

Finding the Lost One(s): Romanticism, Lifewriting, and the Lives of Mary Robinson

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Byrne, Paula. 2004. *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson*. New York: Random House. 445 pp. + xviii. Illus.

SINCE the rise of academic feminism and subsequent scrutiny of the canon, literary scholars have considered an ever-larger group of authors, works, and even genres categorized under the rubric of Romanticism. Mary Robinson, the subject of Paula Byrne's recent biography, has benefited from this development. Robinson's reappearance is not limited to scholarly essays, critical editions, and anthologies for survey courses; her poems, including selections from her sonnet sequence, *Sappho and Phaeon*, appear in *The New Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*, an anthology available to ordinary readers.

Prior to the appearance of Byrne's biography, Mary Robinson and her work had benefited from other critical developments. One is certainly the reexamination of theatricality as an element in nineteenth-century culture exemplified by Joseph Litvak's 1992 *Caught in the Act*, which traced this

quality “in novels of [what had been considered] the privatized and privatizing nineteenth century” (x). Subsequent studies have extended this reexamination beyond the novel and the Victorian era to poetry, drama, essays, and Romanticism itself. In one of these studies, Judith Pascoe (1997) argues that Robinson’s “tendency to situate herself at the center of [late eighteenth-century] popular developments—Della Cruscanism, city spectacle, newspaper reportage—warrants sustained attention to her literary maneuvers” (9).¹ Another critical development is eighteenth-century studies’ continued interest in authorship, the professional writer, and the literary marketplace. The maneuvers by Robinson that Pascoe cites are just as much those of the marketplace as were Samuel Johnson’s or Alexander Pope’s—or, for that matter, Eliza Haywood’s mid-century transformation from amatory novelist to *Female Spectator* to the anonymous author of the sentimental novel, *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. These critical projects, together with the scrutiny of the canon and canonization first sparked by academic feminism in the 1970s, have made possible Jacqueline M. Labbe’s 2002 assessment of Robinson in *Women and Writing* as “key to our understanding of the fluid, coy, slippery, and multivalent aspects of which we [...] call Romanticism.”

However, as suggested by the subtitle of Byrne’s 2004 book (“The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson”) and the existence of two other recent biographies of Robinson by Sarah Gristwood and Hester Davenport, Robinson appeals to readers outside academia. That appeal, I would guess, lies in her life story and, as Gristwood implies in her conclusion, its congruence with current popular psychology and people’s enthrallment with celebrities like Princess Diana (2005, 388–90). In a relatively short period, Robinson publicly reinvented herself successively as an actor, the Prince of Wales’ mistress, a celebrity who figured in political satire because of her affairs with the Prince and Whig leader Charles James Fox, an extremely conspicuous consumer of fashions and carriages, an author of poetry and fiction, a journalist, and a feminist. (She lived to be forty-two, forty-three, or forty-four, depending on which birth year one accepts: 1758, 1757, or even 1756 [Byrne 2004, 399–400].) Byrne even credits her with “[freeing] her fellow women from restrictive dress for two generations,” for Robinson introduced to England the loose muslin “frock” that has come to be identified with the late eighteenth-century and Regency period (2004, 192).

A life like hers requires a biographer willing to apply cool textual analysis to this ongoing process of public reinvention and, moreover, to be a

bit skeptical of it as well. Byrne is up to the task. She fully recognizes the appeal of her subject's many transformations as she sketches Robinson's fascination with the glittering London social scene and its fascination with her, as well as her later involvement with feminism, writing, and writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Godwin. Byrne's depiction of her subject relies on critical reading of texts by and about Robinson rather than the biographer's searching for emotional rapport, as Gristwood does in her introduction (2005, 1–3).

A more psychologically oriented biography of Robinson than Byrne's, or even Gristwood's, would certainly be intriguing, particularly to resolve the contradictions and gaps in Robinson's relationships with others. These gaps occur not only in her marriage to law clerk Thomas Robinson and her affair with the Prince of Wales but also in her relationship with her daughter, whom she referred to as her "*secondself*" (qtd. in Byrne 2004, 382, spelling Robinson's). The editor and continuer of her *Memoirs*, her daughter, Maria Elizabeth Robinson, appears to have been more conventional than Mary Robinson, and in writing the second part of the *Memoirs*, may have reframed her mother's life as more domestic than it actually was by eliding Mary's long-term relationship with Colonel Banastre Tarleton and the active social life that she maintained even while caring for her daughter and returning to poetry (Gristwood 2005, 381; Byrne 2004, 246). Maria Elizabeth Robinson's narrative moreover, as Byrne notes, disregards the probable assistance of Robinson's mother and companion, Hester Darby, at the young girl's sickbed (2004, 246). Byrne does examine Robinson's relationship with her father, a merchant who abandoned his once-wealthy family to poverty but whom Robinson still admired for his daring approach to business. Devoting additional scrutiny to Robinson's problematic relationships with others would satisfy ordinary readers who are interested in a biographer's attempt to discover a subject's psychological coherence more than Byrne's restrained approach does. Such an attempt is not always the search for emotional rapport, which Gristwood overdoes and Byrne is right to avoid. The attempt to discover psychological coherence instead facilitates the depiction of the subject's self and its development even when, as Byrne's references to Robinson's participation in her husband's financial schemes or her 1780 decision to retire from acting demonstrate (2004, 41, 114–15), it is clear that the biographer disapproves of her subject's actions.

Yet I suspect that literary theorists' arguments about the decentered self have made Robinson intellectually relevant in a way that she would not have

been when the model of the ideal self was still what Slavoj Žižek (1989) calls “the Renaissance ideal of the ‘all-round personality’ mastering the passions within himself and making out of his own life a work of art” (2). Robinson’s relevance owes much to readers’ acceptance of the fissured self. This is important to a reading of her life, particularly in her vexed orientation regarding class. Even though, to the end of her life, she continued to rely on the pension grudgingly granted and irregularly paid her by the Prince of Wales and even to ask him for extra funds, her writing questioned the assumptions on which a hierarchical society and its power to give her a pension were based (Byrne 2004, 254–55, 362–63). Her poems, novels, and political writing supported the French Revolution as well as criticized society’s valuation of rank over merit. One example of this criticism comes from Robinson’s 1794 novel, *The Widow*: “to be highly distinguished for *mental perfections*, is, in the eye of ignorance, to be guilty of the *worst* of crimes; because they are attributes *superior* to those of *birth*” (qtd. in Byrne 2004, 298, emphasis Robinson’s). Yet her support for these then radical positions exists alongside her expressions of sympathy for Marie Antoinette, writing that aligned Robinson more closely to Edmund Burke than to her political allies Fox and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, without turning her against the Revolution (Byrne 2004, 161, 272–74). Byrne attributes Robinson’s ideological inconsistency to both her earlier admiration for the French queen and their shared experience of being the object of public vilification (2004, 273). This is not to say that, on one day in the 1790s, Robinson emerged from the chrysalis of triviality and self-deception to fly as a literary, feminist butterfly. I read her life as exemplifying the acknowledgment of inconsistency as a part of what was once called the human condition. Around the same time that Robinson wrote the Prince of Wales for money, she also attempted to wriggle out of a debt to her friend, William Godwin (Byrne 2004, 379–80). In addition, although Byrne does not touch upon this point, Gristwood ponders the mutual attraction that Robinson and the younger Samuel Taylor Coleridge may or may have not felt toward each other (2005, 352–55). These instances of inconsistent behavior each occur after the point in Robinson’s life where Byrne praises her for having transformed it to its final shape (2004, 345).

What makes Mary Robinson intriguing to scholars of lifewriting is her simultaneous struggle to resist the ideal, consistent self in her life and writing yet to maintain this self, despite its static qualities, in her *Memoirs*. Her writing developed from early epistolary verse to fashionable Della Cruscan lyrics to her later, more technically innovative poems and

politically radical novels and, as a critic's comments from 1799 show, readers were aware of her writing's diversity (cited in Byrne 2004, 348). This contradictory quality mirrors the many changes in Robinson's life. As a writer, she also drew on readers' recognition of the autobiographical elements in her work even as she made use of a number of pseudonyms throughout her career (Curran 2002; Byrne 2004, 247–50, 336, 354). One, "Laura Maria," appears to have become completely transparent and no longer even an open secret by 1799. Another, "Sappho," suggested her *Sappho and Phaeon*, itself read as both her "poetic manifesto" and, as Byrne points out, as a response to the end of her relationship with Colonel Tarleton (2004, 323). A third pseudonym, "Tabitha Bramble," was reserved for social satire and drew on the contrast between Smollett's unattractive, fictional character of the same name and Robinson's glamorous past (Byrne 2004, 336). Yet, in the *Memoirs*, Robinson emphasizes the congruencies between her early childhood and her later self. Her images of her childhood take on a "most pensive and melancholy cast" as she depicts herself responding to the solemnity of a church, Pope's poetry, and "only [music] [...] of the mournful and touching kind." This strain continues as she narrates her wedding day, her dominant impression of "melancholy" contradicting the cheerful description of the "chip hat adorned with white ribbons" and "slippers of white satin embroidered with silver" that she wore after the ceremony. Then, as she returns to her childhood home in Bristol, she devotes much of her account to a description indicating her "true" self. She concludes this passage with the following comment: "how little has the misjudging world known of what has passed in my mind, even in the apparently gayest moments of my existence." Later, in an aside that serves as a transition between accounts of the death of her infant daughter Sophia and the continuation of Robinson's successful acting career, she characterizes her life as a "melancholy story" despite her narration's moments of pleasure, triumph, and pride in her appearance (Robinson and Robinson, 1895).

Noting the difference between the subject of a biography and that subject's own self-understanding—or, more accurately, her self-presentation—is important, for, as Byrne and Gristwood both acknowledge, Robinson's *Memoirs*, one of the key sources for their biographies, is itself problematic. First of all, only the first part of the document is attributable to Robinson; the published version includes a "Continuation by a Friend," that is, by her daughter Maria Elizabeth. At one key moment in the continuation, which I mention above, Maria Elizabeth depicts her mother as a pensive

caregiver “completely severed from her former life,” rather than as a woman who in fact still oscillated between the two (Byrne 2004, 246). Secondly, as we have seen, the section of the *Memoirs* credited to Robinson reframes her life as “a melancholy story.” In her discussion of the composition of Robinson’s *Memoirs*, Byrne indicates that the hostile reception of *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1798) may have caused Robinson to abandon her own memoir because of the transgressions against convention that it contained (2004, 345). Ultimately, she did return to it, as the date of her description of her life as “a melancholy story” indicates: “I transcribe this passage on the 29th of March 1800” (Robinson and Robinson, 1895). Therefore, one wonders how many references to her “melancholy story” and the gap between others’ perceptions of her and her own self-knowledge date from her return to her memoirs and how many appeared in the manuscript’s earliest version.

Having read a manuscript version of the memoir written in 1800, Byrne in her biography brings together the elements of Robinson’s life: Romantic literature, the glittering late eighteenth-century public sphere, a series of very public romantic affairs with powerful men, the tensions that she appeared to feel while writing about her earlier lives, and the presence of that “subtly different” version of the memoir (2004, xviii). Gristwood, on the other hand, did not read this manuscript, to which access was strictly limited. Not privy to this manuscript, Gristwood questions the authorship of the second part of the published text (2005, 9, 380–81). Without citing her sources, she speculates that “Mary was herself the ‘Friend’” (2005, 9). Byrne’s reading of the manuscript version of the *Memoirs* undoubtedly helps her more accurately assess Robinson’s role in writing this text and, by implication, her daughter’s role in editing and continuing it.

Byrne’s discussion of the *Memoirs* also complicates the image of Robinson she creates, making her biography rigorous in light of current ideas about the self and its representation in writing. Whereas Gristwood begins her biography by recording the moment when she feels that she has encountered “the *private* Mary” (2005, 2, italics mine), Byrne starts by coolly indicating the discursive and ideological construction of the self that Robinson presents through her reading of the *Memoirs*. She caps Robinson’s vivid description of her childhood home with the comment, “What better origin could there have been for a woman who grew up to write best-selling Gothic novels? If the *Memoirs* is to be believed, even the weather contributed to the atmosphere of foreboding on the night of her birth” (2004, 4). Shortly thereafter, she compares Robinson’s depiction of her childhood

self with Jane Austen's "satirical portrait of the ultra-sensitive Marianne Dashwood" (2004, 6), itself a critical reader's response to the texts of her times. Byrne then observes, "As a writer, Mary was always acutely aware of her audience: her image of herself in the *Memoirs* was designed to appeal to the numerous readers of Gothic novels and sentimental fiction" (2004, 6). Byrne proceeds to critique Robinson's ideological presentation of herself as "a 'natural genius'" (2004, 7). These comments of Byrne's underscore her awareness of the *Memoirs*' limitations as a self-portrait even as she must rely on it for her biography.

It is true that Gristwood's moment of rapport occurred as she read Robinson's correspondence and not the *Memoirs* or her poetry and that she recognizes this moment as a convention of biography (2005, 1). In addition, after depicting this moment, she goes on to catalogue Robinson's attempts at what Stephen Greenblatt has called "self-fashioning." Yet the difference between Byrne's and Gristwood's approaches comes down to their differing stances on whether imagining access to an unmediated self is still credible and whether or not it is intellectually honest to attempt it.

This is not to say that Byrne maintains a cool distance throughout the entire biography. Interestingly, she seems most engaged with and sympathetic to her subject at the end of Robinson's life. Here, she proudly notes Robinson's farewell to her "theatrical, scandalous" life and her entrance into a "purely" literary life: "From this point on, it was the mind alone—bolstered by the company of like-minded friends and a self-sacrificing daughter—that sustained Mary. The end of the affair [with Colonel Banastre Tarleton] was the making of her as a feminist" (Byrne 2004, 345). Byrne's interpretation is not the simply wishful thinking of an academic who prefers writing about her subject's involvement with intellectuals like William Godwin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to writing about her participation in her husband's financial schemes or her attempts to gloss over various public entanglements and equally public censure. As I mentioned earlier, Byrne does not shy away from depicting Robinson's willingness to call on her former lover, the Prince of Wales, for money and to dispute with William Godwin over her debt to him, even though these incidents occurred after Robinson's entry into a "new" life.

In part, Byrne's lively engagement with the later period of Robinson's life may stem from the fact that a more varied selection of her correspondence exists from it than from other times in her life. Even though they may have been subject to a daughter-editor's censorship, these letters provide checks and balances to, and confirmation of, the *Memoirs*, which is

our only source of information about Robinson's childhood. What we know of her courtship and early marriage to Thomas Robinson comes mostly from this same text, but other narratives about this period, as well as accounts of Mary's affairs with the Prince of Wales and other men, are available for this psychologically puzzling period. Even though their overall reliability is questionable, these narratives about Robinson do reveal some aspects of her life that the *Memoirs* elide. Byrne gives more credence to one such narrative, John King's *Letters from Perdita to a Certain Israelite, with His Answers to Them*, that depicts Robinson's flirtation with him than to Robinson's own depiction of this episode in her *Memoirs* (2004, 32). Elsewhere, a 1784 cartoon's false depiction of politician Lord North among Mary's lovers indicates the extent to which she had become the object of public interest and could serve as a symbol of the Whig Party (Byrne 2004, 222–23, 227–28).

By comparison, as Byrne depicts it, Robinson and Godwin's letters make it appear that his resistance to her charm transformed her performance into a give-and-take relationship that she certainly did not have with the Prince of Wales. Both the beginning and the end of Robinson's affair with the Prince surprised her even if, like Byrne, one is skeptical of Robinson's inability to know why this affair ended as it did (2004, 128). On the other hand, Robinson and Godwin's more mature relationship survived both their financial dispute and his questioning of her self-presentation. Byrne notes her response to one of his letters: "You accuse me of cherishing a discontented Spirit! Alas! Had even your Philosophy been so tried" (qtd. in 2004, 382). Earlier, Byrne speculates about whether Godwin had read the manuscript version of the *Memoirs* (2004, 367). Therefore, one wonders whether he is responding not only to her letters but also to her memoir—and how he took her dismissal of the losses in his life, even if it was unthinking.

Despite Byrne's privileging of Robinson's later correspondence over the *Memoirs*, this is not to say that the self she presented to her friend Godwin, her "dear *cross cross* Philosopher" (qtd. in Byrne 2004, 381) is some how "truer" or even "falsier" than the young woman who flirted with the younger prince or the middle-aged woman who sat down to write her *Memoirs*. At this point in the history of biography, it is more important for a biographer to present these different selves than to focus on a partial interpretation of them. Mary Robinson appears to have been a complex, often contradictory person who adapted herself to changing circumstances and whose willingness to adapt to them mediated her "melancholy story." Had she lived further into the nineteenth century, one wonders what she

would have made of events like Napoleon's rise and fall or of later literature such as Keats' poetry and Jane Austen's novels—and, of course, what she would have written. A careful scholarly biographer, Paula Byrne does not answer these questions, but without patronizing or losing readers, she enables them to mull them over and, more importantly, not to encounter Robinson's "private self" but to comprehend her complexities and contradictions. Both Robinson's growing importance to literary scholars and her intriguing life story demand such an approach.

Note

1. Pascoe (1997) describes Della Cruscan verse or, as she later calls it, "effusion," thus: "British women writers pour[ing] forth a torrent of poetry predicated on a falsification: an affectional alliance between sympathetic poet friends" (3). In her subsequent chapter on this verse, she notes its troubled relationship with its successor, Romanticism (70–72).

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