



# CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Civale, S. (2018) Women's life writing and reputation: a case study of Mary Darby Robinson. *Romanticism*, 24 (2). pp. 191-202. ISSN 1354-991X.

Link to official URL (if available):

<https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2018.0372>

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: [create.library@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:create.library@canterbury.ac.uk)



**Key Words: Mary Darby Robinson, life writing, reputation, literary afterlife, Romanticism, women writers**

Women's Life Writing and Reputation: A Case Study of Mary Darby Robinson

### **Introduction**

In 1780, the stunning actress and poet Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800) sparked a media frenzy known as the 'Perdita' affair when she began a high-profile affair with the teenaged Prince of Wales, later King George IV. Robinson spent the bulk of her adult life transforming her public position from sex object to writing subject. Wielding an impressive range of authorial personae in her novels, poems, and periodical pieces, Robinson secured a living and a place of prominence in contemporary literary culture. Her *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself* (1801), edited by her daughter Maria Elizabeth and published the year after her death, has been read as an 'Apology' for her life and a vindication of her character. In this tale of transgression and suffering Robinson establishes herself as a gothic heroine of sensibility and a victim of circumstance.

Yet the jarring shifts in tone, conspicuous gaps in the narration of events, and structural inconsistencies of the *Memoirs* caused contemporary readers to question its veracity, and have led modern scholars to regard it as a final but flawed attempt to rescue a tarnished name. The narrative swings from the plaintive strains of the long-suffering heroine, to the 'electricity' and excitement of the aspiring actress, to the minute observations of 'dress, parties, adulation' in pleasure gardens, in tea-rooms, and dinner parties.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Robinson seems to narrate events selectively,

leaving out large portions of her life (such as her 16-year post-Prince relationship with Banastre Tarleton which is relegated to a footnote), and breaking off completely at the most infamous moment: her decision to join the Prince of Wales in his private apartments. The narration, when it resumes, switches to a 'Continuation by a Friend', a third-person account that gives way a few pages later to a letter supposedly written by Robinson in 1783 and 'found' by her editor, which conveniently begins where the preceding section finishes.

These inconsistencies threaten the coherent narrative of a unitary self that is the prevailing gold standard of autobiography.<sup>2</sup> Many modern critics have thus treated the gaps and contradictions in Robinson's *Memoirs* as flaws that 'undermin[e] her authorizing claims to romantic artlessness'.<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Ty has explicitly discussed the omissions in the narrative as censorship (enacted by both Robinson and her daughter Maria Elizabeth), and therefore as evidence of her 'problems establishing and maintaining herself', her 'struggle with her subjectivity', and her difficulty assuming 'a position outside of these preconceived notions of what a woman should be'.<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Wanko likewise deems Robinson's disruption of the text at its critical moment of sexual transgression the result of the 'shame of admitting this dalliance publicly' and her 'inability to sustain her textual role of misguided youth and ignorance'.<sup>5</sup> Even Hester Davenport, whose analysis of the *Memoirs* manuscript indicates that Robinson most likely did *not* abandon her narrative at its climax but introduced the 'Continuation' and subsequent letter as distancing strategies, maintains that Robinson 'seems a little confused about her objectives in the *Memoirs*'.<sup>6</sup> For Davenport, the lacunae, fluctuations in tone, and 'pretence' of the fragmented narrative leave us with two irreconcilable personalities: 'the gay and the grave, the confident socialite and the sensitive melancholic'.<sup>7</sup>

However, a closer look at the *Memoirs* suggests that its textual and linguistic gaps may comprise part of a nuanced strategy of self-presentation. Throughout the narrative, moments of emotional intensity are described paradoxically as 'undescrivable' (95) or are visually disrupted through structural breaks in the text. In repeatedly and overtly signposting these gaps, Robinson tells us that she is not telling us everything. This complex and seemingly contradictory mode of self-expression enables her to balance opposing elements of her character, maintaining the virtue, authenticity, and feminine decorum commensurate with a heroine of sensibility, and the suggestive allure of a practiced actress.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, despite the continuing doubts about its reliability, Robinson's *Memoirs* enjoyed a robust afterlife. It was reprinted ten times in the nineteenth century alone, spurring reviews, essays, spin-off novels, illustrations, poems, mini-biographies, entries in multibiographies, and citations in the life writing of other key figures, most notably that of King George IV himself. Long after her poetry and fiction had fallen out of print, Robinson's *Memoirs* continued to interest, perplex, and charm readers. This essay explores the inconsistencies in the *Memoirs* not as failures but as innovations, before turning to several nineteenth-century texts that illustrate their influence. Though this nineteenth-century material is disparate in form and in tone, it deserves attention for what it reveals about Robinson's posthumous reputation and the influence of her *Memoirs* in moulding it. Robinson could never obliterate the scandal of her early days, but she was able to reshape reactions to it, and to secure for herself a position as the main architect of her own celebrity afterlife. This essay thus also showcases an approach that extends the 'edges' of our scholarship past traditional period and genre boundaries, to rethink the relationship between literary value, self-fashioning, and textual afterlives in the long nineteenth century.

### Reading the Gaps in Robinson's *Memoirs*

Throughout the *Memoirs*, Robinson refers to her most profound feelings as 'undescrivable' (95) or 'beyond the power of utterance' (97). In more than twenty such affective peaks, Robinson not only indicates an inability—or an unwillingness—to reveal herself completely, but actually goes out of her way to draw attention to these breaches in the narrative. These self-professed silences fall into different categories. Sometimes they signal a linguistic incapacity that results from feelings that overwhelm language. At others, they bespeak a refusal (rather than a lack of ability) to describe her feelings, leaving implicit a range of 'unacceptable' sentiments that must be conveyed obliquely to the reader because direct communication is textually or morally inappropriate. At other times still, they are visible breaks in the narration that enact silence through the absence of verbal text. Announcing her silences has complex, and sometimes contradictory, effects. It makes her appear both moving and thrilling, and allows a sympathetic feminine authenticity to coexist with an intriguing allure.

In the climactic episodes of the *Memoirs*, those detailing her royal affair and its breakup, Robinson utilises these self-professed silences strategically. The narration of the liaison is fragmented, appearing in three sections of the *Memoirs*: the 'Narrative', the 'Continuation', and the 'letter' supposedly written in 1783. The 'Narrative' closes with their epistolary courtship, the Prince's proposal to meet in person, and Robinson's apprehensions. In the 'Continuation', the 'Friend' retraces these fears, elaborating on Robinson's internal 'conflicts' and 'passions' (109) before explaining the arrangements for her upcoming 'interview' (110) with the royal suitor.

The 1783 letter begins with this 'interview', and goes on to tell of their subsequent relationship, its termination, and the emotional aftermath. The 'Friend' then resumes again, lingering over Robinson's sorrow before summarising the events from 1781 until her death in 1800. The stop-start structure, with its textual breaks and shifts in narration, and the overlapping events of the 'Narrative', 'Continuation', and letter, makes this sequence feel disjointed. This feeling of unevenness is exacerbated by the disproportionate distribution of detail which focuses on Robinson's turbulent emotions—her reservations and regrets in particular—at the expense of her more positive feelings in the company of the Prince. As a result, the sexual frisson is often elided, and any enjoyment Robinson found in the year-long affair is compressed. The architecture of the narrative thus foregrounds emotional over sexual experience, and stresses pain over pleasure. These emphases of course accord well with burgeoning Romantic values that 'prize emotional over the rational, finding heroes and heroines [...] in the members of the social body who suffer most'.<sup>9</sup> Though the narrative is, broadly speaking, chronological and coherent (especially if we accept the conceit of the recovered letter), these qualities are masked by a structure which gives the impression of a patchwork of 'found' texts.

During this section, Robinson accentuates the heartbreak and disillusionment that she experiences when the Prince leaves her. As several critics have noted, Robinson rewrites her transgressive relations with the Prince of Wales as a story of 'star-crossed lovers' so as to make herself more sympathetic.<sup>10</sup> By presenting herself as a victim of a doomed attachment, Robinson can continue in the role of the English Sappho, one of her most powerful poetic personae.<sup>11</sup> In this painful episode, Robinson appears 'amazed, afflicted, *beyond the power of utterance*' (115, my italics), and she states: 'My agonies were now *undescribable*' (116, my italics). Soon

after, Robinson's 1783 letter ends and the narration is resumed, for the second time, by the 'Friend.' First linguistically, and then textually, Robinson asserts that she cannot or will not express fully the 'agonies' of her heart. In fact Robinson has already described her 'foreboding' (116), 'dreadful' situation (118), 'distress' (119), 'complete despair' (119), and 'oppression' (119). However, many other emotions do not appear: anger at the men in her life, outrage at society for offering her limited opportunities to support herself, humiliation at being jilted publicly, frustration, resentment, hatred. By alluding to these unspeakable emotions as 'undescribable' (116), Robinson leaves the reader to imagine this emotional prism.

This strategy enables Robinson to strengthen the affective bond with the reader. As Jonathan Lamb has argued, 'it is not through our senses that sympathy works, but through the imagination'.<sup>12</sup> Robinson's decision to curtail description, and to signal this so explicitly, forces us to undergo this imaginative process of engagement. The ruptures and shifts in the narrative frustrate our expectations of the memoir form, which may be doubly effective in adding an element of surprise. Lamb suggests that surprise heightens the 'passionate spontaneity of sympathy' and that 'sympathy thrives in situations of comparative powerlessness in which the function and tendency of social roles is no longer directly apparent'.<sup>13</sup> Here the memoirist ceases disclosure and seems to disappear from the text entirely, inviting the reader, perhaps, to fill in the 'undescribable' gaps.

Robinson, then, is not, as Anne Mellor explains, a 'tortured heroine of suffering who *speaks* to a sympathetic listener',<sup>14</sup> but a heroine who suggests, implies, or gestures, leaving this 'listener' to infer the rest. Robinson's strategy of self-representation follows partial confession with concealment in order to win compassion. The combination of revelation and refusal, what the German

sociologist Georg Simmel terms 'semi-concealment', has been linked by Gill Perry to the complicated relationship of the eighteenth-century actress and her audiences, both on and off stage.<sup>15</sup> Semi-concealment involves presentation and disguise in such a sequence that the whole is visualised more readily. It necessarily includes 'ornamentation' for in concealing that which is decorated, we highlight it. According to Dawn Vernooy-Epp, Joanna Baillie's 1798 treatise on drama likewise theorises that 'the most powerful moments in theatre, moments of the greatest empathetic connection between audience and characters, are those that reveal intentionally concealed passion'.<sup>16</sup> The references to 'undescribable' emotion may function in the *Memoirs* as a kind of verbal 'ornamentation' akin to the hand gesture, facial expression, or bodily movement of an actor on stage. In these moments, Robinson adapts theatrical modes into a verbal refrain that can similarly 'reveal intentionally concealed passion' and thus connect with readers emotionally. Robinson does not so much censor her negative emotions as find innovative ways of expressing them.

In addition, Robinson's use of self-professed silences or 'semi-concealment' also operates at a structural level. The start of her notorious liaison with the Prince of Wales marks one of the most salient structural anomalies of the *Memoirs*, coinciding with the first textual break (discussed above). At this emotionally and sexually charged moment, Robinson's narration ceases, and language is replaced by a series of 23 asterisks spread over three lines. A brief note follows: '*The Narrative of Mrs Robinson closes here*' (107). On the next page begins the 'Continuation By a Friend', a third-person editor who transitions into more general reflections. However, the abrupt termination of the narrative and the circumlocutions of the 'Friend' are not so much hidden as highlighted by the insertion of the asterisks.

Though often ignored or dismissed as an ‘accidental’, the use of this typographical feature is most likely *not* an accident, but a graphic innovation borrowed from eighteenth-century fiction. Writers such as Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, and Samuel Richardson experimented with ‘printer’s ornaments’, visual markers such as flowers, dots, dashes, and asterisks, which can stand in for or supplement verbal text. The asterisk, in particular, is used by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) to replace lewd content. At the same time that Sterne appears to censor out the immodest, however, he in fact not only draws attention to it, but implicates the reader in doing so, for the reader has to fill in the gaps.<sup>17</sup>

It is often assumed that women did not engage in this kind of typographical play because, unlike their male counterparts, they often used intermediaries, and did not have the same direct access to the printing house or contact with the booksellers.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Robinson, her *Memoirs* was published posthumously, so she could not have wielded the direct control enjoyed by Swift, Sterne or Richardson. Still, Robinson’s first publisher, John Bell, was a pioneer in book design, known for his lavish publications and for attempting to capture the sensuous aspects of Robinson’s verse through unique printing features such as indentations, italics, and small capitals.<sup>19</sup> Robinson’s work for Daniel Stuart’s *Morning Post* would also have given her knowledge of newspaper layout and its varied typographical effects. Robinson had employed Hookham and Carpenter earlier in her career and therefore would have had direct input on the printing of her fourth novel *Hubert de Sevrac* (1797).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, according to Cheryl Wanko, it was not uncommon for thespian life writing to draw inspiration from the ‘unusual narrative experiments of the day—mimicking *Tristram Shandy* or Fielding’s narratives’.<sup>21</sup> Robinson may have indicated to her daughter how she wanted the *Memoirs* to appear.<sup>22</sup> Of course there is no

evidence for this, but in any case the *outcome* is certain. The use of printer's ornaments in Robinson's *Memoirs* shows that life writing could import graphic techniques from fiction to contribute to the construction of sympathetic *and* sexually transgressive heroine-protagonists.

Like the 'undescribable' moments in the *Memoirs*, the asterisks function as another type of 'semi-concealment', one that is textual rather than verbal. The asterisks shield the action from view even though writer and reader know exactly what action is taking place. Christopher Flint has discussed similar 'typographical effects' in Sterne's fiction: 'these little textual moments paradoxically enjoin [...] active participation [...] at the same time that they bar the reader from fully reading the text' and therefore push us into 'a double posture' whereby we both inhabit and yet remain distant from the narrated events.<sup>23</sup> Flint stresses the self-consciousness and the playfulness of these moments. The asterisks in Robinson's *Memoirs* have the similarly paradoxical effect of heightening not only what they purportedly conceal but also the pretence of the concealment itself. This coy double-dealing involves the seductive contradiction between revelation and disguise so common to eighteenth-century theatrical roles and costumes.<sup>24</sup> Robinson seems practically to be winking at the reader even as she draws the curtain on her own narration.

The break in the narrative, and the asterisks which adorn it, may therefore support a delicate balancing act that could not be managed with words alone. With her insightful emphasis on 'reading the visual in narrative and the narrative in visual', Laura Engel has explained how Robinson's use of clothing and Gothic tropes enables her

to foreground the seductive desirable qualities of her persona and to subsequently disappear when those qualities signify the possibility of immorality [...] by highlighting and obscuring her “real” body [...] Robinson creates her own celebrity allure. (23)

The use of printer’s ornaments may contribute to Robinson’s ‘celebrity allure’ in a similarly ‘visual’ way. As James Treadwell has suggested, ‘neither pleasure nor instruction can be derived, apparently, from an autobiographical practice which is openly, confessedly immoral’.<sup>25</sup> Yet part of Robinson’s appeal lies in her sexual transgressions, and she is aware of the insatiable public appetite for revelations about actress’s private lives.<sup>26</sup> The break in the narrative wordlessly announces *and* undermines a suppression of salacious content. Robinson seems to employ structural and discursive features to strike a balance between seductiveness and sentimentality, and to reveal herself whilst maintaining the privacy and mystery so important to the cultivation of enduring interest. This balancing act may seem precarious or ungainly to modern scholars but it resonated with nineteenth century readers.

### **Satire and Sympathy**

The anonymous novel, *The Royal Legend: A Tale* (1808), one of several nineteenth-century fictionalisations of Robinson’s royal affair, shows how some of these opposing qualities were read and replayed. This novel parodies the *Memoirs* by rewriting the love affair of ‘Perdita’ and the Prince as a pseudo-gothic romance. In *The Royal Legend*, Robinson’s use of asterisks is repeated to maximum satirical effect. Just as in the *Memoirs*, here too asterisks replace language at the moment of Perdita’s sexual fall: her decision to join the Prince in his chamber. However,

instead of 30 asterisks, there are almost 100.<sup>27</sup> The novel's exaggerated replication of the asterisks makes light of Robinson's hypocrisy and pretended modesty, and suggests that the breaks in her narrative are nothing more than the bald tricks of a courtesan attempting to shore up respectability when her life merits anything but.

The critique continues, inverting the roles so that a few pages later we see the Prince nervously approaching Perdita's apartment. At this crucial moment, again, appear another 50 asterisks interrupted by an editorial note claiming that many pages were destroyed and a truism about 'conscience' as the voice of the soul, and passion as 'the voice of the body' (73). The Prince is then lost in the 'delirium' of possessing his lovely but 'wily mistress' (75). Robinson is portrayed as a selfish and calculating seductress who ensnares the Prince to secure wealth, status, and splendour. The novel contradicts her self-portrait as a love-struck innocent, replacing it with a cynical reading of Robinson as affected and mercenary.

The novel continues this burlesque of the *Memoirs* through its appraisal of the Prince, who is shown, initially, to be as immoral as his innamorata. In the novel, from his very first encounter with Perdita, the narrator informs us that the Prince's imagination has already started to 'trample on the laws of honour and virtue, mark her for his prey, and fix on her, though a wife and a mother, as the object of satiating his dawning unruly passions' (42). Yet despite undermining Robinson's account of the Prince, the novel copies her *Memoirs* verbatim, recounting his 'attentive' ways, 'the graces of his person, the irresistible sweetness of his smile, the tender tones of his melodious yet manly voice' (71).<sup>28</sup> The novel interrogates this whitewashed portrait of the Prince, detailing his selfish motives and vicious ways, and gesturing towards the ways in which Robinson mistook, or more likely, misrepresented him in her narrative. Though these critiques of Robinson and the Prince are nothing new,

the form (replaying the asterisks used by Robinson) and the language (also copied from Robinson) are. The incorporation of Robinson's techniques—even if used against her—nonetheless reveals how pervasively her *Memoirs* affects her posthumous portrayal, even by her detractors.

Moreover, the *Royal Legend* bears even more profound resemblances to the *Memoirs*. In the novel, the Perdita story makes up just one of several episodes which eventually lead the Prince toward redemption, as he finally learns from his mistakes and develops into a worthy heir to the throne. Kristin Samuelian suggests:

*The Royal Legend* is cathartic and exculpatory. When his life story is retold via a recovered text, the Prince is already halfway to reformation [...] *The Royal Legend* mixes its political satire with other modes, not puffery or pornography this time but gothic and sentimental romance.<sup>29</sup>

As a conversion narrative with a sentimental hero, then, *The Royal Legend* is a direct descendent of Robinson's own *Memoirs*. Late in *The Royal Legend*, as compassion and self-realisation dawn on the Prince, he muses wistfully that 'if he were a father, if he had been united to a woman of worth and virtue [...] how happy he would have been!—how he would have cherished her and his dear babe!' (186). The cast of his reflections recalls Robinson's: 'how would my soul have idolized such a *husband!* Alas! how often, [...] have I formed the wish that being were *mine alone!*' (112). Just as the anonymous author of *The Royal Legend* exploits Robinson's typography for its comic potential, he or she also appropriates the character arc of the sentimental hero(ine) for its affective impact. If Robinson's transgressions can be mitigated by her suffering and repentance, so too can the

Prince's. Even a rather unsympathetic fictionalisation of Robinson, it would seem, is influenced by her *Memoirs*, in both structure and content.

### Filling in the Blanks

Considerations of Robinson in non-fiction also exhibit traces of her *Memoirs*. In particular, many of the nineteenth-century biographical essays on Robinson relish the coexistence of the unfortunate victim of sensibility and the accomplished woman of the stage. Dutton Cook titles his 1865 mini-biography of Robinson 'Poor Perdita', immediately calling to mind her status as a figure of pathos and misfortune.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, in a paraphrase of the *Memoirs*, he narrates her acting debut in pacey, upbeat prose:

Mr. Garrick sits in the orchestra to witness the performance of the new actress. She is so nervous she can hardly stand [...] Presently she fronts the footlights: a very beautiful young woman in pale pink satin trimmed with lace and spangled with silver, with white feathers in her hair [...] The curtain falls amidst a clamour of approbation. The new *Juliet* is a thorough success. During the following month the lady essayed her second character: *Statira*.  
(628)

Cook's temporary shift into the present tense in this passage allows him to convey immediacy and excitement to his mid-Victorian readers. Robinson's pride in her 'monumental suit' (87) and 'clamorous approbation' (88) does not nullify 'the various emotions of hope and fear' which are 'impossible to describe' (87). In Cook's retelling, the scene feels gripping, affecting, and true-to-life. Cook connects Robinson's success with her protean abilities:

The actress had made great way in public favour [...] She was very lovely, dressed beautifully, could be arch and sparkling, or tender and pathetic. The good-natured audience demanded no more—they gave her their hands and hearts without further question, thundering their applause. (628-9)

The actress seems in complete harmony with the heroine of sensibility. The description of Robinson's 'public favour' could apply just as well to her *Memoirs*, a textured self-portrait in which the reader sees she is performing but feels, likewise, that behind the performance lies a sincere, feeling subject.

Moreover, scepticism about Robinson's truthfulness runs alongside this substantial affective investment in the *Memoirs*. Dutton Cook finds the *Memoirs* 'palpably decorated and disposed with an eye to effect', 'apologetic and exculpatory in character' and 'conveniently fragmentary' (653), and alludes to it knowingly as 'not the most impartial of histories' (627). In Cook's wry narration, 'the prince is urgent; the lady deliberates; and [...] just at this time, too, the husband becomes more and more conveniently perfidious' (630). An *Athenaeum* reviewer later concurs that 'the memoirs of Mary Robinson are an apology' that attempts to 'account decently for her frailty, since no violence was used and she went, trembling with love and loyalty'.<sup>31</sup> The word 'trembling' suggests not only Robinson's melodramatic performance of her vindication in the *Memoirs* but also the sexual undertones of her narrative. Indeed the *Athenaeum* columnist emphasises this double meaning by comparing Robinson to *Don Juan's* Donna Julia, and recalling that 'familiar phrase of Byron, protesting that she could not think of consenting she consented'.<sup>32</sup> Yet as Cook concludes, he does not criticise the 'romanticist's tone' but rather celebrates the opportunities it affords:

Now, when a lady tells her story, and purposely leaves blanks in it, it is clearly permissible to supply those blanks, if not with suppositions and suspicions, at any rate with such evidence at all bearing on the subject as can be secured from other quarters. (653)

For Cook, a memoir that is ‘conveniently fragmentary’ (653), ‘adroitly shaped’ (650), and full of ‘blanks’ (653) leaves interesting work to future readers or writers who must ‘supply those blanks’ with ‘evidence’ and ‘suppositions’. In a lexicon more legal than literary, the reader (or later writer) becomes a judge who cross-checks the narrative with extant facts, but also relies on her imagination and intuition as well.

### **Imagining the Unseen**

A similar interest in analysing Robinson’s psychology and dramatizing her life also emerges in Elizabeth Barrington’s *The Exquisite Perdita*, a story which was serialised, with illustrations, in *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine* 1925-26, and reissued in book form in London in 1926.<sup>33</sup> Barrington’s popularity as a historical novelist rests, in the words of the *English Review*, on her ‘power of visualizing the past combined with a decided talent for dialogue and command of literary expression’.<sup>34</sup> Her compelling recapitulation of Robinson’s life uses free indirect discourse to illuminate the thinking of various characters. With the aid of Bernard Cornwell’s sensuous drawings, Barrington brings to life Robinson as a sighing young beauty whose ‘large eyes so full of pleading’ and ‘quick, agitated sensibility’ make it impossible for Sheridan to look at her ‘without imagining her quivering in his arms, all melting smiles and tears and tender shame’.<sup>35</sup> Barrington makes clear that Perdita’s appeal is at once affective and erotic: the sensitive melancholic and the fascinating actress are inextricably linked.

Barrington's narrative also demonstrates a masterful engagement with Robinson's *Memoirs*.

[Robinson] told a small part of her own story to the world, quitting the subject when it became delicate, and it would need telling had she given the whole, for how is it possible that a woman should autobiographise? [...] The poor Perdita cannot but court sympathy and support in every glance of her eyes, every curve of her body, her fluttering hands and drooped lashes [...] She tells what she will of her own story so fluently that you shall not have leisure to note the hiatus here, the contradiction there [...] No, her story is a confidence, not an affidavit. And even were it one, more is needed. [...] You will not surprise her off stage in her own brief story. It will be much if I can so catch her for a moment in mine.<sup>36</sup>

Barrington compares the *Memoirs* to a seductive performance in which Robinson 'stage[s]' her femininity, sensibility, and charms through her 'fluent' storytelling. Robinson's 'hiatus[es]' and 'contradiction[s]' are a summons and a challenge to Barrington, whose *Exquisite Perdita* is 'needed' to illuminate the 'complex' character hidden behind the 'studied simplicity' (*EPD* 23).

To this end, Barrington both borrows and departs from Robinson. In emotionally intense moments, Barrington recycles Robinson's trope of self-professed silence. When Mary Robinson discovers her husband's infidelity with Miss Wilmot, Barrington writes: 'To describe his mortification would be impossible' (*EPD* 92). Similarly, as Robinson's stage debut approaches, 'her terrors were beyond all words' (*EPJ* 119). *The Exquisite Perdita* draws praise from the *English Review* for its 'masterly study of sentimentality' (*EPJ* 124), a 'study', perhaps, of Robinson's

*Memoirs* itself. At the same time, this self-conscious narrator periodically contrasts her own narrative with Robinson's. Amidst an early scene where Robinson angrily refuses to obey her faithless husband, the narrator pauses to address the reader:

You could never suppose this was the drooping sylph of her memoirs, she did it so defiantly?, and with an expression quite unbecoming the lady all tears and martyrdoms she there depicts for us in such moving terms. (*EPJ* 92)

Barrington's canny narrator highlights the discrepancy between her novel and the *Memoirs*. The scene provides an insight into the unseen Robinson. Barrington reminds us that *The Exquisite Perdita* is an adaptation as well as a critique of its source text.

### **Conclusion**

Robinson's *Memoirs* has long been criticised for inconsistencies which are seen to undermine her self-portrait as a victimised but essentially good-hearted heroine of sensibility. Yet a closer look at the *Memoirs* reveals a pattern of self-presentation that uses rhetorical and structural gaps strategically to balance seemingly opposite qualities. Robinson reveals just enough of herself to affect *and* to titillate, conceals just enough to remain both virtuous *and* coy. Moreover, the *Memoirs* was reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, and rewritten in countless other works of fiction and non-fiction. These later redactions of Robinson's life responded to and even appropriated the very inconsistencies in the *Memoirs* that are so often deemed to be flaws. They show that Robinson continued to appear sympathetic, alluring, and intriguing, in spite of scepticism about the truthfulness of her narrative.

Still, the prevailing critical opinion is that Robinson's *Memoirs* ultimately failed to restore her reputation. Cheryl Wanko maintains that Robinson 'could only salvage [her character] so much' and Laura Engel, that her 'attempts to rescue her damaged reputation were thwarted'.<sup>37</sup> These claims are true in the sense that Robinson could not erase her scandalous history or escape the public knowledge of her sexual transgression(s), in her lifetime or after. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century texts considered in this essay indicate some of the ways that Robinson's *Memoirs* influenced the texture of her afterlife. Perhaps a reputation is not something merely to be 'damaged' or 'salvaged', but something to be shaped. Women have long been appraised according to what Katharine Kittredge calls 'the good woman/bad woman dichotomy', and yet one of Robinson's most troubling and appealing features is that she embodies both of these binaries.<sup>38</sup> She tells us what she is not telling us, and she visually highlights what she conceals. Behind the coquettish actress is the heroine of sensibility and behind the heroine of sensibility, the coquettish actress. We feel we know her intimately and yet, as Hester Davenport observes, it is difficult 'to pin down the image that Robinson was projecting of herself'.<sup>39</sup> This difficulty may suggest neither a confusion nor a deficiency on her part, but a literary innovation that manages to 'shape and resist the dominant cultural constructions' of women's lives.<sup>40</sup> Robinson's *Memoirs* wields a nuanced strategy of self-representation that contributed to her nineteenth-century afterlife and to her enduring status as a literary celebrity. Leo Braudy explains:

To be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers—the media and their audience. The famous person is thus not so much a person as a story about a person.<sup>41</sup>

Since the publication of her *Memoirs* in 1801, Mary Robinson has become the most significant of these ‘storytellers’, exerting a lasting power in voicing the posthumous ‘story’ of her life, and even, perhaps, restyling the ways in which a woman’s ‘story’ could be told.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself*, ed. M. J. Levy (London, 1994), 85, 55. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>2</sup> James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, 1972), quoted in Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women’s Autobiographies* (Oxford, 1992), 5. Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography is often cited as the benchmark: a ‘retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality’. See ‘The Autobiographical Contract’, *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge, 1982), 192-223, 193. Felicity Nussbaum, on the other hand, questions the existence of an essential self, and sees autobiography as ‘repetitive serial representations of particular moments held together by the narrative “I”’. See *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore, 1989), 18. For more on Romantic-period definitions of—and debates about—autobiography (or ‘self-biography’), see James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature 1783-1834* (Oxford, 2005) and *Romantic Autobiography in England*, ed. Eugene Stelzig (Farnham, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Wilson, ‘From Actress to Authoress: Mary Robinson’s Pseudonymous Celebrity’, *The Public’s Open to Us All*, ed. Laura Engel (Newcastle, 2009), 156-75, 159.

---

<sup>4</sup> Eleanor Ty, 'Engendering a Female Subject: Mary Robinson's (Re)presentations of the Self', *English Studies in Canada*, 21.4 (December 1995), 407-28, 412, 414.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Wanko, *Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock, 2003), 211.

<sup>6</sup> Hester Davenport, 'Introduction', in *The Works of Mary Robinson* (7 vols, London, 2010), vii. xi-xxxiii, xx, xxiv. Davenport agrees with Pascoe that this is a 'distancing strategy'. See Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, 1997), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Davenport, xx, xxiv. See also Wilson, 159-60.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of Robinson's theatrical, 'postmodern', and strategic modes of self-presentation, see Pascoe, Anne Mellor, 'Mary Robinson and the Scripts of Female Sexuality', in *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, eds. Patrick Coleman, Jayne Lewis, and Jill Kowalik (Cambridge, 2000), 230-59, and Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus, 2011). My essay builds on the work of Pascoe, Mellor, and Engel, by looking specifically at rhetorical and structural patterns in the *Memoirs*, and nineteenth-century responses to them.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger, *Before Victoria* (New York, 2005), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Engel, 7; Sharon Setzer, 'Introduction', in *Women's Theatrical Memoirs*, (10 vols, London, 2007), i. 1-5, 2; Mellor, 244.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (Basingstoke, 2011), 126.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London, 2009), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Lamb, 1.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mellor, 250.

<sup>15</sup> Gill Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre 1768-1820* (New Haven, 2007), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Dawn M. Vernoooy-Epp, 'Introduction' in *The Works of Mary Robinson* (8 vols, London, 2009), ii. 225-47, 228.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Flint, *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, 2011), 112-13.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Flint, 'The Eighteenth-Century Novel and Print Culture', in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, eds. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Oxford, 2005), 343-64, 360.

<sup>19</sup> Pascoe, 70; Daniel Robinson, 201, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Rita J. Kurtz and Jennifer L. Womer, 'The Novel as Political Marker: Women Writers and their Female Audiences in the Hookham and Carpenter Archives, 1791-1798', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text*, 3 (Winter 2004), 47-65, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Wanko, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Hester Davenport has speculated that another person, perhaps Samuel Jackson Pratt, co-edited the *Memoirs* with Maria Elizabeth Robinson, and took an active role in the editing, revising, and preparation of the manuscript for the printer. See Davenport, 'Introduction', xxi. The strategic use of printer's ornaments could have been Pratt's innovation, or something he carried forward from an earlier manuscript.

<sup>23</sup> Flint, *The Appearance of Print*, 151.

<sup>24</sup> Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature 1783-1834* (Oxford, 2005), 20.

---

<sup>26</sup> Gill Perry, 'Ambiguity and Desire: Metaphors of Sexuality in Late Eighteenth-Century Representations of the Actress', in *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture 1776-1812*, ed. Robyn Asleson (New Haven and London, 2003), 57-80, 57. See also Kimberley Crouch, 'The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?', *Gender in Eighteenth Century England*, eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London and New York, 1997), 58-78, 64, and Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (Basingstoke, 1993), 45.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, *The Royal Legend: A Tale* (London, 1808), 65. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>28</sup> See also Robinson, *Memoirs*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Kristin Samuelian, *Royal Romances: Sex, Scandal, and Monarchy in Print, 1780-1821* (Basingstoke, 2010), 88-9.

<sup>30</sup> This biographical essay appeared in two parts, in two separate issues. Dutton Cook, 'Poor Perdita: Part I', *Once a Week*, 12, 27 May 1865, 625-30; Dutton Cook, 'Poor Perdita: Part II', 12, 3 June 1865, *Once a Week*, 648-53. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>31</sup> *Athenaeum*, 25 July 1896, 138.

<sup>32</sup> Lord Byron's lines are: 'A little still she strove, and much repented, / And whispering "I will ne'er consent"—consented'. See *Don Juan*, l. 116. 935-6.

<sup>33</sup> Barrington is one of several pseudonyms used by Elizabeth Louisa 'Lily' Moresby (1862-1931). See Alan Twigg, 'Beck, Lily Adams (1862-1931)', *ABC Bookworld*, BC Bookworld, 2015 [[http://www.abcbookworld.com/view\\_author.php?id=7186](http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=7186), accessed 21 Sept 2016].

<sup>34</sup> 'Fiction', *The English Review* (January 1927), 124-5, 124.

---

<sup>35</sup> Barrington, 'The Exquisite Perdita', *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* (January 1926), 117, 120. Subsequent references will be made in the text and cited as *EPJ*.

<sup>36</sup> Barrington, 'The Exquisite Perdita', *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* (December 1925), 22-3. Subsequent references will be made in the text and cited as *EPD*.

<sup>37</sup> Wanko, 210; Engel, 96.

<sup>38</sup> Katherine Kittredge, 'Introduction', in *Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Katherine Kittredge (Ann Arbor, 2003), 1-17, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Davenport, xxiv.

<sup>40</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore and London, 1989), xiv.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (Oxford, 1986), 591-2.