

Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800)*
by Katherine Binhammer

In the last decade of her short 42-year life, Mary Robinson published four collections of poetry, seven novels, a play, two political tracts, a translation, and countless individual poems which appeared pseudonymously in contemporary newspapers (according to her *Memoirs*, she penned seventy-four poems in the last year of her life alone). It is perhaps unfortunate that her reputation today rests not on this amazing literary productivity but on her public sexuality. All sketches of this influential Romantic poet, successful novelist, and early feminist writer, begin by recounting her notorious sexual exploits, in particular, her affair with the then Prince of Wales, later George IV. My account will be no different, for to understand her literary successes, one must understand the incredible odds she was fighting against to acquire respectability. Her posthumously published autobiography suggests that she was never entirely successful at detaching her writing from her erotic body, but this may have been the key to her success. Robinson's ultimate achievement rests, perhaps, in wrestling her public image as a courtesan into the image of a true 'Woman of Feeling'. She writes in her *Memoirs* that '[e]very event of my life has more or less been marked by the progressive evils of a too acute sensibility'. She felt too much, while the men in her life felt not enough, and she emerges from her *Memoirs* as a triumphant yet tragic heroine. She blames these men for her sorrows - from her father's abandonment of the family to take up with his mistress, to her lover of fifteen years, Barnastre Tarleton's leaving her two years before her death for a younger wife - men cheat and women truly love, both in her life and in her writing.

Married at age 14 to Thomas Robinson, a man she did not love and who had misrepresented his fortune to her family, she was eventually to break with her unfaithful husband. Not, however, before he had led the family to debtor's prison. It was while her husband was imprisoned that Robinson wrote her first collection of poetry (*Poems* 1775) and began her life struggle for financial independence, needing to support her infant daughter and herself. Robinson always managed the strength to take care of herself, even if it came with huge personal costs. A woman of fashion who loved to be - and was - a renowned beauty and socialite (her portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and George Romney, in addition to the one by John Hoppner which accompanies this article), Robinson frequented the right London hot spots and was acquainted with the who's of late eighteenth-century society: Lord Lyttleton, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and David Garrick, to name a few. It was Garrick who eventually helped her launch her acting career and she took to the stage, playing Juliet, at Drury Lane Theatre in December 1776. Best known for her facility with the 'breeches parts', her performances as Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It* won her extensive praise. But it was to be her role of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* that would seal her reputation for life.

In late 1779, the seventeen-year-old Prince of Wales saw Robinson's performance in *The Winter's Tale* and, as the story goes, was enraptured by her beauty. His reputation for sexual promiscuity had not yet blossomed and Robinson fell for his declarations of love that he made in effusive letters (one included a miniature portrait of himself). She agreed

to become his mistress in return for a promised £20,000. Quickly bored with her and moving on to his next prey, the prince abandoned Robinson a year into the affair without paying the money. The ensuing settlement negotiations between Robinson's supporters and the royal family provide an interesting case study in the gendered politics of sexuality at the time. Her reputation destroyed by the public affair ('Florizel' and 'Perdita' were a constant source of bawdy humour and satirical caricatures), Robinson could no longer sell her wares as an actress. Yet to admit she gave her body to the prince for money and not for love and demand the payment he promised, would be to publically position herself as a prostitute. The tricky secretive negotiations ended with the royal family paying Robinson £5,000 in exchange for her returning the prince's love letters. The Whig leader, Charles James Fox (who may have been her lover) later helped Robinson negotiate a £500 annuity from the royal family, but it was rarely paid.

Perhaps to escape the cruel and constant tales of her sexual escapades circulating in everything from the daily newspapers to pornographic scandal texts (for example, Thomas Gillray's cartoon 'The Thunderer' [1782] portrayed Robinson with her legs spread open accompanied by the caption 'Alamode Beef, hot every Night'), she left London for Paris where she captured the attention not only of a new Duke but also of Marie Antionette, who was supposedly impressed by Robinson's legendary fashion sense. Upon her return to London, Robinson began her fifteen-year affair with Colonel Tarleton, a hero of the American war. On her second journey to France, where she was travelling to join Tarleton, she either suffered a bad miscarriage or was dangerously exposed to a cold night and this illness resulted in lifelong paralysis below the waist. Her compulsion for expensive fashions and the accoutrements of high-life (notably, extravagant carriages) continued even with her illness and even though she did not have the money to support it, and she fell miserably into debt. According to one biographer, her belongings were auctioned off in 1784 to pay her creditors and she eventually wound up in the debtor's prison in the last year of her life (she refused to take the out available to her and make her absconded husband responsible for her debts).

This was Robinson's life before she dedicated herself solely to writing in 1788 and this personal history informs her entrance into the literary world. The semi-pornographic magazine, *The Ranger's*, announced a publication of hers in 1795 as follows: 'The PERDITA, (and her name is now almost literalized) once said to be the favourite even of prices, has changed her mode of levying contributions on the public; and now entertains the world with the effusions of her head, instead of the exertions of her -'. Like many writers of her day, but perhaps for more pressing reasons, she began publishing poems in newspapers under pseudonyms to hide her identity. Using such pen names as 'Laura,' 'Laura Maria', Sappho' and 'Tabitha Bramble', Robinson became known as one of the Della Cruscan poets, a group later much reviled for its highly sentimental and ornamental style of poetry. One of her greatest poetic triumphs came after Della Cruscan period in the form of a sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon* (1796). The forty-four sonnets narrate the tragic story of Sappho's love for Phaon, his inconstancy and abandonment, her despair and eventual suicide. Already known as the 'English Sappho', Robinson's choice of the Sappho and Phaon story and her decision to use Sappho's voice as the speaking 'I', aligns her own experiences with the Greek poet's passionate rendering of love's betrayal.

The sonnets reveal a woman torn between her powerful ecstatic passion and her growing awareness of her lover's inconstancy:

Why are thou chang'd? O Phaon! tell me why?
Love fled reproach, when passion feels decay;
Or, I would paint the raptures of that day.

Warm'd by thy love, or chill'd by thy disdain;
And yet no bliss this sensate Being knows:
Ah! Why is rapture so allied to pain?
(Sonnet XVIII)

Robinson's poetry is indebted to the major male Romantic poets (her *Lyrical Tales* [1800], no doubt, were inspired by Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*) but she was also influenced by one of the best known female poets of her day, < link to Charlotte Smith biography > **Charlotte Smith**. Smith's perfection of the sonnet as a vehicle for Romantic poetry certainly informs Robinson's experimentation with the form. In addition to being influenced by others, Robinson was, herself, influential. Coleridge, who called her 'a woman of undoubted genius', sent her a manuscript copy of *Kubla Khan*, corresponded with her, and made her the subject of one of his poems.

While the male poets of her day rarely 'lower' themselves to writing in the debased genre of the novel, women writers flourished in the form. Both Smith and Robinson turned to novels for their bread and butter; Robinson, however, never seemed to receive the buttered bread her sales should have brought her. Her first publisher, Hookham & Carpenter paid her poorly and it was not until she switched to Longman in her later years that she averaged a respectable £150 per annum. Her first novel, *Vancenza, or the Dangers of Credulity* (1792) sold out in a day, but the popularity of this gothic novel probably had more to do with her reputation as 'Perdita' than her talent for writing. She went on to write six more novels which cover a range of themes: oppression, slavery, the condition of women, male tyranny, loss of love, and false friendship, especially female friendship. She counted some women as her close friends (particularly, fellow writer Jane Porter) but she distrusted women, writing in her *Memoir* that 'I have almost uniformly found my own sex my most inveterate enemies'.

Robinson's position in relation to the radical politics of her day is a bit confusing. She both was and was not a supporter of the French Revolution. Her writing shows that she was an early feminist but she did not feel a particular solidarity with women. Her contradictory statements only make sense if we understand the particular pain she suffered as a fallen woman. Her 1791 'Ainsi Va Le Monde' references the storming of the Bastille and celebrates a 'Celestial Freedom' that 'warms the breast of man'. But she saved her deepest sympathies for the Queen of France who she felt had been wronged like herself. Thus, both her poem, 'Marie Antionette's Lamentation', and her tract *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France* demonstrate compassion and empathy for the Queen. Her associations with royalty and the aristocracy, while not entirely pleasant, she probably saw as a necessity and as a way out of her precarious

financial predicaments. But she also had many friends and developed crucial intellectual exchanges amongst the radicals, most importantly, with William Godwin, the anarchist philosopher and later husband of < link to Mary Wollstonecraft biography >**Mary Wollstonecraft**. Godwin and Robinson met in 1796 and began what his daughter < link to Mary Shelley biography >**Mary Shelley** later called an 'intimate friendship', a friendship that included Godwin reading much of Robinson's writing from the time in manuscript. Their intellectual friendship led to Robinson's acquaintance with Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, both writers and early feminists. In her relations with the radicals, we can see Robinson's philosophical and intellectual abilities flourishing, abilities which she knew had been compromised by her sexual reputation and by her beauty. As she challenges in her feminist polemic, 'why the graces of feminine beauty are to be constituted emblems of a debilitated mind? Does the finest symmetry of form, or the most delicate tint of circulation, exemplify a tame submission to insult or oppression?'

Her philosophical knowledge and rhetorical skills are apparent in this polemic, published in 1799 under the name Anne Frances Randall but later reprinted with her own name as *Thoughts on the Condition of Women*. The text is heavily influenced by Wollstonecraft's and Hays' earlier feminist polemics as Robinson makes similar arguments: she calls for female education, decries the sexual double standard which places too much emphasis on the appearance of female chastity, argues for the equality of the female mind and against male tyranny in marriage, and then provides a series of well-researched descriptions of exemplary women in history (from ancient Rome to Islam to contemporary England). Her voice in this polemic is both intellectually rigorous and personally passionate and she combines reason and passion in favour of women's rights: 'Let me ask this plain and rational question, - is not woman a human being, gifted with all the feelings that inhabit the bosom of man?' The rhetorical tension, yet powerful rhetoric, of making a reasoned argument about women's feelings demonstrates the merging of her writing with her body that I think is Robinson's legacy. She did not deny her passions, she wrote about them. She was a great physical beauty but she also had a highly developed intellect. When she died December 26, 1800 she hoped that the public would judge her as she judged herself in her *Memoirs*: 'Probably these pages will be read, when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave; when that God who judges all hearts will know how innocent I was of the smallest conjugal infidelity'. For a fallen woman like Robinson, such innocence was hard earned and came through the productions of her philosophically passionate and imaginative pen.

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