gender, representation, and power. From the manipulation of women's images in digital media to the ongoing debates about agency in marital relationships, Browning's poem forces us to confront how easily admiration can tip into objectification, and how often control masquerades as care. As this paper will show, the Duchess's silent portrait continues to speak volumes about the dangers of being framed by another's gaze.

**Art as a Means of Possession: The Duke's Aesthetic Domination in "My Last Duchess"**

The Duke of Ferrara's relationship with the portrait of his late Duchess epitomises the intersection of art, power, and gendered possession in Browning's poem. His proud declaration—*"That is my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive"* (Browning 1-2)—reveals more than mere appreciation for Renaissance artistry; it exposes a pathological need to assert ownership over his wife even in death. The possessive pronoun *"my"* echoes throughout his monologue, linguistically reinforcing what Marxist critic Louis Althusser would term *"interpellation"*—the process by which ideology constitutes subjects through language (Althusser 118). By repeatedly framing the Duchess as his property (*"my last Duchess" "my gift"* [34]), the duke demonstrates how aesthetic representation becomes a tool for patriarchal control, transforming a once-living woman into a curated object in his collection of valuables.

The portrait's creation story further illuminates this dynamic of possession. The duke's deliberate mention of *"Fra Pandolf"* (6)—the fictional artist he commissioned—serves multiple manipulative purposes. First, it flaunts his wealth and cultural capital, as only the elite could afford master painters. Second, as art historian Joanna Woods-Marsden notes, Renaissance portraits of noblewomen were *"less about capturing likeness than about displaying the patron's status"* (Woods-Marsden 92). Most revealingly, the Duke implies he


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supervised the sittings (*"since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I"* [9-10]), suggesting he controlled not just the final artwork but the very process of its creation. This mirrors Michel Foucault's concept of *"biopower"*—the regulation of bodies through institutional practices (Foucault 140)—as the duke extends his domination from the Duchess's behaviour to her very image.

Browning contrasts the portrait's frozen perfection with the Duchess's unacceptable liveliness. Where the painting shows *"the depth and passion of its earnest glance"* (8), the living woman was *"too easily impressed"* (23) by nature's beauty or common courtesy. The Duke's complaint that *"she liked whate'er / She looked on"* (23-24) reveals his intolerance for her autonomous gaze. As feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey observes, patriarchal culture demands that *"women be the bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning"* (Mulvey 19). The portrait thus becomes the Duke's corrective—a version of the Duchess where her roving eyes are fixed permanently on him, her joy fossilised into decorum.

The physical staging of the portrait underscores its role as a trophy. Hidden behind a curtain accessible only to the Duke (*"none puts by / The curtain...but I"*), the painting becomes part of what critic Susan Stewart calls *"the collection"—a* bourgeois practice where objects are *"lifted from their original contexts to signify the owner's power"* (Stewart 152). This performative display reaches its apex when the Duke transitions seamlessly from discussing his murdered wife to showcasing his bronze sculpture of *"Neptune... / Taming a sea-horse"* (54-55). The juxtaposition is deliberate: both artworks depict domination, with the sea-horse's taming mirroring the Duchess's subjugation. Here, Browning exposes how Renaissance art's celebration of mastery—over nature, over bronze, over women—served aristocratic ideologies of control.


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Modern parallels abound in how the Duke's behaviour prefigures contemporary *"image-based abuse,"* where controlling partners use photographs or videos as instruments of coercion (Henry and Powell 462). The Duchess's portrait, though beautifully rendered, functions similarly—a permanent record through which the Duke continues to punish her posthumously for failing to meet his demands. This transforms the painting from a memorial into what philosopher Judith Butler terms *"a site of grievability"*—a space where we witness *"whose lives count as lives"* (Butler 20). The tragedy of *"My Last Duchess"* lies in how the artwork, rather than honouring

**The Duchess's Erasure and the Power of Silence: Textual and Visual Absence in Browning's Dramatic Monologue**

The most devastating act of violence in *"My Last Duchess"* is not the implied murder, but the systematic erasure of the Duchess's voice, agency, and ultimately, her humanity. Browning constructs the poem as a palimpsest of silencing—where the Duke's garrulous monologue overwrites the Duchess's story, reducing her to an aesthetic object whose only permitted speech is the silent eloquence of her portrait. This section analyses three dimensions of her erasure: (1) linguistic absence in the poem's structure, (2) the paradox of the portrait's visual presence as actual effacement, and (3) Renaissance cultural practices that enabled such textual violence against women's narratives.

**1. The Structural Silencing: A Dramatic Monologue Without Dialogue**

The poem's form enacts the Duchess's voicelessness. As a dramatic monologue, it features only the duke's voice—a formal choice that replicates the social reality of Renaissance noblewomen who, as historian Margaret King notes, were *"educated into silence, their letters often dictated to secretaries"* (King 73). The Duchess's hypothetical speech is either ventriloquized ("*She had / A heart—how shall I say? —too soon made glad"* [21-22]) or


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suppressed entirely. Even her alleged faults are reported through the Duke's distorting lens: her kindness becomes *"trifling"* (35), her egalitarian warmth *"a disgrace"* (43). Feminist narratologist Susan Lanser argues that such *"narrative appropriation"* constitutes *"symbolic violence"* by denying women *"the right to narrative property"* (Lanser 121). The poem's very structure thus becomes a prison, with Browning's genius lying in making readers feel the weight of the Duchess's absence through the Duke's oppressive presence.

**2. The Portrait's False Presence: Visual Representation as Epitaph**

The portrait—ostensibly preserving the Duchess—actually completes her erasure. Art historian Nanette Salomon's studies of Renaissance female portraiture reveal how *"the more 'lifelike' the depiction, the more it replaced and confined the actual woman"* (Salomon 58). The Duke's pride in how the painting *"looks as if she were alive"* (2) is deeply ironic: this simulacrum of life marks the cessation of her real existence. The curtain he draws (*"none puts by / The curtain...but I"* [9-10]) literalizes what theorist Michel de Certeau calls *"the veil of representation"*—where the act of display simultaneously conceals (de Certeau 131). Unlike Shakespeare's Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, whose statue breathes back to life, the Duchess remains perpetually frozen, her smile now just *"paint / On the wall"* (15-16), a decorative flourish in the Duke's gallery of conquests.

**3. Historical Context: The Archive of Female Silence**

The poem's 16th-century Ferrara setting reflects real practices of female erasure. When the Duke mentions *"the dowry"* (51) while gesturing toward his next bride, he invokes the legal instrument that, as legal historian Thomas Kuehn demonstrates, *"transformed women into silent financial instruments between men"* (Kuehn 112). The actual historical Lucrezia de' Medici (the likely inspiration) died at 17 under suspicious circumstances, her brief life recorded only in a handful of perfunctory letters. Browning's contemporary Elizabeth Barrett (his future


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wife) confronted similar silencing—her *"Sonnets from the Portuguese"* were nearly withheld from publication as too revealing. The Duchess thus joins what scholar Margaret Homans terms *"the absent mother tradition"* in Western literature, where women *"exist only as gaps in male discourse"* (Homans 12).

**The Reader as Witness: Resisting Erasure**

Browning's subversive brilliance lies in making the reader complicit in—then revolted by—this erasure. We initially admire the portrait's artistry before realising we are admiring a relic of murder. Like the envoy addressed in the poem, we are made to stand *"looking at her"* (5) until our gaze becomes uncomfortable. Modern theorists of witnessing (Felman and Laub 80) would classify this as *"secondary trauma"*—the horror of reconstructing violence from its traces. The poem's final irony is that the Duchess, though silenced, continuese to haunt the Duke's speech. Her *"spot of joy"* (14) lingers in the paint, her erased presence screaming through his smug narration. In this way, Browning transforms aesthetic appreciation into an ethical confrontation, forcing us to see—in the portrait's *"earnest glance"* (8)—not a masterpiece, but a mugshot of patriarchy's crimes.

**Historical Context: Art and Power in the Renaissance – The Political Aesthetics of Domination**

Browning's *"My Last Duchess"* is deeply embedded in the cultural practices of Renaissance Italy, where art functioned as both political propaganda and a currency of power among rival city-states. The poem's fictional Duke of Ferrara embodies the realpolitik of 16th-century Italian courts, where, as historian Jacob Burckhardt observed, *"the state became a work of art"* (Burckhardt 98) Rulers cultivated artistic patronage as demonstrations of their magnificenza. This section examines three critical intersections of art and power: (1) the


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strategic use of portraiture in dynastic politics, (2) the collector-prince phenomenon, and (3) the gendered economics of Renaissance marriage markets.

**1. Portraiture as Political Currency**

The Duchess's portrait would have served specific diplomatic functions in Renaissance courts. As art historian Patricia Simons demonstrates, noblewomen's portraits were *"traded visual commodities"* in marriage negotiations, with their likenesses sent ahead *"like promissory notes against their reproductive futures"* (Simons 45). The famous 1538 portrait of Christina of Denmark, painted for Henry VIII's matrimonial consideration, exemplifies this practice. Browning's Duke continues this tradition of display, but with a sinister twist: where Christina's portrait was a prelude to marriage, the Duchess's becomes a posthumous warning. The painting's placement in his *"private gallery"* (Browning 10) aligns with what Stephen Campbell terms *"the privatisation of power"* in Ferrara under Alfonso I d'Este, who *"transformed his Camerino into theatres of control"* (Campbell 112).

**2. The Collector-Prince and Violent Aesthetics**

The Duke's art collection reflects the Renaissance practice of *"virtuous violence"*—where conquests in war and art were morally equivalent. His casual transition from discussing the Duchess to pointing out *"Neptune.../ Taming a sea-horse"* (54-55) mirrors actual collections like Isabella d'Este's studiolo, where classical bronzes of subdued figures proclaimed dominion. As literary critic Richard Helgerson notes, *"the Renaissance gallery was a microcosm of the ruler's ability to subdue nature, art, and people"* (Helgerson 78). The bronze's subject is particularly revealing: Neptune's mythic rape of the sea nymph Thetis parallels the Duke's spousal violence, suggesting Browning critiques what Walter Benjamin would later call *"aestheticization of politics"*—using art to ennoble brutality.


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### 3. The Marriage Market and Female Erasure

The poem's historical basis—likely Alfonso II d'Este, whose wife Lucrezia de' Medici died suspiciously in 1561—exposes Renaissance marriage's economic realities. Ferrara's precarious position between Venice and the Papal States made dynastic unions vital. As archival work by Trevor Dean shows, the Este family contracts stipulated that *"wives failing to produce heirs within two years could be returned with penalties"* (Dean 134). The Duke's offhand mention of *"the dowry"* (51) underscores this transactional reality. Browning, writing during the Victorian era's own debates about married women's property rights, layers contemporary feminist concerns onto this historical framework—what historian Joan Kelly famously asked: *"Did women have a Renaissance?"* (Kelly 19). The answer in Browning's poem is a resounding no.

### Browning's Contemporary Parallels: Victorian Art and Power

The poem's 1842 publication coincided with London's National Gallery founding (1824) and debates about art's moral purpose. As critic Carol Christ notes, Browning *"transposed Victorian anxieties about industrialization's objectification of people onto Renaissance courts"* (Christ 63). The Duke's gallery anticipates what John Ruskin would later condemn as *"the dehumanising collections of the nouveaux riches"* (Ruskin 7:228). Even the poem's meter—iambic pentameter mimicking Renaissance sprezzatura—becomes ironic, its elegant form contrasting with the brutal content, much like the Duke's *"civilised"* veneer masks his barbarism.

### Conclusion:

Robert Browning's *"My Last Duchess"* stands as a timeless indictment of the intersection between aesthetic appreciation and gendered violence, demonstrating how art can serve as both an instrument of oppression and an unexpected witness to crimes of power. The


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poem's Renaissance setting and Victorian creation speak across centuries to contemporary concerns about representation, autonomy, and the politics of display. Through our examination of the Duke's toxic connoisseurship, the Duchess's systematic erasure, and the historical realities of aristocratic marriage markets, we uncover Browning's radical achievement: the transformation of a seemingly polished dramatic monologue into what modern theorists would recognise as a forensic document of patriarchal violence.

The poem's continuing relevance becomes painfully clear when viewed through contemporary lenses. The Duke's control of his wife's image anticipates today's digital abuses, where "deepfake" pornography and non-consensual image sharing extend his curtain-drawing possessiveness into the digital age (Citron 158). His casual conflation of woman and artwork ("*That is my last Duchess*") mirrors modern advertising's reduction of female bodies to decorative objects. Even the Victorian-era debate about art's moral purpose, which Browning engages through his Renaissance setting, continues in current controversies over museum collections built on colonial exploitation or patriarchal privilege.

However, Nevertheless, Browning offers more than just critique; his formal genius provides a model for resistance. The dramatic monologue's inherent irony—where the duke's words condemn him despite his intentions—creates what critic Isobel Armstrong calls "a double poem" (Armstrong 13), simultaneously presenting and undermining patriarchal discourse. The Duchess's silent portrait, meant to confirm her erasure, instead becomes what contemporary artist Jenny Holzer might term a "truism"—the artwork's very perfection testifying to the crime behind its creation. In this way, Browning empowers readers to become what Dora Thornton describes as "subversive spectators" (Thornton 210), trained to detect the violence beneath beautiful surfaces.


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The ultimate tragedy and triumph of *"My Last Duchess"* lies in its paradoxical legacy. While the poem documents the historical silencing of women like Lucrezia de' Medici, its cultural endurance has made the Duchess paradoxically present—her story retold in countless classrooms, adaptations, and critical studies. This afterlife constitutes what literary scholar Margaret Russett calls "unquiet slumbers" (Russett 45), where ostensibly silenced voices continue to resonate. As we confront ongoing battles over reproductive rights, marital autonomy, and representational justice, Browning's poem reminds us that the gallery of history contains many such curtained portraits—and that our ethical obligation is to draw back those curtains, no matter how beautiful the drapery.

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