‘This wide theatre, the world’:
Mary Robinson’s Theatrical Feminism

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SIGNATURE: .................................
I considered the world as a vast and varying theatre, where every individual was destined to play his part, and to receive the applause or disapprobation of his surrounding contemporaries.

~ Mary Robinson, *Walsingham* (1797)
ABSTRACT

In this thesis I assert that Robinson’s theatrical heritage positioned her uniquely to confront the revolutionary explosions of 1790s radical thought. In her writings, Robinson’s onstage experience of gender performativity is transformed into a bold feminist critique of gender roles for women (and men) everywhere.

In Chapter 1, I study writings by eighteenth-century theatrical women to argue that Robinson’s feminism must be understood within a theatrical context to appreciate the unique radicalism of her feminist vision. In Chapter 2, I explore how Robinson’s powerful identification with Marie Antoinette lies at the roots of her feminist project. In Chapter 3, I explain how Robinson then turns to the voice of Sappho to develop a radical vision of transcendent genius. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate how Robinson turns her critique of gender on men through the performative space of the masquerade in *Walsingham* (1797). Finally, in Chapter 5, I explain how this radical feminist critique is moulded to utopian ends in *The Natural Daughter* (1799), as Robinson rewrites the ending of Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* in a vision of the revolutionary family.

I read three strands into Robinson’s feminism: 1) the rejection of incommensurable sexual difference; 2) the union of rational virtue and benevolent sensibility in the development of transcendent genius; and 3) a radical critique of the anxious crisis in 1790s masculinity.

The result of this was a utopian vision of the future quite different from Wollstonecraft’s better-known brand of ascetic feminism. Instead, Robinson’s feminist theory works to rescue the original values of the French Revolution from beneath the ravages of Jacobin corruption. Beyond the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference, Robinson envisions a family in which woman would no longer have to renounce her sexual body in order to engage with society, and man could finally accept her as his equal.
for my already lovely husband
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Figure 1: Ink drawing of Mary Robinson, by or after Sir Joshua Reynolds (c. 1782)
INTRODUCTION

Mary Robinson’s Theatrical Legacy and the Problem of Reading
1790s Feminism

We have many females on the stage, who are ornaments to society, and in every respect worthy of imitation! For my part, I adore the Theatre, and think there is more morality to be found in one good tragedy, than in all the sermons that were ever printed. With regard to acting; it is an act which demands no small portion of intellectual acquirements! It polishes the manners; enlightens the understanding, gives a finish to external grace, and calls forth all the powers of mental superiority!

Mary Robinson, Angelina (1796)\(^1\)

I considered the world as a vast and varying theatre, where every individual was destined to play his part, and to receive the applause or disapprobation of his surrounding contemporaries.

Mary Robinson, Walsingham (1797)\(^2\)

[The acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts. [...] Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure[.]

Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988)\(^3\)

There are two Mary Robinsons in the modern critical imagination. The first is the spectacular young actress and late eighteenth-century London celebrity, ‘Perdita,’ whose fashions and love affairs were reported breathlessly by the press, and who briefly became romantically involved with the Prince of Wales, later George IV. The second is the prolific poet, popular novelist and complicated (proto-)feminist voice of the 1790s, friend of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and celebrated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as ‘a woman of undoubted genius.’\(^4\) Even in Robinson’s own Memoirs

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4. ‘I have inclosed [sic] a poem which Mrs. Robinson gave me for your “Anthology.” She is a woman of undoubted genius. There was a poem of hers in this morning’s paper which both in metre and matter pleased me much. She overloads everything; but I never knew a human being with so full a mind — bad, good, and indifferent, I grant you, but full and overflowing.’ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Letter to Robert Southey, 25 January 1800; repr. in The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1895), I, 322.
(1801) this sense of split personality pervades as the first person record of her glamorous theatrical life gives way to a ‘Continuation by a friend’ in which she is revisioned as a serious poetic genius.5

Despite this apparent divide, the world of the theatre pervades Robinson’s writings. Her novelistic heroines and heroes praise the actress and theatre (Angelina), critique its innovations and performances (Walsingham), and even find freedom in becoming theatrical women themselves (The Natural Daughter). In her poetry, Robinson performs (among others) the voices of the Shakespearean characters Julia, Portia and Oberon through her use of pseudonyms, and uses these voices to create productive spaces of cultural critique. Most significantly, the theatre also becomes important to Robinson’s writings in the language it gives her to articulate the workings of the world around her, and especially those of sex and gender.

In all of Robinson’s writings, the self-presentation of the individual is considered as the necessary performance of a sexually-predesignated social role: one that is actively policed by the ‘audience,’ her contemporaries, and that comes into anxious conflict with the individual’s inner sense of self as something other than that prescribed gender role. This identity crisis that Robinson lays bare has at its core the cultural construction of incommensurable sex and gender, and in her writings Robinson draws on the language of the theatre to expose the unnatural roots of these roles, and to allow her characters to search for something more, for a different way of performing sex and gender in ‘this wide theatre, the world.’6

MARY ROBINSON’S CONFLICTED REPUTATION

Among modern critics of eighteenth-century women writers, Mary Robinson has a conflicted reputation. While critics of the late twentieth century have worked hard to divide the prolific writer from her sordid past as depicted in biographies such as Robert

5 Mary Robinson, Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson, Written by Herself, 4 vols (London: 1801).
Bass’s *The Green Dragoon* (1957), their readings of Robinson’s literary works are not always in agreement with each other. Stuart Curran’s seminal essay, ‘The “I” Altered’ (1988), begins this recuperation of Robinson with a focus on her poetry as a precursor to Romanticism. This emphasis on Robinson’s poetry as distinct from her history can also be found in Jerome McGann’s work, and even occurs today in works such as Daniel Robinson’s *Form and Fame* (2011), the first book-length study of Robinson’s poetry, in which he insists on ‘a clear distinction between her cultural celebrity and her years of literary fame.’

Other critics have been more interested in Robinson as a novelist, and in these interpretations Robinson is frequently compared unfavourably with 1790s radicals such as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. In *The English Jacobin Novel* (1976), Gary Kelly dismisses Robinson along with her contemporary Charlotte Smith with the judgement that, compared with the superior radicalism of Wollstonecraft, ‘either their talent or their Jacobinism soon faded.’ Following in his footsteps, Eleanor Ty argues that Robinson ‘did not openly confront ideological or feminist issues in the same way Wollstonecraft’s fiction did.’ In *Empowering the Feminine* (1998), Ty takes her critique even further than this, asserting that Robinson’s writing is involved in the ‘political conservatism’ of ‘patriarchal complicity,’ and as such failed ‘to confront directly the subservient position of woman in late eighteenth-century society.’ Similarly, Amy Garnai takes a more favourable reading of Robinson’s radicalism in

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10 Eleanor Ty, Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 6, 10.
relation to the French Revolution, but follows Kelly and Ty in claiming that Robinson’s feminist sensibilities ultimately collapse into ‘victimisation and vulnerability.’

Judith Pascoe’s *Romantic Theatricality* (1997) marks a new turn in Robinson scholarship. Concentrating more on Robinson’s self-presentation than on her literature, Pascoe’s Robinson becomes a ‘Spectacular Flâneuse,’ both a theatricalised spectacle and spectator of the times who ‘attempts to harness the power of fascination inherent in a woman on display without relegating herself to the silent object status this position traditionally suggests.’ For Pascoe, Robinson’s radicalism lies in her experimentation with ways of presenting herself to the public that could in turn reposition her in such a way as to develop new observations about the society that sought to render her in the guise of passive femininity: a move from self-display to self-possession.

Pascoe’s influential work was the first to consider the influence of Robinson’s history as an actress on her self-presentation as a writer. Since its publication many critics have built on this work to consider Robinson as a theatricalised subject in late eighteenth-century British society. Anne Mellor reads Robinson’s variable self-presentation as ‘constructed by the gaze of her admirers and the gendered scripts of nineteenth-century England.’ Mellor argues that Robinson’s constantly shifting self-performance equates with a loss of ‘authentic sexuality and subjectivity.’ Bent by the customs of her day, Mellor argues, Robinson’s true identity is ‘lost’ to the modern reader. Tom Mole builds on this theory, arguing that the ‘loss’ of identity detected by

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In fact, Jacqueline Labbe had foregrounded this turn in Robinson scholarship in her important article, ‘Selling One’s Sorrows,’ in which she identifies Robinson as a shrewd manipulator of the public, fully in control of her own representation: ‘For Robinson, […] to be bold enough to manipulate the belief that sexual behaviour and self-display ruin women forever means that she too refuses to be silenced by convention.’ Jacqueline Labbe, ‘Selling One’s Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry,’ *Wordsworth Circle*, 25.2 (1994): 68-71 (68).
14 Mellor, ‘Making an Exhibition of Her Self,’ 300.
Mellor is in fact an intentional performative strategy by Robinson, whose writings evince a conflicting desire for ‘self-promotion and self-effacement.’

According to Mole, Robinson achieved this balance by manipulating her celebrity to sell novels, and at the same time seeking to detach her scandalous past from her poetry through the use of pseudonyms. For Mole unlike Mellor, then, Robinson had control over her self-presentation. However, again in this interpretation Robinson uses this control in order to separate the shame of her past from her literary productions.

There is another group of critics, however, who build on Pascoe’s reading of Robinson’s ‘romantic theatricality’ to argue for the centrality of Robinson’s theatrical life to her self-authorship as a writer. Betsy Bolton works to bring Robinson’s theatricality back into her literary works, arguing that Robinson’s writing ‘blurred the boundaries between literature and performance.’ Similarly, Claire Brock reconnects Robinson’s early experience as a celebrity actress to her later self-presentation as a literary genius, arguing that Robinson ‘exploited her past and her firm grip of the mechanics of eighteenth-century fame to ensure maximum publicity for herself both as a notorious actress and mistress, but also, later, as a writer.’ Finally, Michael Gamer and Terry Robinson assert that the theatre is ‘the central vehicle for Robinson’s transformation of herself from actress to icon,’ and ‘from icon to poet.’ In this important essay Gamer and Robinson trace the significance of the theatre itself – rather than merely theatricality and performance – in Robinson’s early development as a writer of Della Cruscan poetry.

In this thesis, I seek to build on the work of Pascoe, Bolton, Brock, and Gamer and Robinson to relocate Robinson in her specific historical context as a celebrity

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actress and to emphasise the importance of the theatre and performance to Robinson’s development as writer. However, I want to push the argument further than this. In this thesis I assert that Robinson's immediate performative surroundings and theatrical heritage in fact positioned her uniquely to confront the revolutionary explosions of 1790s radical thought to develop a powerful feminist vision.

Indeed, to argue, as Kelly and Ty have done, that Robinson’s political and feminist thought is more conservative than other women writers of her day only makes sense in the context of a dehistoricised theoretical practice that privileges works of rational philosophy over cultural forms such as the sentimental novel, the periodical poem, and the theatre. As Barbara Taylor has shown, eighteenth-century theorists made no such distinction between rational modes of thought and more emotional modes of expression:

This split between public-political thought and the private self is an orthodoxy seldom questioned by intellectual historians; to Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries, however, it would have seemed nonsensical. To the eighteenth-century mind, reason and imagination, public professions and private emotions were inseparably (if often problematically) conjoined. “We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel,” Wollstonecraft wrote of her feminism in 1795— a truism to her readership, however outré it may seem to present-day scholars.¹⁹

For writers of the 1790s, then, political and cultural forms of writing were inextricably bound up together.

Through her experiences as a public woman on the margins of acceptable femininity, I argue, Robinson was inspired to take up the call of the theatrical women who were her foremothers in order to stake a claim for herself as a woman of sensibility and passion, without forgoing her right to virtue. Instead, her onstage experience of gender performativity and masquerade both in the breeches roles and as a visible London celebrity was transformed through her written works into a bold feminist critique of the theatrical nature of gender roles for women (and men) everywhere.

According to her *Memoirs*, Mary Robinson was born into a comfortable merchant family in Bristol on 27 November 1758.\(^\text{20}\) However, when she was nine her father abandoned the family for a mistress. Robinson was placed at school with Meribah Lorrington, from whom she gained a classical education, and under whose tuition she began composing poetry. When she was fourteen Robinson was discovered by the great theatrical producer, David Garrick, and with him she began to train for a career on the stage.\(^\text{21}\) However, Robinson's mother was anxious about the affect a stage career would have on her daughter’s reputation. When Thomas Robinson, a solicitor’s clerk who claimed to be the heir to a rich uncle in Wales, made a proposal of marriage, Robinson’s mother prevailed and Mary was married at just fifteen.

Following the marriage, Thomas Robinson’s claims were proved false. His ‘uncle’ was actually his illegitimate father, from whom he received very little financial help. Despite this, the couple lived at the height of London fashion. Robinson was immediately noticed and praised for her beauty. Her husband, meanwhile, was gambling away half his money and spending the other half on mistresses. Shortly after the birth of Robinson’s daughter, Maria Elizabeth, on 18 October 1774, the couple were sent to debtors’ prison. In their year in prison, Robinson published her first book of *Poems* (1775) under the patronage of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Following their release, Robinson reforged her stage connections, and on 10 December 1776 she stepped onto the boards of Drury Lane theatre in the character of Shakespeare’s Juliet.

Robinson’s debut was a success. She became a celebrity, famous for her abilities in Shakespeare’s cross-dressed ‘breeches roles.’ On 3 December 1779, Robinson

\(^{20}\) Robinson, *Memoirs*, 4. As Paula Byrne points out, this date has come under question by modern critics, Reviewing the evidence available – most significantly Robinson’s own admission that she was fifteen when she was married on 12 April 1773 – Byrne concludes that she was most probably born on 27 November 1757. Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 429-430. See also Alex Nathan, ‘Mistaken or Misled?: Mary Robinson’s Birth Date,’ *Women’s Writing*, 9.1 (2002): 139-142. My history of Robinson here is taken in large part from Byrne’s *Perdita*, as well as from Robinson’s *Memoirs* (1801).

\(^{21}\) Byrne calls Garrick ‘the man who singlehandedly transformed the theatre world.’ Byrne, *Perdita*, 24.
performed as Perdita in a Royal Command performance of *The Winter’s Tale*. Following this performance she began to receive love letters from the Prince of Wales, under the signature ‘Florizel’ to ‘Perdita.’ After some hesitation on Robinson’s part they began a love affair, which soon leaked out into the press.

Robinson became notorious, appearing in caricatures depicting her many supposed conquests [see figure 2]. After several months Robinson agreed to retire from the stage in exchange for a bond from the Prince promising twenty thousand pounds payable on his coming of age. On 31 May 1780 Robinson performed for the last time, but she continued to be pursued by the press as a scandalous celebrity courtesan, one of the ‘Cyprian Corps,’ as they were known in the periodical press. The king was horrified by this publicity, and under pressure from him the Prince terminated their

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22 Caricature of Robinson and her lovers. Driving the carriage is the Prince. Riding the goats are Fox (pictured as a fox), Tarleton (in military uniform), Lord North and Thomas Robinson (backwards, with cuckold's horns). I am indebted for this explanation of the caricature to Byrne, *Perdita*, 242.

23 The ‘Cyprian Corps’ were a group of high society mistresses who were followed by the gossip columns of the press. The name refers to the island of Cyprus, from which Aphrodite, the goddess of love and passion, was supposed to have come. In the extract below from the *Morning Herald*, the term is used in a letter to the editor by a reader disgusted with the paper’s preoccupation with these women: ‘These sorts of beings, – these prostituted characters, are no subject for such a paper as the Morning Herald. […] In what a degree of low scandal is a certain morning paper now held! Whole columns of it filled with Mrs Robinson’s green carriage. […] The papers have found out fine names for these prostitutes: they are called the Cyprian Corps, the frail sisterhood, the vestals the impures, and twenty other pretty names, which are meant, at least seemingly so, as so many umbrellas to shade the infamy of their real appellation […] the hired prostitution of the day.’ ‘Demireps,’ Letter to the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 547 (31 July 1782).
relationship in early 1781. When he refused to pay the bond promised, Robinson threatened to publish his letters. Robinson finally accepted £5,000 in return for the letters as well as a £500 bond in annuity, which would be paid very erratically throughout her life.

Following a sojourn in France, Robinson returned to Britain at the height of fashion. After brief love affairs with Lord Malden and the prominent Whig politician Charles Fox, she began a relationship with Banastre Tarleton, a military colonel. She was again the jewel of British high society, as famous for her participation in political campaigns as for the dresses she wore to the opera. In the summer of 1783, however, everything changed. In pursuit of Tarleton, who had fled abroad to escape his debts, Robinson suffered what Byrne calls a ‘medical misadventure.’ The exact circumstances are unclear, but following a ‘violent rheumatism’ (probably caused by miscarriage) Robinson lost the use of her legs.

In 1789, Robinson embarked on a literary career. She entered the Della Crucan poetic dialogue of The World magazine, joining Robert Merry (as Della Crusca) and Hannah Cowley (as Anna Matilda), and styling herself as Laura Maria. In 1791 she republished many of these poems under her own name, claiming for herself the praise and notoriety they had produced. In the same year she entered the revolutionary pamphlet wars with an anonymous essay entitled Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France, by a Friend to Humanity, in which she praised the French Revolution and called for mercy for Marie Antoinette.

In the 1790s, Robinson would go on to produce seven novels, two plays, several essays and hundreds of poems. In 1799 she published her feminist tract, A Letter to the

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24 Byrne, Perdita, 1.
25 Robinson, Memoirs, II, 96; original emphasis.
26 Indeed, Della Crucanism was the perfect entrance to literary celebrity for a woman versed in theatrical performance, consisting as it did of a fantasy love affair conducted in daily magazines that mimicked eighteenth-century theatrical banter. For more information, see Pascoe, Romantic Theatricality, 68-94; McGann, The Poetics of Sensibility, 74-93; and Robinson, Form and Fame, 15-110.
Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination, and in 1800 she completed *Lyrical Tales*, a poetical response to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) that Stuart Curran has called ‘the single most inventive use of metrics in English verse since the Restoration.’

Robinson’s goal to remake herself as a literary celebrity was successful. During the decade she developed friendships with William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and, speaking of her poetry, Coleridge called her ‘a woman of undoubted genius.’ At the same time, however, her health grew increasingly worse, and her financial situation, made more desperate by the irregular payment of her annuity, drove her into almost complete seclusion. When Robinson died on 26 December 1800 she left behind an extensive literary oeuvre and was praised for her genius in many quarters. At her funeral, however, only two mourners stood beside her daughter: the poetical satirist John Wolcott, better known as Peter Pindar, and her radical friend, William Godwin.

**The Incandescent 1790s**

That Godwin was chief mourner at her funeral is indicative of the radical nature of Robinson’s engagement in the revolutionary politics of the 1790s. Indeed, Godwin was one of the foremost writers of 1790s radical politics in a movement inspired by the American and French revolutions, which asserted the new philosophy of the ‘Rights of Man,’ and questioned the very nature of the political, social, and cultural structures that underpinned eighteenth-century British society.

As historical scholars have shown, the American Revolution of the 1770s and 1780s and the very current events of the Revolution in France had constituted a radical political upheaval in the British national psyche. Britain had already been shaken by the successful rebellion of a powerful colony, and, with the fall of the Bastille and the subsequent ratification of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789)

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by the revolutionary National Assembly in the course of the French Revolution, the
nation was confronted with the spectre of republicanism at its doorstep. While British
conservative commentators such as Edmund Burke loudly derided the actions of their
French neighbours and admonished the British people against fostering revolutionary
sentiments, more liberal British thinkers such as Thomas Paine and William Godwin
adopted the revolutionary language of the ‘Rights of Man’ to develop a discourse
through which the very core of traditional class hierarchy was called into question.28

The publication of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
(1790) ignited a political pamphlet war that raged throughout the 1790s. In his
*Reflections*, Burke demonstrates the British conservative fear of the threat that the
French Revolution posed to the structures underpinning British society:

In viewing this monstrous tragi-comic scene, the most opposite passions
necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate
contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and
horror.29

In highly sentimental language, Burke attempted to appeal to the emotions of the
British public, to arrest the building fervour over the Revolution, and to restore Britain
to the ‘dominion of kings.’30

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30 This phrase comes from a sermon by the Dissenting minister Richard Price, to which Burke was ostensibly replying in his *Reflections*. In his sermon Price celebrated the dawning of the French Revolution as the natural progress of Enlightenment: ‘And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.’ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), ed. Johnathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock, 1992), 49-50.
Burke’s pamphlet incited a flurry of liberal responses defending the principles of the French Revolution and ridiculing Burke for an argument built on sentimentalism without rational basis. Thomas Paine’s pamphlet, *Rights of Man* (1791) is the most widely known of these. In contrast to Burke, Paine adopts the plain language of reason to argue for the benefits of democracy over aristocracy, in which government should be the servant of the people:

> When we survey the wretched condition of man under the monarchical and hereditary systems of government, [...] it becomes evident that those systems are bad, and that a general revolution in the principle and construction of governments is necessary.  

In this powerful tract, regarded by many as the purest example of the radical political sentiment of the 1790s, Paine proposes the extension of republicanism to Britain and the abolition of the British monarchy.

William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) is the most extensive example of 1790s political radicalism. Ostensibly another reply to Burke, *Political Justice* is in fact an ambitious work of philosophy in which Godwin lays down his arguments for universal benevolence, utilitarianism, rationalism, and the rejection of sentimentalism. While previous radicals had challenged the British government directly at the historically specific moment of the French Revolution, Godwin extends this challenge to include a re-evaluation of the political and social structures underpinning society, from the redistribution of property, to the rejection of marriage in favour of individual rational unions not predicated on the state.

Women also participated in the debate on the ‘Rights of Man.’ As well as Robinson’s own contribution, *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790. In *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft ridicules Burke for his ‘reverence’ of ‘antiquity’ and his ‘gothic notions of beauty’ which are echoed in his linguistic ‘flights

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32 See Chapter 2 of this thesis.
of fancy’ and ‘slavish paradoxes.’ In opposition to Burke, Wollstonecraft constructs a platform of religious righteousness on which to stand the promulgators of the French Revolution. Burke, she argues, is a gothic hypocrite, who rejects the dawn of a new and better world and the ‘sacred rights’ of men in fear of losing his privileged rank in the old social order of the ancien régime.

**THE MONUMENTAL MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT**

It was in this incandescent environment that the discourse on the Rights of Man developed into a dialogue about the rights of woman. Fighting both for and against the new radicalism, British women entered the fray, and, as I will go on to discuss in Chapter 1, women such as Mary Robinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Maria Edgeworth, Priscilla Wakefield and Mary Ann Radcliffe extended the call for the rights of man to incorporate the rights of women, rejecting their socially designated place as the chattel of British society.

The most famous of these responses is Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Indeed, at one time or another almost all of the other radical women writers of the 1790s have been named either a ‘Wollstonecraftian,’ or a member of the ‘Wollstonecraft school.’ In Polwhele’s famous anti-radical poem, *The Unsex’d Females* (1798), for example, Wollstonecraft is depicted as the Amazonian leader of ‘A female band defying NATURE’S law’:

> See Wollstonecraft, whom no decorum checks,  
> Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex; […]  
> ‘Go, go, (she cries) ye tribes of melting maids, […]  
> And vindicate the Rights of womankind.’

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35 For a detailed discussion of *Rights of Woman*, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

In this poem, Polwhele names the writers Anna Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Yearsley and Mary Hays (who is referred to in a footnote as ‘evidently a Wollstonecraftian’) as responding specifically to Wollstonecraft’s summons. In truth the politics of these women ranged from the hints towards radical sympathies that can be detected in Smith’s novels, to the passionate and boldly revolutionary letters of Williams. This mattered little to the conservative critics of the time, however, who framed any radicalism on the part of 1790s women as evidence of a ‘Wollstonecraft school’ of women inspired by the author of the *Vindications* to revolt against the natural order of society. Against Wollstonecraft’s renown, the differences between these women fade into the background.

This dissolving of the differences between the feminisms of these women into the larger image of the ‘Wollstonecraft school’ is a problem that continues in modern feminist criticism. Indeed, in our times as in theirs, it is difficult to look at feminist writings of the 1790s without the figure of Wollstonecraft threatening to overshadow all other attempts at an articulation of the problems women faced in the social and political economy of late eighteenth-century Britain. As we have seen in the examples of Kelly and Ty, repeatedly Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* is held up as the model against with the worthiness of all other 1790s feminist writing is judged, and often ultimately found to fall short. The unwritten question that appears time and again in these modern feminist texts is this: is this woman *as feminist* as Wollstonecraft? Thus, in attempting to recuperate radical 1790s women into the feminist canon, Wollstonecraft has all too often become the yardstick against which their radicalism is measured.

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37 Polwhele, The Unsex’d Females, 20n.

38 This description is even given to fictional characters, as seen in a review of Mary Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* (1799), in which her heroine Martha is described as ‘a decidedly flippant female, apparently of the Wollstonecraft school.’ [Review of *The Natural Daughter*], *British Critic*, 16 (1800): 320-321 (320).

39 For an example of this in relation to the work of Mary Hays, see Mary A. Waters, “‘The First of a New Genus’: Mary Wollstonecraft as Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37.3 (2004): 415-434.
As Barbara Taylor has written, ‘Perched on her pedestal, Wollstonecraft has acquired a mythical patina that blurs and distorts her historical contours.’ For in fact, this ‘mythical patina’ also works to distort the historical contours of Wollstonecraft’s female contemporaries, so that when we look back at the 1790s the picture frequently appears to be one of a monolithic ‘Revolutionary feminism’ heralded by the unique genius of Wollstonecraft, to which other female writers adhered to a greater or lesser extent. However, if we look more closely at the many feminist voices that proliferated in the revolutionary decade, a rather different picture emerges.

In drawing out the differences between these revolutionary feminisms, Foucault’s work on genealogy becomes useful. In ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1977), Foucault lays out a theoretical process for overcoming these pitfalls in interpreting discursive history that he terms ‘genealogy.’ Foucault argues that genealogy differs from traditional historical study in that it ‘rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for “origins”.’ In other words, the role of the genealogist is not to write a history that consists of value judgements or assessments of historical events with reference to some assumed universal and unchanging ideals of right and wrong; it is not to judge the worth of a historical event or theory. Rather, Foucauldian genealogy examines ‘the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts’ as ‘events on the stage of historical process,’ revealing the conflicts within and between different discourses as they develop, and

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40 Taylor, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination, 9.
41 Kelly describes ‘Revolutionary feminism’ as one among several strands of eighteenth-century feminism including ‘Bluestocking feminism, Enlightenment feminism, Sentimental feminism, [and] Evangelical feminism.’ However, he fails to acknowledge that among ‘Revolutionary feminists’ there was more than one form of feminist thought. (Nor, indeed, does he gesture much towards the idea that there was more than one ‘Revolutionary feminist.’) Gary Kelly, Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 20.
exposing the ways in which certain discourses become dominant, so that their seeming
metahistoricity is revealed as a fiction.\(^\text{43}\)

This is not a ‘history of ideas’ in the traditional sense. Rather, it is an ‘effective
history,’ one that explores

not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of
forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against
those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other.’\(^\text{44}\)

In this way, genealogy makes visible the battles that are fought in the liminal spaces at
the borders of overlapping and interweaving discourses. It exposes the way in which
certain discursive narratives first establish dominance, and then both conceal that
process of establishment and repress those discourses that rival it, thus creating the
illusion of metahistoricity.

The usefulness of Foucault’s method of genealogy in the examination of radical
writings by 1790s women is twofold. First, it allows us to expose the complex and
intersecting web of discourses surrounding the discourses of gender and sexuality in the
eighteenth century. No longer approaching these texts as engaging exclusively in a sort
of monolithic ‘Revolutionary feminism,’ genealogy instead allows us to examine the
ways in which other discourses – such as discourses of nature, civilisation, religion,
theatricality, sensibility, celebrity, and genius – emerge in the texts to inflect each
writer’s unique understanding of woman’s rights and place in late eighteenth-century
British society. Second, in its rejection of the idea of a monolithic grand narrative of

\(^{43}\) Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,’ 86.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 88.
history, a genealogical approach would allow us finally to look beyond the dominant figure of Wollstonecraft and her ‘mythical patina’ to discover alternative and multivalent discourses of gender and sexuality as inflected with each writer’s unique experience of society.

In this thesis, I seek to map the complex interplay of discourses in which Robinson’s individual brand of ‘Revolutionary feminism’ was developed, to situate her in her specific historical and discursive context, and so to reveal the distinct historical and cultural forces that enabled and affected the creation of her vision. Indeed, I argue, Robinson’s vision is \textit{not} grounded in the shared development of some monolithic discourse that could readily be identified as a singular 1790s feminism. Rather, the development of her unique feminist voice comes about in dialogue with many discourses, and is inflected with the many conflicts that were waged within these discourses.

This explains why, when reading Robinson’s writings in the context of her specific historical and theoretical background, it becomes clear that the theatrical tradition of writings by eighteenth-century celebrity actresses is an important discourse in the development of her feminism, while it is all but absent from Wollstonecraft’s. In contrast, while Wollstonecraft’s work is steeped in the tradition of modern Dissenting and Enlightenment philosophy, Robinson, although influenced by these discourses, eschews them almost entirely in her writings, remarking in a postscript to her \textit{Letter to the Women of England} that her text is not intended for ‘the MALE disciples of MODERN PHILOSOPHY,’ whom Wollstonecraft addresses in her \textit{Vindications}.\footnote{Robinson, \textit{A Letter}, 97.}

This is not, then, a failure on Robinson’s part to live up to Wollstonecraft’s feminist example. Rather, Robinson’s specific position on the borders of the contemporary and shifting discourses of theatricality, fame, and sexuality position her
uniquely to respond to the rapidly changing politics of the 1790s, and to develop a theatrical feminism that would be adequate to incorporate the position of the public woman on display in late eighteenth-century society.

**TAKING ACCOUNT OF THEORY: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE RADICAL REJECTION OF INCOMMENSURABLE SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

In trying to understand the unique development of Robinson’s feminism, postmodern theories of the body and sexuality can become productive tools for criticism. These theories question the assumed stability of historical categories of sex and gender, and in reading eighteenth-century feminism through the lens of these theories we can begin to recognise the ways in which 1790s feminists such as Robinson were able to manipulate the shifting ground on which these discourses were based. In using these theories to explicate Robinson’s feminism, I do not wish to make an anachronistic reading of postmodern theory into Robinson’s work. Rather, I seek to make use of the framework and language that these theories develop, so as better to articulate the complicated turns of Robinson’s particular manipulation of eighteenth-century sex and gender discourse.

I have already established the usefulness of Michel Foucault’s theory of genealogy to an understanding of Robinson’s feminism. Thomas Laqueur’s work on the one/two-sex models is also significant in this respect. In ‘Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology’ (1987), Laqueur exposes the ways in which seemingly fixed categories of sex and gender as we understand them today are in fact historically and culturally specific:

Sometime in the late eighteenth century human sexual nature changed. [...] [T]he old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence. An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man.46

In this seminal work, Laqueur argues that, prior to the eighteenth century, male and female bodies were read and understood within a ‘one sex’ model that positioned all bodies hierarchically within a scheme that viewed female bodies as less perfect versions of male bodies, different only in degree. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a ‘new biology’ had gained ascendancy: a ‘two sex’ model that positioned male and female bodies as different in every conceivable way, as diametrically opposed and ‘incommensurable.’

In the course of this shift, cultural and scientific discourses of the female orgasm underwent a change from a belief in women’s uncontrollable voracity to an assumption of the non-existence of female desire.

This shift from ‘a one sex/flesh model to a two sex/flesh model,’ was not, however, the ‘consequence of increased specific scientific knowledge.’ Rather, this discursive shift in the understanding of male and female bodies occurred in line with the epistemological and political changes of the Enlightenment:

The new biology, with its search for fundamental differences between the sexes, […] emerged at precisely the time when the foundations of the old social order were irremediably shaken, when the basis for a new order of sex and gender became a critical issue of political theory and practice.

As social contract theory and the spreading calls for the ‘Rights of Man’ began to undermine all of the old ‘natural’ hierarchies of the eighteenth-century cultural consciousness, the new biology of incommensurability provided a new justification for the subordination of women: ‘wherever boundaries were threatened arguments for sexual difference were shoved into the breach.’

Laqueur’s one/two-sex model helps to explain how Robinson could in her feminist theory make use of the positive aspects of both the one and two sex models, allowing her to reject the one-sex hierarchical model that privileged men as more

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47 Laqueur, Making Sex, 11.
48 Ibid., 8, 10.
50 Ibid., 18.
perfect than women, while at the same time also rejecting the two-sex language of incommensurable sexual difference that rendered women passionless. As I will explain in Chapter 1, inspired by the radical possibilities that she detected in the gender masquerade of her theatrical foremothers, Robinson turns away from the terms of biological incommensurability that were central to the new ideology of what Laqueur terms the two-sex model. Instead, in her writings Robinson borrows from the older discourse of the ‘one-sex’ model the more fluid notion of sex and gender as governed by behaviour rather than biology. In taking the positive aspects of both cultural models, Robinson is thus able to carve a new space for women beyond the limitations of the ‘female’ virtue of chastity. Instead of these divergent paths for men and women, I will argue, Robinson develops a new and more fluid theory of sex and gender for both sexes that would allow them to transcend the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference in the union of the twin powers of ‘masculine’ rational virtue and ‘feminine’ benevolent sensibility.

In this conception of the fluidity of gender as articulated through theatrical acts, the work of Judith Butler also becomes useful. Indeed, in ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988), Butler argues that theatrical performance provides an interesting parallel to the performance of gender in culture that the theatrical woman could use to her advantage: ‘the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.’\(^5\) For Butler, the body is a ‘materiality that bears meaning,’ and as such it is ‘fundamentally dramatic.’\(^5\) Like the theatrical performer, the woman has a prescribed role to follow within the discourses of sex and gender. However, at the same time, both actor and woman have spaces of potential within those roles with which to experiment with ‘interpretation’: ‘just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally

restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.\textsuperscript{53}

The important point is this. If to be a woman in culture is to play a role, then gender must be in some way ‘performative,’ or theatrical. If this is the case, then identity is no longer determined by gender: ‘there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender,’ and gender itself could be revealed as a ‘regulatory fiction’:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinility or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed.\textsuperscript{54}

Once we understand gender not as an identity but as an act, we become open to the possibility that gender could be changed through the means of performance. As Butler explains, ‘Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure.’\textsuperscript{55} It is this ‘anxiety’ and ‘pleasure’ in the performance of gender that can be read into Robinson’s theatrical feminism. Inscribing ‘subversive performances’ of gender and sexuality in her writings, Robinson works to ‘expand the cultural field’ of sex and gender discourse, and so begins to imagine a new possibility for women of the 1790s: that a woman skilled in theatrical performance could perhaps extract herself from the limiting boundaries of eighteenth-century sex and gender, if she could be daring enough to choose to play a different role.\textsuperscript{56}

One could argue that my decision to refer to Robinson’s ‘feminism’ is anachronistic. I acknowledge the point. Indeed, Robinson’s thinking about women does not easily fit into the feminist historical canon as it has thus far been established, which is perhaps why her writings have not been given the attention they justly deserve. However, my decision to use ‘feminism,’ rather than ‘protofeminism,’ in my discussion of Robinson is an important one. As we move into a postmodern conception of

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 526.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 528.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 531.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 531.
feminism as plural and intersectional – a movement speaking with many voices – the difference of Robinson’s feminism and the fact that her feminism was articulated before feminism itself was defined become new reasons for inclusion in, rather than exclusion from, our ever-expanding understanding of feminist history.

Indeed, Robinson has much to teach us. If a new historically and discursively specific reading of Robinson’s feminism can expand our understanding of what opposing oneself to ‘the injustice of mental subordination’ might have meant to a woman of the eighteenth century, then perhaps we might also learn to pay more attention to the productive conflicts within modern feminist discourse, to listen to the voices that have been marginalised by their position in society, and so expand, too, our understanding of what opposing oneself to gendered injustices could mean for women of the twenty-first century.

MARY ROBINSON’S FEMINIST VISION

In Robinson’s 1790s writings we can see this playful exploration of the fluidity of gender develop into a radical and unique feminist vision that manifested itself in three main avenues. In the first instance, Robinson’s work enacts a bold rejection of the discursive model of incommensurable sexual difference that located ‘female’ virtue in the sexual virtue of chastity. As I shall explore in Chapter 1, in its stead Robinson turns to the subversive performances of her theatrical foremothers through which to develop a new conception of virtue, one drawn out of older models of performative masculinity that had at its core the celebration of the intellect, honour, and self-defence as objects to which women as well as men could aspire.

Secondly, in opposition to this discourse of female sexual virtue, Robinson works in her writings to recuperate and privilege desire, sensibility and passion as essential to the development of her unique notion of transcendent genius. First through an identification with Marie Antoinette as a woman of self-display (Chapter 2) and then
in a productive performance of the voice of Sappho as a disembodied symbol of female desire (Chapter 3), Robinson articulates a new conception of the female genius as one who could transcend the cultural limits of her sex, to reclaim passion, and to act as a radical role model for women of the future.

This vision of the transcendent female genius is not grounded in an essentialist understanding of woman’s nature. Rather, Robinson’s understanding of the genius is one who unites intellectual powers with sensibility, ‘the purest and most feminine passion of the soul.’ Sensibility here is not feminine in the sense that it naturally belongs only to women. Rather, it is feminine as designated by culture. As I will explain in Chapter 1, throughout her writings Robinson understands the foundations of gender – and the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ – as cultural.

My interpretation here follows Susan Wolfson, who argues in *Borderlines* (2006) that Wollstonecraft registers a ‘revolution [...] on the politics of language’ by ‘putting the language of gender into interrogative syntax’ to render words like ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ as ‘mobile or even negligible descriptives.’ I propose that Robinson also uses gendered language in this way. For Robinson, some terms are ‘masculine’ (reason) and some ‘feminine’ (sensibility), but this is a cultural designation. Her difference from Wollstonecraft lies in Robinson's celebration of certain ‘feminine’ traits. Where Wollstonecraft expands chastity for all, Robinson expands sensibility for all. For Robinson, ‘masculine’ rationality and ‘feminine’ sensibility are accessible to both men and women, and it requires a union of these traits in either gender to produce a truly transcendent genius.

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58 Regarding the ‘masculine,’ Robinson writes in the *Letter* that ‘prejudice (or policy) has endeavoured, and indeed too successfully, to cast an odium on what is called a masculine woman; or, to explain the meaning of the word, a woman of enlightened understanding.’ Similarly, Robinson’s ‘most feminine passion of the soul’ is available to men as well as women, as she goes on to ask, ‘How few men have we seen so nobly uniting the softest passion of the soul, with the enthusiasm of valour,’ suggesting that this ‘feminine’ passion is in fact accessible to both sexes. Robinson, *Letter*, 72, 60.
Indeed, this leads us to the third aspect of Robinson’s feminism, which consists in a radical critique of the anxieties that lie at the heart of 1790s masculinity, exposed in Robinson’s work as the root cause of men’s paranoid suppression of women. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, in her 1797 novel, *Walsingham*, Robinson demonstrates how the crisis of masculinity in the 1790s prevents Walsingham from fulfilling his potential as a man, because he lacks the sensibility necessary to develop a secure interiorised identity that would allow him to relate productively to others. Opposed to Walsingham in the novel is the cross-dressed Sir Sidney, who transcends this interiorised anxiety in a subversive performance of gender play. In Chapter 5, I show how, in *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson finally envisaged a man of radical sensibility in the character of lord Francis. Through this revolutionary figure, Robinson imagines a man who could finally join woman in the transcendent space of the liberated revolutionary family.

Beginning with a study of the writings of eighteenth-century theatrical women, then, in Chapter 1 I argue that Robinson’s feminism must be understood within a theatrical context to appreciate the unique radicalism of her feminist vision. Tracing the development of a discourse of eighteenth-century female theatrical memoirs, I position Robinson in her specific context to demonstrate why she couldn’t, as Wollstonecraft did, settle for a feminism of ‘modesty, temperance, and self-denial.’ In a comparative reading of Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) and Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* (1792), I explicate the differences between these tracts in order to fully expose the boldness of Robinson’s feminism.

In Chapter 2 I turn back to the early years of the decade to explore how Robinson’s powerful identification with Marie Antoinette as a woman on display came into conflict with her joyful celebration of the French Revolution. While in 1790 Robinson could express the hope that the Revolution’s inculcation of the ‘Rights of

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Man’ could hold the potential for female emancipation, by 1793 this hope dissolves into a mournful eulogy for the executed queen, who for Robinson represents the death of the dream of the radical female citizen in the French Republic.

Following the execution of Marie Antoinette, I argue, Robinson turns to the disembodied voice of Sappho as a new way to articulate female desire, and in Chapter 3 I explain how this performance of female desire through Robinson’s Sappho poetry develops into a radical vision of the transcendent female genius who could act as a productive foremother for the suppressed women of the eighteenth century. In *The False Friend* (1799), Robinson demonstrates the fatal situation of eighteenth-century women who lack these productive foremothers, and are thus destined to replicate the patriarchal scripts of passive femininity. However, in Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England* the figure of Sappho resurfaces as a conduit through which Robinson could herself take up the position of productive foremother, through the performative voice of the pseudonymous Anne Frances Randall.

In Chapter 4 I examine the 1797 novel, *Walsingham*, to demonstrate how Robinson also turned her performative critique of gender on men through the performative space of the masquerade. Through her antihero, Walsingham, Robinson demonstrates the ‘crisis of masculinity’ that results from the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference, as Walsingham anxiously cycles through different performances of masculinity in a desperate attempt to be recognized as a ‘good man.’ Entering the liminal world of the masquerade, Walsingham’s mask of benevolent masculinity slips, leading to his abduction and rape of Amelia. Opposed to Walsingham in the novel is the cross-dressed Sir Sidney, a woman who is celebrated as the best of men, despite her biology. Uniting the best qualities of cultural masculinity (reason) and femininity (sensibility), Sidney implodes the binary structures of sex and gender to create an image of a new and better citizen.
Finally in Chapter 5 I turn to Robinson’s final novel, *The Natural Daughter* (1799), to explain how this radical feminist critique of gender is moulded to utopian ends, as Robinson rewrites the pessimistic fragmentary ending of Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* (1797). While the shared maternity of Wollstonecraft’s heroines only seems possible in a retreat from society, in *The Natural Daughter* the heroines’ experience as theatrical women imbues them with a powerful sense of ‘innate worth’ that enables them actively to oppose the patriarchal suppression from which Maria and Jemima must flee.\(^61\) Locating the novel’s action during the Jacobin Terror, Robinson works to reclaim the original values of the Revolution from their corruption by the misogynist Jacobins. In the novel’s climactic scene, a radical act of performative speech both names and kills the father/husband patriarch that haunts the pages of both novels. Into the place of this monstrous patriarch steps lord Francis, a man of radical masculinity who joins the women in a utopian vision of the revolutionary family.

In past discussions of Robinson’s works, many critics have sought to position her either as a Romantic, or as a writer of the eighteenth century.\(^62\) However, I do not agree with either designation. Although Robinson’s final book of poetry, *Lyrical Tales* (1800), is certainly Romantic, the same cannot be said for the majority of her writing, which is very much engaged in the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility, and in the ornate surfaces of the Della Cruscan school.\(^63\) Similarly, although she does engage


\(^{62}\) Critics who position Robinson as a Romantic include Judith Pascoe, who in *Romantic Theatricality* seeks to locate Robinson in ‘a more inclusive performance’ of Romanticism (11), and Daniel Robinson, who in *Form and Fame* calls her ‘an important Romantic-era writer’ (2). Critics who position her as a writer of the eighteenth century include Jerome McGann, who in *The Poetics of Sensibility* locates her in the specifically eighteenth-century context of Della Cruscanism and sensibility (94), and Anne Mellor, who in ‘Making An Exhibition of Her Self,’ again emphasises Robinson’s sensibility, writing that ‘within this eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, [Robinson’s] female poetic creation is identical with the expression of emotional pain’ (291).

\(^{63}\) Moreover, I am uneasy with the way that any discussion of ‘Romanticism’ inevitably results in comparison to the ‘big Six’ poets. While Robinson did exchange letters and discuss poetry with Coleridge, these writers did not have a significant impact on the majority of her writings. Further, it seems peculiar to designate a feminist writer as Romantic, considering how stringently masculinist Romanticism would become. See Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
with Pope, Milton, and the eighteenth-century discourse of enlightenment theory, these are not the key touchstones in her writing.

Rather, I place Robinson specifically as a writer of the 1790s. This is a decade in which everything is changing, in which all the old ideologies are coming under question, but in which, importantly, the new ideologies have not yet gained ascendancy. It is, to use Foucault's terminology, an ‘event of history’: a moment which records the ‘jolts,’ ‘surprises,’ ‘unsteady victories’ and ‘unpalatable defeats’ of clashing and overlapping discourses. Robinson begins her literary career at the dawn of the French Revolution, with all the political promises and new ways of thinking (and talking) about being that it heralded, and she dies before the Napoleonic wars could finally put an end to the hopefulness of writers such as Helen Maria Williams in their enthusiastic reports on the radical possibilities of the Revolution. Robinson is influenced by eighteenth-century theory – as seen in her use of the theatrical discourse of celebrity actresses and the older models of sex and gender fluidity – and she is influenced by Romantic theory – such as the idea of the poet as prophet, sublime transcendence, and the importance of posterity – but, more than either of these, it is the revolutionary decade that makes her.

Prior to this decade, there was no common language of ‘natural rights' on which to build a feminist argument. Following this decade, the conservative British retreat from radical thinking – even among the Romantics – made this sort of feminist manipulation of gendered language much more difficult – perhaps even impossible – to undertake. It is the revolutionary decade that allows her to turn her theatrical knowledge into a subversive performance of politicised female sexuality. It is the revolutionary decade that makes possible her experimentation with gendered language, and her vision of transcendence for both men and women from the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference.

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64 Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy History,’ 80.
65 For a discussion of theatricality and gender fluidity in Robinson’s writings, see Chapter 1 of this thesis. For a discussion of Romantic sublime transcendence, posterity, and the poet as prophet, see Chapter 3.
INTRODUCTION

In a letter to William Godwin in the final year of her life, Robinson articulated her vision of a ‘perfect being’:

But since I first felt the power of discrimination, since I adored the excellent part of mankind, and execrated the base, I have been a wanderer in search of some thing, approaching to my idea of a perfect being. [...] I have fancied that I found the graces of feeling and sincerity, in woman; the fascinations of Truth, Genius, and Sensibility in Man.  

Thus, through the development of a feminist discourse grounded in the performative space of the theatre, Mary Robinson works in her writings to create these ‘perfect beings,’ rescuing women from the limiting cultural space of chastity in order to reinstate them as desiring subjects with the radical potential for transcendent genius. Alongside this vision of the powerful woman of passionate genius, Robinson articulates a new figure of radical masculinity as one who unites masculine reason with feminine sensibility to implode the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference.

The result of this, I argue, was a vision of the future quite different from Wollstonecraft’s better-known brand of ascetic feminism, with its anxieties about the dangerous excesses of female desire. Instead, Robinson’s feminist theory works to rescue the original values of the French Revolution from beneath the ravages of Jacobin corruption to envision a new and radically egalitarian revolutionary family. Beyond the limitations of patriarchal ideas of incommensurable sexual difference, Robinson works through her unique expression of theatrical feminism to envision a utopian family grouping, in which woman would no longer have to renounce her sexual body in order to engage with society, and man could finally accept her as his equal.

CHAPTER ONE

'Disdain[ing] the drudgery of servile imitation': Mary Robinson’s Theatrical Feminism

The writer of this letter, though avowedly of the same school, disdains the drudgery of servile imitation. The same subject may be argued in a variety of ways; and though this letter may not display the philosophical reasoning with which ‘The Rights of Woman’ abounded; it is not less suited to the purpose. For it requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence.

Mary Robinson, A Letter to the Women of England (1799)

In A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination (1799), Mary Robinson laid out the full extent of the feminist manifesto that she had been gradually constructing in essays, poetry, and fiction throughout the decade. Robinson was not the first woman writer of the 1790s to publish a feminist tract. Preceding her were an impressive array of texts by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Maria Edgeworth, Priscilla Wakefield, and Mary Ann Radcliffe, to name only the most prominent of these new feminist voices. Despite this eruption of feminist voices in the 1790s, Robinson felt she had something quite unique to say on the subject, as is seen in a footnote in the opening pages of the pamphlet. Here, she acknowledges her debt to these writers in claiming to be ‘avowedly of the same school’ as Wollstonecraft, but nevertheless boldly ‘disdains the drudgery of servile imitation,’ arguing that ‘the same subject may be argued in a variety of ways.’

Despite this determined claim to originality, modern critics of Robinson’s Letter frequently conflate her feminism with Wollstonecraft’s. Anne Mellor, for example, finds nothing new in Robinson’s tract, writing that the Letter was only ‘directly

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67 Mary Robinson, A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination, with Anecdotes. By Anne Frances Randall (London: 1799), 2. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
repeating Wollstonecraft and Hays’s arguments.\textsuperscript{68} Similarly, Judith Pascoe mentions Robinson’s \textit{Letter} only in passing – and only in relation to Wollstonecraft – writing that ‘Robinson sounds most like Wollstonecraft when she is writing in Wollstonecraft’s favourite mode: the polemical tract.’\textsuperscript{69} Others appear to have agreed with the \textit{British Critic}’s review of the \textit{Letter}, that ‘it is so desultory, that to give an analysis of it, if it were worth while, would be impracticable.’\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, to date, a search of the MLA’s International Bibliography reveals only three published papers on the \textit{Letter}, and the text is still routinely left out of longer critical studies of Robinson’s writings.\textsuperscript{71}

Where critics have acknowledged a difference from Wollstonecraft, it is usually located in the form, rather than in the theory of Robinson’s argument. Jane Hodson, for example, writes that Robinson’s ‘rhetorical strategy’ in the \textit{Letter} is ‘notably different from that adopted by either Hays or Wollstonecraft,’ but does not consider the content of the arguments themselves.\textsuperscript{72} Likewise, Ashley Cross locates Robinson’s difference from Wollstonecraft in her ‘insistent return to the literary,’ concentrating her reading on Robinson’s list of female intellectual accomplishments in the \textit{Letter}.\textsuperscript{73} As I will discuss later in the chapter, Adriana Craciun is the only critic to take seriously the feminist content of the \textit{Letter}, but here, too, it is Robinson’s similarity to Wollstonecraft, rather


\textsuperscript{69} Judith Pascoe, \textit{Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 127. For other critics who dismiss Robinson as a mimic of Wollstonecraft, most notably Gary Kelly and Eleanor Ty, see the Introduction to this thesis.

\textsuperscript{70} [Review of A Letter to the Women of England], \textit{British Critic}, 14 (1799): 682.

\textsuperscript{71} As well as Pascoe’s \textit{Romantic Theatricality}, two recent books with extended studies of Robinson that fail to examine the \textit{Letter} are Eleanor Ty’s \textit{Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), and Amy Garnai’s \textit{Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).


\textsuperscript{73} Ashley Cross, ‘He-She Philosophers and Other Literary Bugbears: Mary Robinson’s \textit{A Letter to the Women of England},’ \textit{Women’s Writing}, 9.1 (2002): 53-68 (57).
than their difference, that is discussed, as Craciun draws comparisons between the
depictions of physical bodies in their feminist texts.74

In this chapter, I argue that Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England* in fact
demonstrates a feminism that is in many ways wholly different from that of
Wollstonecraft and other 1790s radical women. This difference, I suggest, is rooted in
Robinson’s immersion in the eighteenth-century discourses of theatricality and
celebrity. Tracing the complex discourse of eighteenth-century femininity in
conjunction with what Laqueur has termed the rise of the ‘two-sex model’ of
incommensurable sexual difference, I will demonstrate how the eighteenth-century
celebrity actress, as a public woman whose sexual virtue was always suspect, was
located in a unique position on the borders of acceptable femininity. While the actress
was disbarred from easily claiming the chastity that formed the central tenet of late
eighteenth-century femininity, at the same time, this separation from normative
femininity gave her the opportunity to explore different ways of being – or performing –
woman.

In a genealogical analysis of writings by eighteenth-century actresses and other
‘scandalous’ women, I demonstrate how this liminal position in fact provides a space
for theatrical women to find alternative ways of accessing virtue through a subversive
performance of sex and gender. They achieve this, I argue, through an articulation of
virtue more usually defined as masculine: a virtue of intellect, honour and self-defence.
In some cases, this discursive cross-dressing translates to a physical cross-dressing, as
seen in the case of the actress Charlotte Charke, and the complex character of the
Chevalier(e) d’Eon. These performative women demonstrate the ways in which those
who stood outside the boundaries of eighteenth-century femininity could begin to
manipulate shifting models of gender and sexuality. In so doing, they were able to push

74 Adriana Craciun, ‘Violence Against Difference: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson and Women’s
against the limiting discourse of incommensurable sexual difference, and so perform
different ways of being woman in eighteenth-century society.

Turning to a close analysis of Robinson’s *Letter*, I argue that the feminism she
develops within this treatise is deeply embedded in these eighteenth-century theatrical
discourses. Building her feminism on the models of subversive performance
demonstrated in this theatrical cross-dressing, Robinson takes the masculine conception
of virtue articulated in these earlier texts and transforms it through a playful
manipulation of gendered language into a bold call for woman’s right to self-defence; a
project very different to Wollstonecraft’s earlier vision in her *Vindication on the Rights
of Woman* of a feminism of ‘modesty, temperance and self-denial.’

In the final part of the chapter, I turn to the complex discourse of eighteenth-
century sensibility as evinced in both Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* and
Robinson’s *Letter*. While Wollstonecraft demonstrates a deep suspicion of the dangers
of sensibility for women, I argue, Robinson works in her tract to separate the positive
aspects of sensibility from the negative, rescuing it as a ‘feminine passion’ (60) to be
united with masculine virtue. For Robinson, I assert, the union of these pre-eminent
gendered categories culminates in an image of the ‘omnipotent’ (73) transcendent
genius: a category to which women – and especially theatrical women, with their skills
in subversive performance and their refusal to renounce feminine passion in their claim
to virtue – were most poised to attain.

Throughout the chapter, I seek to reject the argument, as Robinson herself
sought to do, that she engaged in the ‘drudgery of servile imitation.’ Rather, I wish to
propose that Robinson did in fact directly and uniquely confront the ideological and
feminist issues that Wollstonecraft is so famous for. It is only by resituating Robinson
in her cultural theatrical heritage, rather than looking at the discourses of gender and

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sexuality theory in isolation, that we can begin to understand the true extent of her radical political project. While both writers were confronted by the same systematic misogyny and the same problems of discursive representation, each woman’s unique subject position led them to ask different questions and battle different contradictions in her writing, leading them to draw different conclusions about the ideal place of woman in society. In a genealogical analysis of Robinson’s Letter, I will draw on the interweaving discourses of gender, sexuality, theatricality and celebrity, along with the contemporary discourse of Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman itself, in order to expose the ways in which Robinson’s text displays a unique discourse of its own: a discourse of distinctly theatrical feminism that is an essential component in our reading of Robinson’s earlier writings on sex and gender, in our understanding of the developing feminism of the 1790s, and, indeed, in our engagement with the history of feminist theory as a whole.

‘THE CATASTROPHE OF A FEMALE PHILOSOPHER’: MAKING THE CASE FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS AT THE END OF THE REVOLUTIONARY DECADE

Such was the catastrophe of a female philosopher of the new order […]. It will be read with disgust by every female who has any pretensions to delicacy […]. Licentious as the times are, we trust it will obtain no imitators of the heroine in this country.76

In a review of William Godwin’s scandalous biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman (1798), the European Magazine expressed horror at the idea that any woman might wish to imitate the ‘catastrophe’ of such a ‘licentious’ ‘female philosopher.’ The dramatic tone of the article signals a political environment very different from the one in which Wollstonecraft had published her Vindication of the Rights of Woman to great acclaim only six years before. Between 1792 and 1798, opposition to the French Revolution had crystallised. While in the early 1790s writers such as Thomas Paine, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft could

write enthusiastically on the merits of natural rights and revolution, following Britain’s declaration of war with France in 1793, the 1794 treason trials of Thomas Hardy and John Horne Tooke, and the sedition laws of 1795, the political atmosphere became, as Gregory Claeys phrases it, ‘extraordinarily repressive,’ and in the latter part of the decade ‘there were thus few attempts either hostile or friendly to analyse the principles of the revolution.’ 77 It was in this antagonistic environment that Mary Robinson published A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination (1799).

Robinson was not the first woman to turn the rights of man debate into a call for the rights of woman, and it is important to understand her Letter in the context of a popular debate over the place of women in Britain. Indeed, the 1790s was unprecedented in its multitude of female voices calling for an end to women’s oppression. The most famous of these treatises is Wollstonecraft A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). In this bold essay, Wollstonecraft extends Paine’s argument for the universal rights of man to women, progressively claiming that women ‘ought to have representatives’ and a ‘direct share’ in ‘the deliberations of government.’ 78 This radical claim for women’s rights had already been urged in France by Olympe de Gouges, who in 1791 composed The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen in response to the National Assembly’s constitutional Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789). In her Declaration, de Gouges had argued for absolute equality with men: ‘Mothers, daughters, sisters, representatives of the nation all, are demanding to be incorporated into the national assembly. […] [T]hey have resolved to expound the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of women.’ 79

78 Mary Wollstonecraft, Rights of Woman, 228.
Following these rallying cries in both England and France, there was an influx of pamphlets by radical women. Mary Hays, a close friend of Wollstonecraft and an active participant in the radical political life of the 1790s, published two essays on the subject. In *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793), Hays argues, among other radical subjects, against the ‘gothic barbarity’ of the ‘mental bondage’ that ‘enslaves the female mind.’\(^{80}\) In *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women* (1798), she rails against the ‘state of PERPETUAL BABYISM’ in which women are held in order to be kept obedient to men, and promotes in its stead a Wollstonecraftian understanding of the rational female mind.\(^{81}\)

Maria Edgeworth’s *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) positions itself rather within the discourse of female education than directly within a more political vein. However, its contents belie this presentation, as a ‘champion of the rights of woman’ appears within the opening pages. In this *Letter* Edgeworth mounts a defence of women’s moral and intellectual equality that echoes the style and arguments of Wollstonecraft and Hays, first through the pen of her fictional male champion, and then through the letters of a self-styled female ‘philosopher,’ in which she advises her friend to choose the life of rational domestic affection over that of dissipation.\(^{82}\)

Among less radical women, too, the issue of woman’s oppression becomes a concern. In Priscilla Wakefield’s contribution, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), she argues fairly conservatively for an improved education for women that would allow them to fulfil their potential usefulness, and fully develop the ‘distinguishing characteristics of excellence’ that she sees as specific to the female sex.\(^{83}\)

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\(^{83}\) Priscilla Wakefield, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for its Improvement* (London: 1798), 4.
Mary Ann Radcliffe’s *The Female Advocate* (1799) represents one of the final pamphlets of this sort in the decade. Here, Radcliffe distances herself entirely from ‘the Amazonian spirit of a Wollstonecraft’ [*sic*], to call for ‘the real rights of women’: the protection of men over those women who ‘are held down by the most powerful influence of custom and misrepresentation’ from fulfilling their potentials.\(^{84}\)

It is interesting to note here the way in which the calls for women’s rights becomes increasingly conservative through the course of the decade. In the early years of the 1790s, the radicalism of Wollstonecraft’s call for female representation in government was matched by Hays’s outright rejection of the ‘mental bondage’ of women, and Edgeworth’s strong defence of women’s mental equality and the ‘female right to literature.’\(^{85}\) However, just a few years later, Wakefield’s pamphlet can only call for women’s freedom in the ‘sphere of feminine action,’ in which they must conform to the ‘boundaries’ of ‘propriety,’\(^{86}\) and Radcliffe, writing in the same year as Robinson, wholly rejects the ‘Amazonian’ radicalism of Wollstonecraft in favour of a somewhat nostalgic appeal to men’s protection from oppression and injury, reminiscent of the ancient chivalry that Burke had yearned for in his *Reflections* at the beginning of the decade.\(^{87}\)

In 1792, the general attitude of the periodical press towards Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was that voiced by the *Monthly Review*: ‘In the class of philosophers, the *author* of this treatise – whom we will not offend by styling authoress – has a right to a distinguished place.’\(^{88}\) By 1799, on the other hand, and following Godwin’s publication of Wollstonecraft’s *Memoirs*, the political climate had

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84 Mary Ann Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate; or, An Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (London: 1799), xi, x, viii; original emphasis.


87 Although Hays published her more radical *Appeal* in 1798, the overall trend is still one of increasing conservatism.

changed, and there was no higher praise for the conservative writer Hannah More than Richard Polwhele’s estimation that she was ‘a character, in all points, diametrically opposite to Miss Wollstonecraft.’ Indeed, Radcliffe herself acknowledges that the early years of the decade constituted ‘a period, perhaps, more favourable for publishing than the present,’ in a Preface to her *Female Advocate* that reads almost like an apology for writing at all, as comparatively conservative as her ideas may have been.

This change in political mood can be traced to the crackdown on radical writing by the British government in the midyears of the 1790s under the instruction of William Pitt, during which time revolutionary sympathisers who expressed their opinions in print could be arrested and charged with sedition or even treason. As Claeys details:

Government pamphleteers were enlisted by the droves. Postmasters were ordered to report the circulation of seditious material. Reformers were hounded from their meeting places. *Rights of Man* was proscribed, and Paine was torched in effigy throughout the country. Loose words with vaguely disloyal implications were prosecuted ruthlessly, and employers were encouraged to sack radical workmen.

The ‘panic and hysteria’ that pervaded at this time is demonstrated in two of Robinson’s later novels, *Walsingham* (1797) and *The False Friend* (1799), both of which feature government spies who attempt to wrong-foot the novels’ innocent heroes. When Walsingham is temporarily imprisoned, his jailor describes his membership of a public political club reminiscent of the infamous London Corresponding Society, in which he spies on his fellow members: ‘I gets tipped now and then, for vatching the patriots. […] I serves the public, and vatches the people at the same time.’

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94. Mary Robinson, *Walsingham*; or, *The Pupil of Nature*, ed. Julie A. Shaffer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 251. As Claeys explains, the London Corresponding Society was ‘the first large-scale plebeian democratic organisation in Britain.’ It sought universal suffrage for men, and was shut
False Friend, Gertrude is bribed with the accusation of sedition by the conniving Mrs Ferret, who steals an important packet of letters from her: ‘It looks and smells like treason,’ she insists, ‘and it is the duty of every loyal subject to be careful. […] Besides, I am handsomely rewarded for keeping an eye upon certain people of certain opinions.’

Coupled with the shocking revelations of Godwin’s Memoirs, which once and for all rendered all advocates of the ‘rights of woman’ in the public mind as ‘philosophical wanton[s], breaking down the bars intended to restrain licentiousness,’ this constituted a great blow to the development of the British radical movement, which failed to recover momentum until the mid nineteenth century.

It was in this hostile political environment, then, that Mary Robinson published her Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination, under the pseudonymous title of Anne Frances Randall. The critical reception of this pamphlet immediately demonstrates the vitriolic fervour with which the conservative periodicals regarded Wollstonecraft and her feminist contemporaries. The Gentleman’s Magazine intones dismissively that ‘Mrs. R avows herself of the school of Wolstencroft [sic]; and that is enough for all who have any regard to decency, order, or prudence, to avoid her company.’

The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine is more bellicose:

Miss Anne Frances Randall, then, belongs to the ‘legion of Wollstonecrafts,’ whose office is to ‘undermine poison.’ Though we are not ‘profound scholars’ enough to comprehend the art of ‘undermining poison,’ either literal or metaphorical, yet we know what it is to diffuse the poison of corruption through the mass of society. This, we conceive, is the peculiar office of ‘the legion of Wollstonecrafts.’ It is our province, and our duty, to meet this legion; (‘for they are many!’) and, since ‘no man can bind them, no, not, with chains,’ to endeavour to ‘cast them out!’

96 [Review of Memoirs of the Author], European Magazine and London Review, 250.
98 [Review of A Letter to the Women of England], Anti-Jacobin Review, 3 (1799): 144-146 (145); original emphasis.
Even the usually sympathetic *Monthly Review* dismisses the text with ridicule, ‘humbly beg[ging]’ to remind ‘this literary Thalestris’ that her argument is entirely without merit.\(^9^9\)

At the same time, however, while the very act of writing the tract connected Robinson (or ‘Anne Frances Randall’) with ‘the Wollstonecraft school’ in the minds of her reviewers, these critics also acknowledge the obvious differences in Robinson’s text from that of Wollstonecraft. For the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, Robinson’s text teems with ‘novelties,’ and the reviewers sarcastically ‘congratulate’ her ‘on her discovery of a new mode of acquiring so honourable a distinction’ as that of an ‘entitled philosopher.’\(^1^0^0\)

Although, in the eyes of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, of course, these are ‘novelties’ of the worst kind, this reading of the text is a useful starting point from which to view the differences between Robinson’s text and those of her radical female contemporaries.

As I have already demonstrated, Robinson simultaneously marks her allegiance to and difference from Wollstonecraft in her rejection of ‘the drudgery of servile imitation’ (2). Declaring that ‘[t]he same subject may be argued in a variety of ways,’ Robinson steps away from ‘the philosophical reasoning with which “The Rights of Woman” abounds’ (2) in favour of a rather different approach. As innocuous as this statement may at first seem, this is not merely modesty at work. Rather, it is a bold statement of intent, signallling to the reader that within this text would be a very different set of discourses at work from those employed by other participants in the rights of wo/man debate. Where Wollstonecraft and Hays had drawn on the contemporary philosophical discourses of Dissenting and Enlightenment theories to promote their cause, in her text Robinson turns away from ‘the MALE disciples of

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\(^1^0^0\) [Review of Letter,] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 144.
MODERN PHILOSOPHY’ (97) such as Paine and Godwin, and looks instead to older discourses of sex and gender through which she could express her views of the injustice of mental subordination, and so make a radical claim for female equality at the turn of the nineteenth century.

FROM ONE SEX TO TWO: THE SHIFTING DISCOURSES OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SEX AND GENDER

As discussed in my Introduction, the work of Thomas Laqueur is significant to our understanding of the shifting language of sex and gender at the end of the eighteenth century. Tracing a discursive move from a ‘one-sex’ model of sex and gender hierarchy to a ‘two-sex’ model of gender incommensurability, Laqueur argues that the new language of incommensurable sex difference enabled the continued oppression of women, even as all the old hierarchies of the eighteenth-century cultural consciousness were called into question:

A biology of hierarchy grounded in a metaphysically prior ‘great chain of being’ gave way to a biology of incommensurability in which the relationship of men to women, like that of apples to oranges, was not given as one of equality or inequality but rather as a difference whose meaning required interpretation and struggle.¹⁰¹

As Laqueur makes clear, however, this discursive shift towards the incommensurability of the sexes cannot be understood simply as a misogynist move. The language of the new feminism of the 1790s also relied on a model of difference. To speak as a woman required the prior acknowledgement that one’s sex constituted part of one’s identity, that to be a woman was to be something very different from a man: ‘Thus feminism too,’ he argues, ‘depends upon and generates a biology of incommensurability in place of the teleologically male interpretation of bodies on the basis of which a feminist stance is impossible.’¹⁰²

¹⁰² Laqueur, ‘Orgasm,’ 19.
The language of what Laqueur terms the two-sex model is everywhere in both liberal and conservative discourses of the 1790s. Rousseau’s statement in his educational treatise, *Émile*, is probably the most famous example: ‘In everything not connected with sex, woman is man. […] In everything connected with sex, woman and man are in every respect related but in every respect different.’

Hannah More, the conservative evangelical writer who Polwhele praised for her difference to Wollstonecraft also joins the chorus, writing in her *Essays ... for Young Ladies* (1777): ‘In short, it appears, that the mind, in each sex, has some natural kind of bias, which constitutes a distinction of character; and that the happiness of both depends, in a great measure, on the preservation and observance of this distinction.’

Similarly, the equally conservative Laetitia Matilda Hawkins contends in her *Letters on the Female Mind* (1793): ‘It cannot, I think, be truly asserted, that the intellectual powers know no difference of sex. Nature certainly intended a distinction; but it is a distinction that is far from degrading us.’

Indeed, this belief in ‘natural’ sexual difference as ‘a distinction that is far from degrading us’ was a view held by women from both the conservative and liberal camps in the 1790s, and, as Laqueur argues, it could be used to feminist as well as oppressive ends. In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), Hannah More calls on her countrywomen to:

[C]ome forward, […] without blemishing the delicacy of their sex: […] to the best and most appropriate exertion of their power, to raise the depressed tone of public morals, and to awaken the drowsy spirit of religious principle.’

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Here, while disparaging ‘female politicians’ and ‘female warriors’ as ‘disgusting and unnatural,’ More nonetheless locates a privileged position for women as the guardians of morality and religion.107

Among more liberal women writers, a similar strategy was frequently used to call for the extension of women’s rights. As we have already seen, Mary Ann Radcliffe marks gender difference in her Female Advocate by calling on men, as the ‘natural’ protectors of women, to release them from their subordination.108 While more radical women writers are less willing to acknowledge that any such ‘natural’ protection of men over women exists, the two-sex model resurfaces in their reliance on the often masculinist language of radical theory, and especially in their use of the Enlightenment philosophies of progress and civilisation.

According to this narrative, enthusiastically promoted among Scottish Enlightenment theorists and radical Dissenters, society from the dawn of time is undergoing a process of progressive civilisation. At present, they argue, British society is in a partial state of civilisation, and this is signalled by the ongoing tyrannies of master over slave and man over women. Indeed, women are essential to this narrative as the markers of civilisation. As William Alexander writes in his History of Women (1779), ‘the rank […] and condition in which we find women in any country, mark out to us with the greatest precision the exact point in the scale of civil society, to which the people of such country have arrived.’109

107 Ibid., I, 8.
108 Radcliffe, Female Advocate, x.
Using the discourse of partial civilisation to their advantage, Hays and Wollstonecraft assert that the oppression of women has led to a deformation in the progress of society, and that civil perfection will not be attained until women are emancipated. In her *Appeal*, Hays writes that sexual prejudice has been the cause of imperfection in society, and that ‘till these prejudices are exterminated and done away with [...] society can never arrive at that state of perfection, of which it is really capable.\(^{110}\) In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft similarly contemplates ‘the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilisation.’\(^{111}\) Writing that civilisation has ‘hitherto’ been ‘very partial,’ she wishes ‘to see woman placed in a station in which she would advance, instead of retarding, the progress of those glorious principles that give substance to morality.’\(^{112}\) Thus, in their emphasis on woman’s unique ability to guide mankind towards the perfection of society, the language of the two-sex model can be clearly read into the writings of Wollstonecraft and Hays.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the two-sex model had entirely effaced the one-sex model from the cultural psyche. As Laqueur makes clear, the language of the one-sex model was still being used in social and political discourses well into the nineteenth century. Indeed, as genealogy uncovers, there is never one clear line of progression from one discourse to the next. Old discourses do not vanish to make way for new discourses. Rather, discourses overlap and interweave with counter discourses, and though they might be concealed by the effort of the dominant discourse, traces of these older discourses can still be detected.

The language of the one-sex model is thus in evidence in many of the 1790s feminist texts under discussion, at times sitting somewhat uncomfortably alongside language of the two-sex model within the same tract. Priscilla Wakefield, for example,

\(^{111}\) Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 83.
\(^{112}\) *Ibid.*, 71, 65. Further emphasising this view, elsewhere in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft writes: ‘Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all was right originally: a crowd of authors that all is now right: and I, that all will be right.’ (78-79).
writes in her *Reflections* that ‘women possess the same qualities as man, though perhaps in a different degree’: language that mirrors almost exactly Laqueur’s explanation of the one-sex model.\(^{113}\) Indeed, Wakefield goes on to acknowledge the pressing weight of the two-sex model on 1790s discourse in her rejection of the contemporary cultural belief that ‘the intellectual faculties of each sex are wisely adapted to their appropriate purposes.’ Wakefield insists that that these differences in sex are cultural rather than natural, and that until women’s capabilities ‘are exerted to the utmost extent of their capacity,’ then the true ‘energies of which they are capable’ cannot be known.\(^{114}\)

In Robinson’s *Letter*, elements of both models are evident, merging the discourses in way that both takes advantage of the positive aspects of each, and at the same time reveals the tenuous ground on which these supposedly ‘scientific’ models rely. Seeming to directly engage with two-sex discourses such as that of Rousseau, Robinson asserts that:

> [T]here is something peculiarly unjust in condemning woman to suffer every earthly insult, while she is allowed a sex; and only permitting her to be happy, when she is divested of it. There is also something profane in the opinion, because it implies than an all-wise Creator sends a creature into the world with a sexual distinction, which shall authorise the very extent of mortal persecution. If men would be completely happy by obtaining the confidence of women, let them unite in confessing that mental equality, which evinces itself by indubitable proofs that the soul has no sex. (16-17)

Here, Robinson exposes the partial foundations of the two-sex model. In arguing that ‘the soul has no sex,’ she rejects the supposition of a ‘sexual distinction’ between man and woman as a cultural construction, and substitutes in its place an older discourse of Platonic-Cartesian Dualism, of the type developed in earlier feminist writings by women such as Mary Astell.\(^{115}\) In so doing, Robinson replaces the sexual distinctions of the body with the androgyny of the unsexed mind, and thus repositions men and women

\(^{113}\) Wakefield, *Reflections*, 2.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 4-5.

\(^{115}\) Mary Astell, ‘Reflections Upon Marriage,’ in *Mary Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-80. Although there is no evidence that Robinson was aware of Astell’s writings, Mary Hays had included her in her *Female Biography; Or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all Ages and Countries*, 6 vols (London: 1803), 1. It is therefore fair to assume that Astell’s writing were known to radical women writers of the 1790s.
on an equal footing. As I shall go on to discuss later in the chapter, the language of the two-sex model does resurface in Robinson’s text. However, this language is put to very different use in the Letter from that of her contemporaries, as Robinson takes advantage of the instability of these discourses to develop a fluid conception of sex and gender that borrows the best aspects of both the one- and two-sex models, to imagine a future in which woman could ‘eclipse [man] by her brilliancy’ (57).

**THE ‘PROPER LADY’ AND THE CELEBRITY ACTRESS: THE COMPLEX DISCOURSE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FEMININITY**

In *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003), Adriana Craciun begins to unpick the biological language of the two-sex model that sought to ground the incommensurability of the sexes in nature. In opposition to this apparently ‘natural’ discourse, Craciun explains how depictions of ‘unnatural’ female bodies in eighteenth-century women’s texts – such as the undead or the physically strong – ‘contest rather than reinforce the two-sex system on which gender-complementarity readings of their works ultimately rely.’ In Craciun’s elucidation of Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England*, it is women’s physically strong bodies that allow Robinson to disrupt the two-sex model, as these images of female strength serve to disrupt the ‘limitations of modern sexual dimorphism’ with the figure of the ‘unsexed’ woman.

For conservative commentators of the late eighteenth century, the ‘unsexed’ woman was a monstrous and unnatural figure. On reading Wollstonecraft’s aggressive criticism of Marie Antoinette in her *Historical and Moral View of the French*...
Revolution (1795), for example, Horace Walpole branded her a ‘hyena in petticoats.’ Similarly, Richard Polwhele provides the most famous depiction of the ‘unsexed female’ in his 1798 poem The Unsex’d Females, in which he refers to radical woman writers of the 1790s as ‘A female band despising NATURE’s law.’

In Craciun’s reading, the ‘unsexed’ female is important to our understanding of eighteenth-century sex and gender discourse because she is not just ‘unfeminine,’ she is ‘unfemale’: ‘a third term in an anomalous position outside the two-sex binary’ of incommensurable sexual difference. Through the depiction of the ‘unfemale’ woman, then, eighteenth-century feminist writers could begin to find a way past the limitations of the two-sex model that encaged women in their ‘proper’ sphere. Although Craciun limits her argument to images of female physical strength, the same could also be argued of the figure of the eighteenth-century actress, who was similarly unsexed by her status as a public woman. In a cultural milieu that positioned women as ‘naturally’ private and domestic, the celebrity actress of the eighteenth century inhabited a place outside of the bounds of acceptable femininity.

To come to a simple definition of ‘femininity’ as it was understood in the eighteenth century is not an easy task. The once commonplace discourse of separate spheres has come under interrogation by more recent studies. Critics of the separate spheres narrative argue that this model of female exclusion and repression, epitomised in Mary Poovey’s depiction of the ‘Proper Lady’ – a ‘feminine ideal’ who represented domesticity, modest virtue and moral religious devotion – is reductive, as it draws its evidence from prescriptive conduct literature, rather than from examinations of how

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120 Polwhele, The Unsex’d Females, 7.
121 Craciun, Fatal Women, 58.
122 The narrative of the separate spheres traces a shift from a pre-eighteenth century ‘golden age’ of sexual permissiveness to a society that was by the nineteenth century strictly divided into an exclusively male public sphere and a private sphere in which women were enclosed. See Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,’ The Historical Journal, 36.2 (1993): 383-414, for an explication of this model.
eighteenth-century women actually lived their lives.\textsuperscript{123} These critics, such as Amanda Vickery, Robert Shoemaker and William Stafford, highlight in reaction to this the many women who published books, owned businesses, and engaged actively in the evangelical church throughout the century.\textsuperscript{124}

Habermas’s famous delineation of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ has been invaluable in the complication of this model. In eighteenth-century society, Habermas argues, there existed a political sphere that was distinct both from the aristocratic public sphere of the royal court and the private sphere of the home and private enterprise. Here, private citizens came together in public spaces such as coffee shops and debating societies to question and criticise the political regime through conversation and political pamphlets.\textsuperscript{125} Although now widely criticised for its ‘gender myopia,’\textsuperscript{126} this ‘bourgeois public sphere’ provides a useful tool through which to recognise an alternative space for eighteenth-century women outside the confines of the private sphere.

As is made clear in many eighteenth-century women’s autobiographies and memoirs, women – and especially actresses – were actively involved in this bourgeois public sphere: joining debating societies, hosting political gatherings, and campaigning on behalf of parliamentary candidates. In her \textit{Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy} (1785), for example, the actress makes much of her close friendship with the prominent Whig politician Charles Fox, and of her extensive knowledge of classical

\textsuperscript{123} Mary Poovey, \textit{The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
In one chapter, Bellamy describes hosting ‘public breakfasts’ in order to canvass votes during a local election. As is made clear in the newspapers and caricatures of the time, both Mary Robinson and her patron, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, were equally active in campaigning for the Whig vote [see figure 3]. As one edition of the Morning Post observed:

The Duchess of Devonshire is so jaded by the fatigues of canvassing, that she must step down from the niche she has hitherto occupied among the BEVY OF BEAUTIES. Perdita is nominated for the succession by the High Priest of the Temple.

Despite these very real engagements by some women in public political life in the eighteenth-century, however, this is not to say that there were no limits on women’s

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127 On her relationship with Fox, Bellamy wrote, ‘I returned Mr. Fox thanks for the assurance he gave me of his friendship […] Mr. Fox’s popularity was at this time arrived at such a height, from the opposition he made to the Marriage Act.’ Bellamy also wrote of her political ambition, stating ‘I determined to become, if possible, another Maintenon.’ (Madame de Maintenon was the rumoured mistress and later second wife to King Louis XIV of France. She was famed for her extensive political influence.) George Anne Bellamy, An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy (1785), 5 vols, 3rd edn (London: 1786), III, 47, 16.
128 ‘[During] the famous contested election […] I, as well as most of my acquaintance, was as anxious for the success of his Lordship as if the fate of the nation depended upon it.’ Bellamy, An Apology for the Life, II, 80-81.
129 Caricature of Charles Fox and his followers at the time of the election. The only woman in the picture is Mary Robinson, who is administering smelling salts to Fox while her hand is kissed by the Prince of Wales. For more information on the caricature, see Byrne, Perdita, 237-238.
130 Morning Post, 26 April 1784.
access to politics and the public sphere at this time. The paragon of the ‘proper lady’ who would later transform into the nineteenth-century ‘angel in the house’ of the private sphere did exist in the many conduct books and prescriptive texts aimed at women that multiplied across the century, and these texts had a real impact on the lives of eighteenth-century women. If they did not physically prevent women from participating in print culture and the public sphere, they at the very least made it more difficult for them to do so from a psychological and cultural perspective. Developing concurrently with and borrowing the language of the two-sex model, these texts gradually infiltrated the public consciousness concerning what the ideal woman should be and do – what it was natural for women to be and do – and what deviating from these strictures could mean for a woman’s character. For women, to deviate from this model of ideal femininity meant risking the accusation that they, too, were ‘unsexed,’ and to be ‘unsexed’ was to bring woman’s morality, and more significantly her virtue, under question.

Dorinda Outram has explained how the preservation of female virtue was of paramount importance in maintaining woman’s social reputation in eighteenth-century Europe. For a woman to be ‘virtuous’ meant something very different than for a man. For men, virtue was equated with intellect, honour and self-defence, in defending one’s country by the sword and through diplomacy. For women, on the other hand, by the mid-eighteenth century virtue held an entirely sexual character: to be a virtuous woman was, simply, to be chaste. As Outram argues, by the time of the French Revolution, virtue had thus become ‘a two-edged sword,’ which divided the concept ‘into two distinct political destinies, one male and the other female.’

Female sexual virtue was directly equated with political male virtue, carrying with it the implication that any deviation from chastity in women could threaten the political virtue of the state. For this reason

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women’s virtue was rigorously policed, effectively disbarring them from engagement in the public sphere. As Olympe de Gouges commented in 1791, ‘women are now respected and excluded, under the old regime they were despised and powerful.’

There was one class of women, however, for whom this equation of female virtue with chastity in revolutionary France did not exclude them from the public sphere: the celebrity actress. As Outram explains,

Many a revolutionary public figure went to the great ladies of the Comédie Française for instruction on how to be, how to personify themselves. But actresses were in any case not ordinary women: their profession turned them into embodiments of pure personification.

In this way, then, while to be an actress was, on the one hand, to be under constant threat of being ‘unsexed’ by their profession, on the other hand, it also provided the possibility for women to step out of the confines of eighteenth-century notions of feminine sexual virtue. Once removed from this limiting category of chaste femininity, eighteenth-century celebrity actresses could perhaps begin to explore different ways of ‘being’ woman, and they did so in the performative spaces and ‘subversive performances’ of sexuality and gender that Judith Butler has identified as existing within theatrical contexts.

As Felicity Nussbaum has attested, this ambiguous position of the actress in eighteenth-century public life was thus one that could ‘herald new possibilities for women.’ In the actress’s contradictory embodiment of a feminine private ‘self’ that was nevertheless displayed publicly onstage, there lay the potential to stretch the limiting boundaries of eighteenth-century categories of sex and gender. In exploiting the permeable border between ‘female’ and ‘unfemale,’ they could ‘inven[t] new

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133 Outram, ‘Le langage mâle de la vertu,’ 128-129.
definitions of womanhood.'

For Nussbaum, the celebrity actress of the eighteenth century held a more potentially powerful position than the female writer. While the female writer seeks to empty her personality from the text as she writes, for the actress, her personality is the text: ‘actresses trading on their acting reputations represented quite the opposite of the disembodied female author who often veiled her public identity, appearing as a nameless, anonymous being.’

Displaying themselves onstage in performances of elaborate femininity while, at the same time, marking themselves out in that very act of self-display as wholly unfeminine (in its eighteenth-century delineation), actresses thus, Nussbaum argues, ‘revealed the performative nature of femininity even as they helped redefine its margins.’

In so doing, celebrity actresses, like the protofeminist writers of the 1790s, were able to show women alternative models of female virtue and womanhood. It is within this very performative position of the actress, I argue, that Robinson found a discourse in which to express her unique vision of the rights of woman.

THE FEMINIST POTENTIAL OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ACTRESS: THEATRICALITY, CELEBRITY, NOTORIETY

In Sexual Suspects (1992), Kristina Straub posits that eighteenth-century discourse about the theatre presents a unique perspective on the gradual shift from the one-sex to the two-sex model in the cultural psyche:

Popular discourse about players [...] functions as a discursive space where remnants of older sexualities that do not fit in an emergent set of norms can be articulated [...]. This process [...] allows us to read the workings of this new sexual hegemony even as it serves it. Discourse about players in the eighteenth century can be read as a site of both recuperation and resistance to recuperation, a discursive place of struggle over the terms from which our modern sexualities took their present, though continually shifting, forms.

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136 Nussbaum, Rival Queens, 26.
137 Ibid., 18.
138 Ibid., 29.
Theatrical discourse thus provides us with a lens through which to uncover the weak points in eighteenth-century sex and gender discourse, where the language of the one- and two-sex models overlap and collide. Foucault has termed these moments of discursive formation and reformation as ‘the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats.’\(^\text{140}\) In theatrical discourse, these ‘jolts’ are experienced in the ambiguous sexuality, ambiguous gender presentation, and ambiguous power relations of the players, whose subversive performance, both on and off the stage, confounds the idea of incommensurable sexual difference, allowing the new language of the two-sex model to be exposed as a cultural construct.

As ‘sexual suspects,’ eighteenth-century actresses occupied a liminal space on the shifting borders of sex and gender identity, and thus constituted a very real threat to the social order. As such, they were rigorously policed and condemned in critical and satirical literature of the time. In *The Case of the Stage in Ireland* (1758), for example, the author comments that ‘it is notoriously observable, what kind of Lives are too frequently led by the Female Performers. [...] [T]heir Profession instructs them systematically in every meretricious Subtlety and Art that can captivate and subdue the Frailty of our Nature.’\(^\text{141}\)

At the same time, this ambiguous position offered certain freedoms to players. As Heather MacPhearson has written, ‘for the actor, [...] individual celebrity challenged and subverted traditional socio-cultural and professional hierarchies and served as a powerful mode of social acculturation.’\(^\text{142}\) This was also the case for the celebrity actress. Sandra Richards has described how ‘women’s pioneering performances [...] prepared the way for actresses to supersede their male colleagues as performers during


\(^{141}\) The Case of the Stage in Ireland; containing the reasons for and against a bill for limiting the number of theatres in the city of Dublin (Dublin: 1758), 18-19.

the latter half of the eighteenth century.’ Advancing to the top of their professional field and often out-earning their male theatrical contemporaries, for women of the eighteenth century to become an celebrity actress was thus to place oneself outside the bounds of easily deducible categories of gender identity. In so doing, these women were given the unique opportunity of developing new ways of ‘being woman’ that did not require conformation to the status quo.

The influence of theatrical culture can be read throughout the 1790s writings of Mary Robinson. Despite having left the stage in 1780, only four years after becoming an actress, and despite the dubious reputation of the actress in eighteenth-century culture, the propriety of the theatrical profession for women is asserted throughout her literary oeuvre. From the bold defence of actresses found in Angelina (1796), where theatrical women are depicted as ‘ornaments to society,’ to the defiant actions of her heroine Martha in The Natural Daughter (1799), who not only treads the boards herself, but in doing so claims the title of a ‘chil[d] of Genius,’ the actress holds a vindicated position in Robinson’s literature.

Indeed, Robinson was not alone in mounting a defence of women on the stage. Rather, she was engaging in a literary theatrical tradition that dates back to the seventeenth century. Actors and actresses regularly turned to the pen in defence of their profession, writing critical essays on all aspects of the theatre: from speech and gesticulation, to dress, to lighting and scenery. The lives of actresses especially were

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143 Sandra Richards, The Rise of the English Actress (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 30. For a further discussion of the various pay packets of actresses and their male contemporaries, see Nussbaum, Rival Queens, 1-6.


145 See, for example, Thomas Betterton, The History of the English Stage, from the Restauration [sic] to the Present Time. [...] By Mr. Thomas Betterton, ed. Edmund Curll and William Oldys (London: 1741); Catherine Clive, The Case of Mrs. Clive Submitted to the Publick (London: 1744); and David Garrick, An Essay on Acting (1744). Betterton was an actor/manager at the end of the seventeenth century. His writings were collected into the History by Curll and Oldys in the mid eighteenth century. Catherine (or Kitty) Clive was one of the most celebrated actresses of the mid eighteenth century. Her Case was published to appeal against her firing from the theatre. Garrick was one of the most famous
the subject of multiple books and pamphlets detailing their histories and intrigues, and theatrical women themselves actively participated in the publication of these ‘scandalous memoirs.’

Lynda Thompson has argued that these memoirs had an impact on the literary scene because they ‘not only appealed for women’s independence, but also opportunistically exploited the ideological contradictions concerning women’s nature.’ Although Thompson’s study concentrates on the writings of eighteenth-century women of the upper classes, the same may be argued of the memoirs of eighteenth-century celebrity actresses. In laying claim to their histories and owning their sexual promiscuity, these theatrical women enacted through their texts a performance of femininity very different from that prescribed by the dominant discourse. In so doing, they pushed against the restrictive limits of this discourse of woman’s ‘nature,’ and revealed its foundations as cultural.

The most suffocating discourse that the eighteenth-century celebrity actress had to contend with was the discourse of virtue. As Nussbaum has argued,

eighteenth-century women bore the cultural weight of alternately personifying and protecting virtue, and serving as the index to civilisation’s progress; but the definition of virtue was anxiously moulded and reconfigured in the hands of actresses.

As women in public, celebrity actresses fundamentally disrupted the developing ideology of separate spheres and modest, private femininity. Stepping out of their

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146 In early texts, this genre generally consisted of bawdy ‘memoirs’ such as A True Account of the Late Most Doleful, and Lamentable Tragedy of Old Madam Gwinn (London: 1679) and Authentick Memoirs of the Life of that Celebrated Actress Mrs. Anne Oldfield (London: 1730). Later in the century, theatrical women begin to take charge of this discourse, so that George Anne Bellamy published her Apology in the same year as the anonymous Memoirs of George Anne Bellamy (London: 1785), and Mary Robinson was able to overwrite the salacious content of various anonymous pamphlets, such as The Vis-à-vis of Berkeley Square (London: 1783) and The Memoirs of Perdita (London: 1784) with her own Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself (London: 1801).


148 Nussbaum, Rival Queens, 121.
‘proper’ sphere, women on display threatened social order in their blurring of the strict boundaries of sex and gender that worked to keep women dependent on men. This was even more the case for actresses than for other public women of the time, as, in much of eighteenth-century discourse, the actress and the prostitute are inextricably linked. As seen in cautionary tales throughout the century, such as Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina* (1725), in which the heroine is mistaken for a prostitute when she chooses to sit alone in the stalls of the theatre, the theatre was not only the workplace of the actress, but also that of prostitutes, who used the theatrical pit to display their wares for the purpose of acquiring clients, and in so doing provided an alternative showcase to that of the actresses onstage.\(^{149}\)

Even in the later years of the eighteenth century, when, as Straub writes, there was a ‘growing urgency to recuperate actresses as “respectable,”’\(^ {150}\) women such as the renowned Sarah Siddons were only able to sustain their reputation in a very rigorous policing of their behaviour and interactions. Indeed, Siddons herself laments such a need for caution in a letter to John Porter, in which she expresses regret at being unable to respond to Mary Robinson’s desire for friendship:

> If she is half as amiable as her writings, I shall long for the possibility of being acquainted with her. I say the possibility, because one’s whole life is one continual sacrifice of inclinations, which to indulge, however laudable or innocent, would draw down the malice and reproach of those prudent people who never do ill […] The charming and beautiful Mrs. Robinson: I pity her from the bottom of my soul.\(^ {151}\)

Even the unequalled Siddons, the woman who Byrne has described as ‘almost single-handedly responsible for the changing attitudes towards actresses at the close of the eighteenth-century,’\(^ {152}\) it seems, was never far away from the accusations of ‘malice and reproach’ that could interpret her self-display as a marker of disrepute.


\(^{150}\) Straub, *Sexual Suspects*, 90.

\(^{151}\) Sarah Siddons, letter to John Taylor (spring, 1800), qtd. in Byrne, *Perdita*, 311.

\(^{152}\) Byrne, *Perdita*, 310.
Indeed, in the minds of the eighteenth-century public, the actress and the prostitute were not only related; frequently, they were conflated. In a pamphlet typical of the satirical public discourse on actresses in the eighteenth century, Miss C—Y’s Cabinet of Curiosities (1765), for example, the author equates the fictional actress, Miss C—y with a prostitute, writing that ‘The word Prostitute does not always Mean a W—; but it is used also, to signify any Person that does any Thing for Hire. In this Sense Miss C—Y may be said to be a Prostitute Player.’ Similarly, when the narrator of the Memoirs of the Celebrated Mrs. Woffington (1760) wished to hint at this actress’s sexual exploits, he wrote: ‘In a Word, she was a true Actress, and was ready to act a Part with every one that paid her well for it.’ Like many of the anonymous ‘memoirs’ of actresses that were published at the time, these texts were written more to titillate than to inform, and cannot be taken as a reliable account of the life of the actresses discussed. Nonetheless, these pamphlets are extremely useful in revealing the ways in which the dominant discourse framed actresses in the public mind.

In this particular memoir, Margaret, or ‘Peggy,’ Woffington is depicted as a woman who is naturally predisposed to licentiousness, even as a child. Undergoing her first sexual experience when ‘within a Fortnight of Eleven’ years of age, she is positioned in explicitly sexual terms: ‘the poor, tender, innocent Girl, unable to resist so mighty a Champion, sunk in his Arms, and gave him Kiss for Kiss, and sigh for sigh.’ The rest of the text presents a list of suitors who successfully ‘purchas[e] her Love’ and ‘rifl[e] [her] charms.’ In this way, Woffington is presented as a woman who is naturally licentious, and her sexual voraciousness is associated by the narrator with

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153 Miss C—Y’s Cabinet of Curiosities; or, the Green-Room Broke Open, by Tristam Shandy, Gent. (Dublin: 1765), 45.
154 Memoirs of the Celebrated Mrs. Woffington, Interspersed with Several Theatrical Anecdotes; The Amours of Many Persons of the First Rank; and some Interesting Characters Drawn from Real LIFE (London: 1760), 23.
156 Ibid., 26.
‘Desire and the Love of Fame,’ reiterating for the reader that a woman’s desire to act is indicative of an uncontrollable sexuality.\textsuperscript{157}

Indeed, for many commentators of the British stage, the actress, by nature of her profession, was automatically disbarred from sexual virtue. In \textit{The Battle of the Players} (1762), the anonymous poet summarises this attitude in a satirical list of current theatrical performers. However, the name of the ‘chaste’ actress ‘famed for Virgin Charms’ is left blank. In a footnote, the absence is explained: ‘If [the reader] knows of any Actress, \textit{deserving} of this Epithet, I own he is possessed of more Knowledge than I am.’\textsuperscript{158} By the end of the 1780s, the public may have been able to fill this blank with the name of Sarah Siddons, but, as I have shown, even Siddons’s claim to chastity was continuously under threat from the suspect nature of her profession, and many of her contemporaries, such as Robinson herself, were still disbarred from feminine virtue.

This, then, was the attitude with which the eighteenth-century celebrity actress had to contend. Positioned as little better than (or in some cases equivalent to) prostitutes, and with uncontrollable sexual appetites, female theatrical players were situated as inherently ‘other’ to the ‘Proper Ladies’ who watched them from the safe distance of the stage boxes. Even as the profession began to develop a new respectability towards the end of the century, the actress had to walk a very fine line to avoid the ‘malice and reproach’ that Siddons herself always feared, and this balancing act was made more difficult as the discourse of femininity became ever more aligned with the private sphere and domesticity.

At the same time, however, in thus excluding celebrity actresses from the category of the passionless ‘Proper Lady’ defined by the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference, commentators were forced to turn instead to older models of female

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{158} The Battle of the Players. In Imitation of Dean Swift’s Battle of the Books. In which are introduced, the Characters of all the Actors and Actresses on the English Stage. With an Impartial Estimate of their respective Merits. (London: 1762), 38-39.
sexual voraciousness in order to categorise and attempt to contain these women within the male-controlled limits of discourse. In this way, discourse about celebrity actresses in the eighteenth century reveals the Foucauldian ‘event of history’ at which the two-sex model of gender incommensurability comes into direct conflict with the older one-sex model that it replaced. In the course of this conflict, the apparently scientific and ‘natural’ grounding of the two-sex model is thus exposed as a cultural construct.

For the celebrity actresses who were the objects of this contradictory clashing of ideologies, this unaccountability of their lived experience within the modern discourse of the two-sex model gave them a unique opportunity to take control of the language. In a way that was less accessible to women confined by the discourse of female sexual virtue, celebrity actresses found themselves able to write back to the dominant discourse, giving their own accounts of their lives as public women, and forming their own discursive framework that would allow them to reclaim virtue without the need to prove themselves chaste. In so doing, they, like the aristocratic ‘scandalous’ women who were their forebears, carved a space for themselves in which to envisage new ways of performing womanhood in eighteenth-century culture and society.

The Celebrity Actress and the Scandalous Memoir: Taking Control of the Discourse

The language of virtue can be read everywhere into the scandalous memoirs of the eighteenth century. From playwright Delarivière Manley’s 1714 Adventures of Rivella, in which she provides a semi-fictionalised account of her life, bigamous marriage, and sexual relationships, to George Anne Bellamy’s Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy (1785), these public women rewrite the scripts of acceptable womanhood to reclaim virtue for themselves, despite their loss of chastity. Robinson would contribute to this tradition with her posthumous Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson (1801). However, I argue that its influence can also be read into her Letter to the Woman of
England, in which her call for women’s ‘justice’ is heavily inflected with the experience of having once been a sexual suspect herself.

In the opening pages of Rivella, Manley’s narrator writes that ‘If she had been a Man, she had been without Fault.’¹⁵⁹ This fundamental sense of injustice at the unequal treatment of the sexes, and the unreasonable sexual standards to which women were held, is a sentiment echoed by all the women writers of scandalous memoirs. Although she is not chaste, Manley insists that ‘Her Vertues are her own.’¹⁶⁰ She thus rejects the restrictive confines of feminine sexual virtue and in its place lays claim to a universal conception of virtue that aligns her with ‘Man,’ that is, ‘without Fault.’ As Katherine Zelinsky argues, ‘it is not so much Rivella’s “Ruin” as her ability to recuperate her reputation for virtue’ that is at stake here.¹⁶¹ This claim for a universal standard of non-sexual virtue would be echoed by scandalous female memoirists throughout the century, in the face of the increasing pressure of the discourse of gender incommensurability.

Writing in the mid-century, Teresia Constantia Phillips and Laetitia Pilkington also reject the suffocating discourse of sexual virtue. The classic ‘scandalous memoirists’ of Thompson’s study, Phillips and Pilkington were genteel women who became notorious for their infidelities and high-profile divorce proceedings. In these memoirs, the growing influence of biological incommensurability becomes increasingly visible under the weight of the ‘shame’ of the unchaste woman. Despite the increasing pressure to conform to female sexual virtue, however, both Phillips and Pilkington push against these limits, reframing the discussion in terms of men’s manipulation of women’s ‘natural’ sexual desire, and denouncing the society that pardons men’s licentiousness while damming women.

¹⁵⁹ Delarivière Manley, The Adventures of Rivella; or, the History of the Author of the Atalantis (London: 1714), 7; original emphasis.
¹⁶⁰ Manley, Adventures of Rivella, 7.
In *Apology for the Conduct of Mrs. Teresia Constantia Phillips* (1748), Phillips draws attention to the deformed definition of female virtue as purely sexual, rejecting this limiting definition in favour of a more broad understanding of female morality:

*Chastity* we admit to be one of the most shining Ornaments that can add Lustre to a Woman’s Character; but while they are preserving that, we would recommend to their Consideration, to think, [...] a Woman may trespass upon that first Punctilio, and yet be, in all other Respects, a moral honest Creature.\(^{162}\)

Defending women from condemnation for ‘*Errors we are led into by our Passions,*’ Phillips here both denies the primacy of ‘*Chastity*’ in a consideration of female morality, and, conversely, insists that women are passionate beings.\(^{163}\) Further, she rejects the popular attitude that ‘the Want of every Thing that can be an Ornament to [woman’s] Sex is ballanced [sic], by the Word Virtue.’\(^{164}\) In this way, Phillips spurns the discourse of biological incommensurability that sought to render women passionless, and rejects the inordinate social emphasis on female chastity as conducive to the proliferation of other non-sexual vices.

In *Memoirs of Mrs. Laetitia Pilkington* (1748), Pilkington builds a similar argument against sexual virtue, depicting her own ‘fall’ from chastity as stemming from the brutality of her husband. In this text, Pilkington speculates on the insidious nature of female sexual virtue, given that the loss of it is so significant for women, while providing no such qualms for men. ‘Is it not monstrous that our Seducers should be our Accusers?’ she asks with disbelief. In so doing, Pilkington, like Manley and Phillips, draws attention to the ‘monstrous’ (thus unnatural) consequences of reducing women to their sexual character, while allowing their seducers to claim virtue for themselves.\(^{165}\)

As Lynda Thompson writes, these women ‘put their private or personal experience to service in order to make a more general protest about women’s unjust

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\(^{162}\) Theresa Constantia Phillips, *An Apology for the Conduct of Mrs. Theresa Constantia Phillips, more Particularly That Part of it which relates to her Marriage with an eminent Dutch Merchant*, 4 vols (London: 1748), III, 8; original emphasis.

\(^{163}\) Phillips, *Apology for the Conduct*, III, 8; original emphasis.


treatment at the hands of, firstly, husbands and lovers and, secondly and more fundamentally, the law itself.’¹⁶⁶ For celebrity actresses, however, the situation was rather different. Tom Mole has explained how ‘the assumption that women of virtue did not draw attention to themselves meant that a female celebrity could seem like a contradiction in terms.’¹⁶⁷ Caught between ‘their society’s expectations of feminine modesty and reticence and celebrity culture’s operations of marketing and display,’¹⁶⁸ the celebrity actress could not fall back on the eighteenth-century discourse of femininity to make their defence in the way that the scandalous gentlwoman could. Rather, actresses’ presence on the public stage effectively disbarred them from laying claim to any of the cultural terms of femininity that revered women while it constrained them. Instead, self-authoring celebrity actresses tend to draw on more masculine definitions of virtue to make their defence.

In George Anne Bellamy’s Apology for the Life (1785), the reconsideration of female sexual virtue by the blushing memoirists is given new inflection through the perspective of the actress.¹⁶⁹ Rejecting the posture of the supplicant victim that Phillips and Pilkington adopt, Bellamy instead delivers a spirited defence of her unconventional life. Already rendered a sexual suspect by her decision to go onstage, she refuses to be constrained by the discourse of feminine sexual virtue. Indeed, throughout her Apology, Bellamy delights in self-display, proclaiming, ‘I was a female Narcissus.’¹⁷⁰ As such, she is a woman very different from the blushing memoirists who were her forbears, and

¹⁶⁶ Thompson, Scandalous Memoirists, 9. It is true that both Manley and Pilkington were public women in the sense that they were authors, but Nussbaum’s reflection above on the way in which early eighteenth-century female writers sought to become ‘disembodied’ in their writings demonstrates their distance from truly ‘public’ women, such as actresses. Nussbaum, Rivals Queens, 18.
¹⁶⁸ Mole, ‘Mary Robinson’s Conflicted Celebrity,’ 187.
¹⁶⁹ There have been questions about the authorship of the Apology. In Rival Queens, Nussbaum suggests that it was ghostwritten by Alexander Bicknell, although she provides no evidence to support this claim (115). However, I intend to follow Straub here, who argues that the original provenance of the text is less important than the fact that it was generally understood to be Bellamy’s text, and so ‘in some real sense made Bellamy, the popular commodity’ (114).
¹⁷⁰ Bellamy, Apology, I, 110.
her refusal to become the private Proper Lady of the two-sex model leads her into a radical re-evaluation of female virtue.

Taking up Phillips’s argument, Bellamy accepts that ‘Chastity is undoubtedly the brightest ornament that adorns the female mind.’ Nonetheless, she refuses to accept this as the only virtue important to women:

But I can by no means allow, as the censorious part of the sex seem to consider it, that this virtue is the only needful one; and when a person has been unhappily deprived of it, though by the most seductive arts, every other good qualification takes flight with it.

Moreover, she asserts that women who fail to remain chaste, due to ‘the artifices of designing men,’ could ‘still retain [their] native purity.’ In this way, Bellamy rejects female sexual virtue, and in its place substitutes the ‘native purity’ of the mind, evoking the Platonic-Cartesian concept – ‘the soul has no sex’ – that was central to the development of early feminist thought in Britain.

In Bellamy’s reconfiguration of virtue, the actress is promoted from the lowest class of women to the highest. Rather than being assumed to lack virtue by nature of her profession, the actress is instead praised for her rectitude in the face of public opinion:

I thought a woman who preserved an unblemished reputation on the stage, to be infinitely more praiseworthy, than those who retained a good name, merely because they were secured by rank or fortune from the temptations actresses are exposed to.

For Bellamy, then, the actress holds a privileged position in culture that allows her to claim virtue beyond chastity. Rejecting the female sexual virtue of biological incommensurability as meaningless for public women whose sexuality is always already in doubt, Bellamy instead champions the ‘native purity’ of the ‘mind’ as the true source of female virtue. In this sense, the virtue championed in Bellamy’s Apology is closer to the masculine virtue of intellect, honour and self-defence identified by Outram.

\[171\] Ibid., IV, 118.
\[172\] Ibid., IV, 118.
\[173\] Ibid., IV, 117; I, 149-150.
\[174\] Ibid., I, 149.
It is also to this so-called ‘masculine’ rational virtue that Robinson turns in her *Letter to the Women of England*, in order to liberate women from the confines of female sexual virtue.

Beginning her *Letter* with an epigraph from Nicholas Rowe’s play, *The Fair Penitent* (1703), Robinson immediately signals the importance of theatrical women to the development of her feminist project. The epigraph is drawn from a speech by the heroine, Calista, who was something of a ‘scandalous’ woman herself:

> How hard is the condition of our sex,  
> Through ev’ry state of life the slaves of man!  
> […] wherefore are we  
> Born with high souls, but to assert ourselves,  
> Shake off this vile obedience they exact,  
> And claim an equal empire o’er the world?\(^{175}\)

Robinson thus selects an epigraph in which a strong theatrical woman actively rejects the discourse of gender incommensurability through the older Platonic-Cartesian discourse of ‘high souls.’ In this way, she stakes her feminist argument on the ground of theatrical discourse, marking out the performative space of the theatre as the foremost site on which a rejection of female sexual virtue could be enacted.

In the *Letter*, Robinson echoes earlier scandalous women in questioning the primacy of feminine sexual virtue. However, here, its rejection is countenanced in even more radical terms:

> WOMAN […] is not to allowed to plead the frailty of human nature; she is to have no passions, no affections; and if she chance to overstep the boundaries of chastity (whatever witcheries and machinations are employed to mislead her;) […], CUSTOM, that pliant and convenient friend to man, declares her infamous. […] [B]ecause woman is the weaker creature, and most subject to temptation! because man errs voluntarily; and woman is seduced, by art and by persecution, from the paths of Virtue. (77)

Here, Robinson boldly exposes the unnatural basis of this restrictive sexual discourse. Disbarred from any appeal to ‘passion’ as a defence for their behaviour, women are

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\(^{175}\) Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent. A Tragedy.* (London: 1703), III, l. 39-40, 49-52. Robinson’s epigraph reads: ‘wherefore are we / Born with high souls, but to exert ourselves’; Robinson’s emphasis.
declared ‘infamous,’ not by nature, but by ‘CUSTOM,’ and by the rhetoric of biological incommensurability that insists on female passionlessness.

Turning away from this restrictive category, Robinson, like the scandalous memoirists before her, looks instead to older discourses of female sexual desire in order to ‘plead the frailty of human nature,’ in the face of which, she asserts, woman is ‘most subject to temptation.’ Indeed, she goes on to expose the nefarious consequences of female sexual virtue, which, she insists, is forced on women by their oppressors:

The laws of man have long since decreed, that the jewel, Chastity, and the purity of uncontaminated morals, are the brightest ornaments of the female sex. Yet the framers of those laws are indefatigable in promoting their violation. […] Man thus commits a kind of mental suicide; while he levels that image to the lowest debasement, which he has ostentatiously set up for universal idolatry. (80)

For Robinson, chastity is not ‘natural’ to women. Rather, it has been inflicted on them by ‘the laws of man.’ In creating this chaste vision of ideal womanhood while at the same time forcing women ‘to the lowest debasement’ through a ‘violation’ of this chastity, Robinson argues, man commits ‘mental suicide.’ Framed against the assertion of women’s ‘high souls,’ this image of men’s ‘mental suicide’ – with thoughts of ‘the lowest debasement’ – works to invert the gendered categories of the two-sex model that oppress women. In so doing, Robinson defuses the productive power of the discourse that ‘ostentatiously’ presents woman with ‘universal idolatry’ while forcing them ‘from the paths of Virtue.’ In its place, she imagines new ways of being for women outside the confines of female sexual virtue.

In order to understand how Robinson works to replace this misogynistic rhetoric in her text, it is useful to turn back to the discourse of masculine virtue: that of intellect, honour, and self-defence. For Robinson, this ‘masculine’ conception of the virtuous mind was highly preferable to the crippling weight of female sexual virtue. Irrevocably

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176 As Lynda Thompson has demonstrated, ‘frailty’ was a significant term for the scandalous memoirists, who ‘made a feature of their own frailty’ and used it as a weapon to attack their seducers. Thompson, *Scandalous Memoirists*, 7. Even at the level of language, then, Robinson is connected with her protofeminist self-authoring forebears.
positioned as a ‘sexual suspect’ in eighteenth-century society due to her scandalous past, the relocation of virtue to the mind provided Robinson with the opportunity to free women from the cultural weight of their sexually exploited bodies, and to reclaim for them a position of moral worth, regardless of their sexual histories. Robinson’s vision of enlightened womanhood did not simply substitute female sexual virtue for a uniquely feminine conception of morality, however, as was the case for some of her contemporaries who manipulate the positive aspects of gender incommensurability in their feminism. Rather, she chose to adapt older discourses of masculinity in her vision of enlightened womanhood, discourses that had been pushed out of the cultural consciousness by the development of the two-sex model.

THE BREECHES ROLE: THE SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCE OF THEATRICAL CROSSDRESSING

Historians of masculinity studies have begun to trace the changing cultural face of masculinity throughout the eighteenth century. These theorists describe how notions of male honour and virtue shifted from the ground of the duel, in which honour was defended with physical violence, to the ideal of a polite ‘civility,’ in which it was marked by conducting oneself with restraint. Both Robert Shoemaker and Elizabeth Foyster demonstrate the decline of public violence by men in the early years of the century. Meanwhile, Michèle Cohen traces the development of politeness and civility as core components of masculine identity in the later years of the century. These critics thus reveal a shift in eighteenth-century masculinity from the clash of swords on the battlefield to the clash of words on the floor of the House of Commons.

177 For a more detailed overview of this field of eighteenth-century masculinity studies, see Chapter 4 of this thesis.
As the two-sex model of biological incommensurability began to take hold and cultural conceptions of femininity became more grounded in the sexed body, masculinity became diametrically aligned in the cultural consciousness with the concept of the rational and enlightened mind. In the older one-sex model of essentially homogenous but hierarchically ordered sexed bodies, however, the category of man was not understood in binary opposition to the category of woman. Rather, masculinity’s opposite was effeminacy.

As Anna Clark has shown, effeminacy was not a category that could be distinguished by biology. Rather, it was a set of behaviours that could include physical weakness, self-indulgence, and, above all, a debilitating preoccupation with luxury. While the truly ‘masculine’ man was brave, honourable, and ready to do his patriotic duty, the effeminate man – often known as a ‘fop’ – was vain, irrational, excessive, dissipated, and sexually promiscuous. In locating masculine identity in the mind and character rather than in the sexed body, then, an understanding of the ways sex and gender were understood within the one-sex model could open up the possibility for women to experiment with the category of masculinity. Within theatrical circles this gender experimentation is seen most clearly in the actress’s subversive performance of cross-dressing.

The image of the cross-dressed woman was very significant to eighteenth-century culture. Onstage, the sight of the cross-dressed actress was often actively celebrated by the audience, who seemed to take pleasure in the playful sexual ambiguity that the image of the actress in breeches provided in the controlled environment of the theatre. In Woffington’s Memoirs, for example, the author reflects on her famous

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180 While this trend is apparent in the cultural conception of eighteenth-century masculinity, I do not mean to suggest that this was a homogenous masculinity that changed simply over time. Rather, there were many interweaving discourses surrounding masculinity, some of which changed and some of which, like the concept of patriarchal power over women, stayed the same. See Chapter 4 of this thesis for a more detailed consideration of this complex issue.

performance as Sir Henry Wilder in *The Constant Couple*, stating, ‘The Male Part of the Audience were all running mad [with desire] for her. […] The Females were equally well pleased with her acting as the Men were, but could not persuade themselves, that it was a Woman that acted the Character.’\(^{182}\) Within the frame of the play, it seems, the titillation of cross-dressing was safely contained by the obvious physicality of the actress’s female body, exposed by the revealing breeches costume, and in the spectatorial knowledge of the audience that she was a woman in disguise. However, as Straub has argued, this pleasure in female cross-dressing entirely ‘depends on its containment as a theatrical commodity.’\(^{183}\) Once the cross-dressed woman moves offstage and into society, the anxiety that her ambiguously sexed presence occasions quickly makes itself known.

In his pamphlet, *The Female Husband* (1746), Henry Fielding relates the apparently true story of Mary ‘alias George’ Hamilton. Hamilton, he tells us, lived her life as a man and committed bigamy with three wives before being imprisoned for her fraud. Beyond Fielding’s ambiguous and horrified observations on the mechanics of Hamilton’s cross-dressing, the text is also interesting for the way in which it frames cultural understandings of sex and gender in the mid-eighteenth century. Fielding opens the text with a warning against a lack of self-restraint in disrupting the boundary between the sexes:

> But if once our carnal appetites are let loose, […] there is no excess and disorder which they are not liable to commit, […] there is nothing monstrous and unnatural, which they are not capable of inventing, nothing so brutal and shocking which they have not actually committed.\(^{184}\)

Asserting that ‘there is no excess and disorder’ which the ‘carnal appetites’ of men and women ‘are not liable to commit,’ Fielding reveals the cultural perception that the

\(^{182}\) Memoirs of the Celebrated Mrs. Woffington, 22.
\(^{183}\) Straub, *Sexual Suspects*, 129.
\(^{184}\) Henry Fielding, *The Female Husband: or, the surprising History of Mrs. Mary, alias Mr. George Hamilton*, who was convicted of having married a Young Woman of Wells and lived with her as her Husband. Taken from Her own Mouth since her Confinement (London: 1746), 1.
‘monstrous and unnatural’ behaviour of same-sex attraction requires civilising by society and self-restraint by the individual to control. In so doing, he unwittingly exposes the natural basis of these apparent perversions (in that they inevitably occur when ‘let loose’ from restraint), and the underlying belief that society must police the borders of the sexual categories, to prevent the ‘excess and disorder’ of such behaviour.

In this way, in attempting to establish the ‘unnatural’ basis of Hamilton’s cross-dressing, Fielding’s words actually work to reveal the extent to which the categories of sex and gender were in fact understood as fluid, even if that very fluidity was something that caused anxiety among custodians of society. Throughout the text, Fielding moves repeatedly between male and female signifiers to refer to Hamilton: the ‘pretty woman’ becomes a ‘beautiful youth,’ ‘she’ is a ‘son in law,’ and Hamilton was ‘the best man in Ireland.’ Further, when events occur that could raise suspicions about Hamilton’s sex, the suspension of disbelief among her contemporaries is another testament to the fluidity of the male category in the mid eighteenth century. At a country dance, where Hamilton is wooing her third wife, an altercation occurs in which Hamilton’s breasts are exposed, ‘which, tho’ beyond expression beautiful in a woman, were of so different a kind from the bosom of a man.’ Astonishingly, despite this exposure, the event still ‘did not bring the Doctor’s [Hamilton’s] sex into absolute suspicion.’ In this way then, despite the horror expressed in the narration of his tale, Fielding’s pamphlet demonstrates the fluid understanding of sex and gender in the mid eighteenth century.

That a woman was able to put on the male sex through her outward appearance, her proclaimed profession, and her name, and be countenanced as such by wider society even when visual cues to the contrary are offered, thus reveals the extent to which the one-sex model created a space in which women could perform the male sex in order to gain access to prohibited aspects of society, not only sexual, but also professional.

185 Ibid., 5, 14, 11.
186 Ibid., 19.
While Hamilton’s switching of sex allowed her to claim the title and profession of doctor, other eighteenth-century women such as Hannah Snell, Christian Davies, and Louise Françoise de Houssay adopted masculine personas in order to go to war, in the process claiming for themselves an even more literal interpretation of masculine virtue in the defence of their country by the sword.\textsuperscript{187}

The case of the Chevalier/e d’Eon provides an even more complex example of the fluidity of sex and gender in the mid eighteenth century. Something of a gender-shifting marvel, he began his British career in 1763 with an overtly masculine political role as a French ambassador. In 1771 he was accused of being a cross-dressed woman. Accepting the accusation, he adopted a female persona in his later life, occasionally ‘cross-dressing’ as male, only to be revealed in a post-mortem to have been a man all along. As he wrote in a petition to the House of Commons in 1792, ‘I have passed successively from the state of a girl to that of a boy; from the state of a man to that of a woman. I have experienced all the odd vicissitudes of human life.’\textsuperscript{188}

As Anna Clark has written, the case of d’Eon provides an interesting perspective on the shifting conception of masculinity throughout the century:

In the 1760s, d'Eon could get away with [his] flamboyant imag[e]; [his] duelling and defiance overcame […] d'Eon's slight, delicate French figure. By the early 1770s, in a wider political context, a more sober, moralistic masculine image became popular. In such an atmosphere, people became all too ready to believe that d'Eon was really a woman.\textsuperscript{189}

Clark here exposes how older conceptions of masculinity – as residing in behaviour rather than biology – thus allowed both men and women to perform the opposite gender by changing their behaviour. Theatricality and performance are intrinsically connected to this idea of gender fluidity, as society’s acceptance of actresses performing male

\textsuperscript{187} See The Life and Adventures of Mrs. Christian Davies. The British Amazon (London: 1740); The Female Soldier; or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell (London: 1750); and A Narrative of the Sufferings of Louise Françoise de Houssay […]. Translated from the manuscript of the Author (London: 1796).

\textsuperscript{188} [Petition from Mme d'Eon to the House of Commons], \textit{Gentleman's Magazine}, 72 (1792): 657-658 (658).

\textsuperscript{189} Clark, ‘The Chevalier d’Eon and Wilkes,’ 30.
roles onstage provided a cultural touchstone for women offstage to experiment with the subversive performance of masculinity in other fields, just as d’Eon was understood to be ‘a woman playing her part in the theatre of politics.’\textsuperscript{190} Indeed, when we return to the memoirs of theatrical women, we can see that here, too, cross-dressing is taken off the stage and into public life, allowing celebrity actresses such as Charlotte Charke to explore new ways of living as a woman in a masculine world.

In male depictions of theatrical female cross-dressing, the same anxieties that haunted Henry Fielding resurface. In \textit{The Conduct of the Stage Consider’d} (1721), for example, the clergyman Jeremy Collier warns against actresses playing male roles onstage, writing somewhat absurdly that ‘Nature has made difference not only between the Sexes, but between the Apparel of Men and Women.’\textsuperscript{191} At the same time, however, Nussbaum has highlighted the ways in which onstage cross-dressing could create new possibilities for women, both onstage and off: ‘playing a man, even fleetingly, allows [actresses] to exercise greater mobility than most women, something that was easily conflated with actual actresses’ greater access to public space than previous generations had possessed.’\textsuperscript{192} As cross-dressed actresses onstage drew attention to the constructedness and fluidity of sex and gender categories in the wider world, some women boldly adopted the breeches role offstage to inhabit the masculine role in wider society. The most noted of these women was the actress Charlotte Charke.

Charke’s \textit{Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke} (1755) provides a fascinating example of the ways in which a woman performing as a man could disrupt the strengthening rhetoric of biological incommensurability. Unlike previous scandalous memoirists, in Charke’s \textit{Narrative} there is no apparent desperation to reclaim the discourse of virtue. In fact, this discourse does not even enter her text.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Ibid.}, 32.
\textsuperscript{191} Jeremy Collier, \textit{The Conduct of the Stage Consider’d}. Being a Short Historical Account of its Original Progress, various Aspects, and Treatment in the Pagan, Jewish and Christian World (London: 1721), 40.
\textsuperscript{192} Nussbaum, \textit{Rival Queens}, 195.
Rather than seeking to refashion the cultural terms of femininity to fit her purposes, Charke refuses to allow herself to be categorised at all. Instead, she maintains an element of undecidability in her text, withholding the reasons for her cross-dressing:

My being in Breeches was alleged to me as a very great Error, but the original Motive proceeded from a particular Cause; and I rather chuse to undergo the worst Imputation that can be laid on me on that Account, than unravel the Secret, which is an Appendix to one I am bound […] by all the Vows of Truth and Honour everlastingly to conceal.193

As Straub has observed, Charke’s sexual ambiguities ‘both demand and resist labelling.’194 Refusing categorisation, Charke is a self-identified ‘Proteus,’195 shape-shifting through sex and gender categories that are impossible to pin down.

Charke depicts herself as unfeminine from youth, having a ‘natural Aversion’ to ‘housewifely pursuits.’196 Later in life, her sexuality is equally equivocal. Despite denying that she had ever done anything ‘monstrous’ or ‘infamous’ with her own sex, her language invites the reader to view her as a female husband.197 Adopting the name Mr. Brown, Charke narrates how she lived for several years with a woman known as ‘Mrs. Brown,’ understood by the community to be her wife.198 In thus invoking the figure of the female husband, Charke openly confronts the anxieties of critical commentators about the corruptive influence of female theatrical cross-dressing.

Indeed, Charke’s subversive performance of masculinity offstage is explicitly linked to her theatrical career. Her cross-dressing is first introduced in the theatrical playbills for ‘the Benefit of Mr. Charke.’ Later in the Narrative she relates how she receives her greatest approbation in the character of Hamlet, when informed that ‘no Man could possibly do it better.’199 This usurpation of the masculine prerogative onstage is later taken offstage as women fall in love with her under the moniker ‘Mr. 

193 Charlotte Charke, A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke […]. Written by Herself, (London: 1755), 139.
194 Straub, Sexual Suspects, 143.
195 Charke, Narrative, 40.
196 Ibid., 271.
197 Ibid., 113.
198 Ibid., 225.
199 Ibid., 56, 208.
Charles Brown,’ and refuse to believe she is a woman. As Straub argues, the important point about Charke’s ostentatious gender-bending is not that she enacts a believable performance of masculinity. Rather, she exposes the extent to which all masculinity is, in essence, a performance, and thus unnatural: ‘It is not that her performances in drag are so successful; it is rather that they call into question whether anybody’s masculine postures are successful.’

Charke’s intention may not have been to consciously resist the rhetoric of biological incommensurability. Nonetheless, her text reveals the ways in which behaviour could still trump biology in cultural understandings of mid eighteenth-century sex and gender, creating performative spaces in which women could push against the boundaries of the newly developing two-sex model. When we turn to Robinson’s Letter almost half a century later, we can see the same manipulation of performative masculinity being turned to radical effects, not just for the celebrity actress, but for all women.

**The Right to ‘Resent and Punish’: Mary Robinson and the Discourse of Masculinity**

Why may not woman resent and punish? Because the long established laws of custom, have decreed her passive! Because she is by nature organised to feel every wrong more acutely, and yet, by a barbarous policy, denied the power to assert the first of Nature’s rights, self-preservation.

Like her theatrical forebears, Mary Robinson also enjoyed success in cross-dressed roles on stage, as the *Morning Post* reported in 1779: ‘Last Night Mrs. Robinson wore the breeches for the first time (on the stage at least) in the character of Jacintha in the Suspicious Husband, and was allowed to make a prettier fellow than any of her female competitors.’ The comment ‘on the stage at least’ hints at Robinson’s offstage cross-

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200 Ibid., 111, 164.
201 Straub, *Sexual Suspects*. 141; original emphasis.
203 *Morning Post*, 11 May 1779.
dressing, and this is confirmed by Laetitia Hawkins, who describes Robinson’s love of performance and theatrical costume offstage as well as on:

To-day [sic] she was a paysanne, with her straw hat tied at the back of her head, looking as if too new to what she passed, to know what she looked at. Yesterday she, perhaps, had been the dressed belle of Hyde Park, trimmed, powdered, patched, painted to the utmost of rouge and white lead; to morrow, she would be the cravatted Amazon of the riding house: but be she what she might, the hats of the fashionable promenaders swept the ground as she passed.\(^\text{204}\)

In Robinson’s writings, too, the trope of cross-dressing can be read, not only in its most obvious manifestation of the cross-dressed Sir Sydney Aubrey in *Walsingham*, but also in her extensive use of pseudonyms.\(^\text{205}\) In publishing under a masculine pseudonym, either overtly, as she did when she published poetry under the Shakespearian moniker ‘Oberon’ in the *Morning Post*, or implicitly, as in her androgynous signature, ‘a Friend to Humanity,’ in her *Impartial Reflections*, Robinson not only freed herself from the constraints of her personal notoriety, she also disentangled herself from the complicated politics of writing as a woman.\(^\text{206}\) For Robinson, as for Wollstonecraft – who similarly published *Rights of Men* anonymously – it perhaps seemed necessary first to unburden herself from the complicated trappings of her sex before she felt able to weigh in on the politics of ‘humanity,’ especially considering the fact that women, by virtue of their sex, were increasingly excluded from eighteenth-century public discourse and citizenship by the two-sex model that rendered women passive.\(^\text{207}\)

By 1799, however, on the publication of *A Letter to the Women of England*, something essential had changed. Robinson still chose to disentangle her personal

\(^{204}\) Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, Memoirs, Anecdotes, Facts, and Opinions, Collected and Preserved, in Two Volumes (London: 1824), ii, 24; original emphasis.

\(^{205}\) For a discussion of these pseudonyms, see Chapter 3 of this thesis. For a discussion of *Walsingham*, see Chapter 4.

\(^{206}\) See Jane Hodson, *Language and Revolution in Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Godwin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), and ‘Women Write the Rights of Woman: The Sexual politics of the Personal Pronoun in the 1790s,’ *Language and Literature*, 16 (2007): 281-304, for a discussion of the difficulty of writing as a woman in the political debates of the 1790s.

\(^{207}\) For a more detailed examination of this trend, see Chapter 2 of this thesis. See also Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere* (1988).
baggage from the *Letter* with the use of a pseudonym, but this time the pseudonym was explicitly female. As Jane Hodson has argued, the use of an explicitly female pseudonym has the effect not only of detaching the text from Robinson’s scandalous background, it also ‘disguised the disguise.’\(^{208}\) With no indication that the pseudonym was a pseudonym, Robinson was free in her *Letter* to write as an anonymous everywoman, and in so doing to speak for women of all walks of life.

Despite the change of authorial sex in the *Letter*, the influence of Robinson’s experimentation with cross-dressing can still be detected in her ongoing preoccupation with the shifting discourse of masculine honour and virtue. In her construction of a female protagonist who lays claim to masculine discourse, Robinson rends the boundaries of biological incommensurability asunder. Following her theatrical foremothers, she utilises older models of performative masculinity as a locus of potential liberation for women. In so doing, she creates a site of cultural resistance to the fixed categories of sex and gender that rendered women passive, and passionless.

Adriana Craciun has demonstrated how the feminist writings of 1790s women question the boundaries of ‘physical sexual difference.’\(^{209}\) In demanding woman’s right to ‘resent and punish,’ Craciun identifies in Robinson’s *Letter* an interest in the strong female body as an antidote to the suppression of women under the two-sex model: ‘the strong female body transforms gender […] by transforming “natural” sexual difference itself.’\(^{210}\) While Craciun’s analysis is insightful, I think that there is something more

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\(^{209}\) Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 50.

going on here. When Robinson calls for the right to ‘resent and punish’ (8), she is not only questioning feminine categories of sexual difference, she is also manipulating masculine categories of sexual difference, drawing on older models of masculinity that invoke a more fluid conception of sex and gender categories. In so doing, I argue, she exposes the weak foundations of the two-sex model.

Although the title of the Letter signals that Robinson will be concerned primarily with the ‘mental subordination’ of women, another strand of discourse soon emerges. Opening the text with the assertion that women’s ‘claims to the participation of power’ must be asserted ‘both mentally and corporeally’ (2), she immediately signals a departure from the essays of her forebears. In order to gain their ‘proper sphere,’ Robinson argues, women must adapt both their mental and physical behaviour. Asserting that women possess ‘the noblest species of pride’ (2), Robinson signals to the reader that the discourse she is interested in adapting is that of masculine virtue. As we have seen, this species of rational virtue was concerned with intellect, honour, and self-defence. It is above all this question of honour that Robinson is interested in. Writing that, due to the ‘barbarity of custom’ (4), ‘even the laws of honour have been perverted’ (5), Robinson immediately marks her intention to reclaim supposedly ‘masculine’ virtues as universal, and, in so doing, to rescind the injustice of female subordination.

Indeed, honour and masculinity were intrinsically linked in the eighteenth century. This is demonstrated in a public letter from the Marquis de l'Hôpital to the Chevalier d'Eon in 1771, at the time that his sex was first called into question:

> You have that in you which distinguishes man, understanding and courage […], virtue and honour; so that you are now acknowledged to be man - a male: what you want physically insures still more the effect of those qualities and the employment of your time.\(^{211}\)

While this quotation emphasises an understanding of manliness as consisting in ‘courage […], virtue and honour,’ it also exposes the undetermined definition of

\(^{211}\) *Middlesex Journal*, 20-22 (1771); qtd. in Clark, ‘The Chevalier d'Eon and Wilkes,’ 34; original emphasis.
eighteenth-century masculinity. Hinting that d’Eon’s potential lack of male genitalia need not necessarily disbar him from the appellation of ‘man’ or ‘male,’ l'Hôpital reveals the extent to which the discourse on masculinity was still a fluid concept even into the later period of the eighteenth century. Clearly, here, the grip of the two-sex model over the cultural consciousness had not entirely subsumed other ways of thinking about sex and gender. Using these fluid terms, then, Robinson is able to mould the discourse of masculinity to her will in the Letter, repurposing its attributes for women in order to assert them as the ‘equal associates of man’ (3).

Indeed, towards the end of the Letter, Robinson writes that ‘the prominent subject’ of the text is in fact not ‘mental subordination,’ but rather, ‘that woman is denied the first privilege of nature, the power of SELF-DEFENCE’ (73). Re-reading the text with this in mind, one can recognise the extent to which Robinson’s argument is actually concerned with claiming the masculine virtues of ‘courage’ and ‘honour’ for women. Rejecting the ‘degrading appellation of the defenceless sex’ (4), Robinson instead devotes her text to emphasising the necessity of ‘self-defence’ for women, or, in other words, the right to ‘resent and punish,’ in order that they can learn to seize their right to equality with men.

The right to ‘resent and punish’ seems a peculiar one for women to claim. It is very different from, for example, Wollstonecraft’s call in her Rights of Woman for women to have the right to develop ‘modesty, temperance, and self-denial.’ But for Robinson, this right to (appropriate) female violence is inherently linked to woman’s right to claim ‘the first of Nature’s rights, self-preservation’ (9). Rejecting the ‘barbarous policy’ of ‘CUSTOM’ that ‘decree[s]’ her passive (8), Robinson insists that it is this very notion of female passivity, and its closely connected cousin chastity, that renders woman subordinate to man.

212 Wollstonecraft, Rights of Woman, 155.
While ‘custom,’ guided by the limits of the two-sex model, allows to woman ‘no passions, no affections’ (77), it also allows her no recourse to defend her chastity from the ‘cunning sophist’ (10). Man, who, though designated by custom as her protector, instead ‘first degrades, and then deserts her’ (81):

Thus, custom says, you must be free from error; you must possess an unsullied fame: yet, if a slanderer, or a libertine, even by the most unpardonable falsehoods, deprive you of either reputation or repose, you have no remedy. (5)

In repeating the word ‘custom’ sixteen times in the course of the Letter, Robinson thus emphasises the social construction of the discourse of biological incommensurability that constrains woman in such an untenable position, and so maintains her subordination. In the face of this suppression, Robinson seeks recourse in the earlier discourse of masculinity as performance rather than biology, and its claim to ‘honour,’ ‘self-defence,’ and the prerogative to ‘resent and punish,’ to release women from the ‘yoke of sexual tyranny’ (60).

Robinson writes in her Letter that, ‘Prejudice (or policy) has endeavoured, and indeed too successfully, to cast an odium on what is called a masculine woman; or, to explain the meaning of the word, a woman of enlightened understanding’ (72). For Robinson, as for Wollstonecraft, a ‘masculine woman’ was not a woman who wished to be a man. Rather, she was a woman who adopted the so-called ‘masculine’ virtues of honour and rationality. Elsewhere in the text, she writes that ‘men would be shamed out of their effeminate foibles, when they beheld the masculine virtues dignifying the mind of woman’ (37n.). Here, as in the discourse of the one-sex model, masculinity is not an attribute of a physically male body. Rather, it is a set of behaviours that connotes strength, bravery and honour. The increasingly hysterical discourse by male commentators in the 1790s about the rise of the unnatural ‘masculine’ woman demonstrates the cultural desire to shut down these avenues of expression for women.213

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213 See, for example, Thomas James Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature. A Satirical Poem in four dialogues* (London: 1794); and Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females* (1798).
However, at the same time, it also points to the cultural awareness that women could be masculine, just as men could be effeminate, and thus that the rigid boundaries drawn between the sexes by the two-sex model were in fact not ‘natural’ at all.

Indeed, for Robinson, there is no direct relationship between men and masculinity or women and femininity. As I explained in my Introduction, Wolfson’s understanding of Wollstonecraft as registering a ‘revolution […] on the politics of language’ by ‘putting the language of gender into interrogative syntax (if…)’ is useful here. Wolfson argues that Wollstonecraft places the terms of gender (masculinity/femininity vs. man/woman) into ‘free play’ in order to render them ‘mobile or even negligible descriptives.’ Robinson likewise puts the ‘language of gender into interrogative syntax’ when she classifies men as ‘effeminate’ and praises women’s ‘masculine virtues.’ Here, however, the point is not to disregard these descriptives entirely. Rather, it is to defamiliarise the terms of debate and free them from their biological connotations. Rejecting the conditions of the two-sex model that forces woman to ‘disdain to be strong minded, because she fears to be accounted masculine […] and yield to every assailant, because it would be unwomanly to defend herself’ (90), Robinson turns instead to the language of the masculinity-as-performance to find a space in which woman could reclaim honour for herself.

This treatment of masculine discourse is most clearly demonstrated in Robinson’s interest in the duel. In the old model of performative masculinity, the duel was part of a ‘code of honour’ that proved man’s courage, virility, and, to an extent, even his virtue. With the development of Enlightenment discourse and commerce, this violent demonstration of masculinity began to be condemned, and a new model of rational masculinity began to emerge. In Godwin’s Political Justice, for example, the

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215 Wolfson, Borderlines, 13, 28.
duel is depicted as a ‘despicable practice [...] originally invented by barbarians for the gratification of revenge.’

Godwin urges all men of honour to seek more rational means of ending a dispute. For Robinson, however, the older masculine discourse of the duel holds the possibility for women to claim the ‘code of honour’ for themselves.

In the Letter, Robinson narrates the tale of a young noble woman whose fiancé suggests they need not wait until the wedding night to consummate their love. The woman resolves to be ‘amply revenged’ (21), and challenges him to a duel in which she kills him, saying:

Remember for what infamous purpose you invited me here: you shall never be a husband of mine; and such vengeance do I seek for the offence, that, on my very soul, I vow, you or I shall die this hour. Take instantly up the pistol, I’ll give you leave to defend yourself; though you have no right to deserve it. In this, you see, I have honour; though you have none. (22)

For Robinson, this is a ‘heroic act of indignant and insulted virtue,’ and the story ‘will prove that the mind of woman, when she feels a correct sense of honour, even though it is blended with the very excess of sensibility, can rise to the most intrepid defence of it’ (25). Here, the masculine discourse of honour proved by duelling is wholly claimed for woman, while the man’s honour, and by association his masculinity, is forfeit through his indecent proposal. However, honour is also equated here with female sexual virtue, as the woman’s ‘correct sense of honour’ allows her to enact a ‘most intrepid defence’ of her chastity. In this way, Robinson unites both masculine and feminine senses of honour and virtue into a universal code of honour by which both men and women should abide.

Robinson also refers here, in a note, to ‘the case of Miss Broderick’ (25n.), to demonstrate how Britain’s denial of female self-defence results in placing woman ‘in the very front of peril’ (26). Ann Broderick was the defendant in a high-profile British court case in 1795. Like the woman in Robinson’s story, she was on trial for the murder of a lover who had abandoned her, and was found insane by the court. This case split

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217 Godwin, Political Justice, 179.
public opinion. While *The Trial of Miss Broderick* (1795) condemns her for ‘the wilful murder’ of her lover, *The Fatal Effects of Inconstancy Verified* (1796) takes a more sympathetic approach, arguing that, due to his cruel abandonment of Broderick after seducing her, the murdered man ‘may therefore be said to have been the author of his own destruction.’  

Robinson uses Broderick’s case as evidence for her argument that, in Britain, women are not ‘allowed the means of self-preservation,’ and are disbarred from ‘that very resistance which would secure her from dishonour’ (26). In summoning such a controversial case to her aid, Robinson here demands her reader to sit up and take notice. When man, her ‘professe[d] […] champion,’ proves himself to be ‘the most subtle and unrelenting enemy she has to encounter,’ then Robinson’s question in a valid one: ‘What then is WOMAN to do? Where is she to hope for justice?’ (26). In turning to the one-sex discourse of performative masculinity and the honour code of the duel, Robinson finds the answer. Women, it seems, must defend themselves.

Thus the rejection of woman’s ‘mental subordination’ in the *Letter* turns into a call for woman’s physical self-assertion. While ‘education’ might not ‘*unsex* a woman,’ Robinson insists, it will ‘rende[r] her more capable of defending her own’ honour (56). In claiming the right to ‘resent and punish’ the assailants of her virtue, then, women could perhaps finally claim their place as ‘equals in the extensive scale of civilized society; and in the indisputable rights of nature’ (14). Taking advantage of the ‘ever-shifting force field of gender attractions and performances’ that Wolfson detects throughout the Romantic period, Robinson thus lays claim to the discourse of performative masculinity for women.  

In so doing, she exposes the unnatural basis of the discourse of biological incommensurability, and creates a space for women as the ‘equal associates of man’ (3). It was in this space that Robinson turned to the discourse

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218 The Trial of Miss Broderick (Edinburgh: 1795), 2; The Fatal Effects of Inconstancy verified in the Life and Uncommon Proceedings of Miss Broderick (London: 1796), 23.  
of femininity, and, moving away from the ascetic feminism of Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, found within it the inspiration for a unique vision of omnipotent female genius.

‘**SHE WILL BECOME OMNIPOTENT’**: WHERE ROBINSON DEPARTS FROM WOLLSTONECRAFT

‘I preach, and I shall never fail to feel those precepts which have been inculcated by one who now sleeps in the grave* (*)(The late Mrs. Wollstonecraft)*,’ said I, ‘but whose monument is built on the immortal basis which supports the rights of woman. On the illustrious name of their departed champion, I will bestow that eulogy which should be the glory of our sex, though it may expose the tyranny of yours.’

‘Preposterous!’ exclaimed Mr. Treville: ‘woman is merely a domestic creature; take her from the humble avocations of life, and she becomes –’

‘Your equal!’ interrupted I. ‘If I speak individually at the present moment, I may add – your superior.’

Published just weeks before *A Letter to the Women of England*, Robinson’s *The False Friend* (1799) depicts the trials and tribulations of the sentimental heroine Gertrude St. Ledger, a woman who, like Ann Frances Randall, is a member of the school of Wollstonecraft. Indeed, it is tempting to read Gertrude’s promise of a ‘eulogy’ for her ‘departed champion’ as fulfilled by the *Letter* itself. Echoing the incendiary language of *The False Friend*, the *Letter* reads like an indignant retort to the ‘cunning sophists’ that Mr. Treville represents.

As in the novel, the *Letter* does not allow that the rights of woman have been achieved by Wollstonecraft’s writings, however ‘immortal.’ Rather, the *Vindication* is positioned as the ‘basis’ on which the fight for woman’s rights must be built. Deviating from Wollstonecraft’s script, Gertrude asserts the ‘preposterous’ notion that woman might not only be man’s ‘equal,’ but also, perhaps, his ‘superior.’ In her *Letter*, Robinson-as-Randall similarly contemplates a possibility that Wollstonecraft never ventured in the second *Vindication*: that, given the right education and freedoms, woman might ‘become omnipotent’ (73). Thus, in Robinson’s radical deviation from

220 Mary Robinson’s note.
221 Robinson, *The False Friend*, ii, 77-78. For a close analysis of this novel, see Chapter 3 of this thesis.
Wollstonecraft’s theory of gender in her Letter lies the possibility for women finally to move beyond the restrictions of the two-sex model into a utopian space in which they could be free to test the true extent of their powers.

In order to understand the differences between the feminist discourses of Wollstonecraft and Robinson, it is necessary first to explicate the complex discourse of sensibility in the late eighteenth century. Sensibility was a discourse used by both radical and conservative commentators to both oppressive and subversive effects, and seemed to contain within it both egalitarian possibilities for the future and a chivalric homage to tradition. Indeed, sensibility and the concomitant concept of sentimentality infuse practically all writings of the late eighteenth century, from political texts and social histories, to educational treaties and conduct books, to the burgeoning genre of sentimental literature and poetry. As Dustin Friedman succinctly puts it,

In their broadest senses, ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimentality’ operate as an index of changing cultural attitudes towards the relationship between the body’s highly effective responses and various cultural products and social realities located in the exterior world.  

Signalling a highly evolved awareness of human experience – especially that of suffering – sensibility politicised the emotions, putting the effusions of feeling centre stage as markers of social virtue and advanced civilisation.

The complexities of this discourse are most clearly explained in Chris Jones’s *Radical Sensibility* (1993). In this text Jones identifies two coexistent strains of sensibility in the last decade of the eighteenth century, one radical and one conservative, each with its own set of contradictory meanings and definitions relating to the same terms of debate. The opposing ideas of radical versus conservative sensibility are defined by Jones as:

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reason versus passion, universal benevolence versus partial affection or enlightened selfishness, individual judgement versus the opinions and customs of society, the artistic imagination versus just moral and social ideas. 223

Thus, while the radical privileged reason, imagination and individual conscience as the tools for improvement of society, the conservative maintained that passionate odes to custom, tradition and domesticity were necessary to maintain societal order.

This expression of such oppositional views within the same aesthetic schema goes some way to explaining some of the more perplexing aspects of this debate. It clarifies, for example, the seeming contradiction that has been noted in Wollstonecraft’s attack on Burke’s sentimental reaction to the French Revolution in her *A Vindication on the Rights of Men* (1790), in which she herself adopts the language of sensibility to call for revolutionary support and the spread of universal emancipation. For Wollstonecraft, however, this was not a contradiction in the least. While she criticised Burke for the irrational and partial basis of his sentimental outburst, she understood her own sensibility to be informed by reason and universal benevolence turned to the greater good of mankind. 224

When we turn to Robinson’s use of sensibility, however, this distinction is further complicated by her co-option of past discourses of sex and gender. While Wollstonecraft is firmly on the side of radical Jacobin sensibility, disclaiming against Burke’s ‘rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility’ and dismissing the gallantry he admires as ‘impudent dross,’ Robinson is less clear on the matter. 225 In the *Letter*, Robinson makes use of both sides of the sensibility divide, drawing like Wollstonecraft on the discourses of reason, genius and universal benevolence, but at the same time also

224 For an interesting discussion of these differing strains of sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications* see Alex Schulman, ‘Gothic Piles and Endless Forests: Wollstonecraft Between Burke and Rousseau,’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41.1 (2007): 41-54.
reclaiming passion, and revisioning older models of masculinity and femininity in her vision of enlightened womanhood.

As I have shown, Robinson’s experiences as a celebrity actress had given her access to potential sites of power within the older model of passionate femininity that, by the 1790s, had fallen wholly on the conservative side of the divide of sensibility. Similarly, although she condemns the ‘Sensual Egotis[m]’ (85) of the male libertine, Robinson’s interest in older models of performative masculinity as a potential site of liberation for women leads her to a more equivocal use of the discourse of sensibility, and an unwillingness to reject ‘conservative’ aspects of sensibility to the extent that Wollstonecraft did in her *Vindications*.

Throughout *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft’s suspicion of conservative or ‘false’ sensibility is writ large. With such assertions as,

> overstrained sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station,

Wollstonecraft depicts the dangers of sensibility for women who have not been allowed to develop their mental faculties. Unchecked by reason, sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s delineation makes women ‘slaves to their bodies’ and ‘to their senses.’ It pushes them away from virtue and towards ‘the illegitimate power’ obtained through a ‘degrading’ display of their bodies and an indulgence in corrupt sensuality.

Just as Robinson had extracted the discourse of masculinity from its connection with physical sex in order to revision ‘masculine’ virtues as accessible to women, so too had Wollstonecraft re-evaluated these categories, arguing that ‘the word masculine is only a bugbear,’ and insisting on the universality of ‘masculine virtues’ as ‘the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human

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character." At the same time, in Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* the discourse of the ‘feminine’ is used to refer to the aspects of ‘sickly’ sensibility that ‘stifl[e] the natural emotions of the heart, [and] render the domestic pleasures insipid.’ Targeting the cultural construction of womanhood rather than women themselves, Wollstonecraft repeatedly denounces the feminine as weak, irrational and superficial. ‘This desire of always being woman,’ she declares, ‘is the very consciousness that degrades the sex.’

For Wollstonecraft, schooled in the liberal and religious Enlightenment philosophy of the Rational Dissenting movement, the solution to this problem of ‘illegitimate’ feminine sensibility was to be found in a discourse of self-restraint. Advocating ‘modesty, temperance, and self-denial’ as the surest means to greater virtue and closeness with God, Wollstonecraft calls for a ‘revolution in female manners’ in which women must give up ‘power over men’ in order to gain power ‘over themselves.’ Sacrificing ‘the pleasure of an awakening passion’ in favour of ‘her brightest hopes beyond the grave,’ Wollstonecraft thus asks woman to hold feminine sensibility at arm’s length, wary of the dangerous sway it would have over those beings whose reason had been crippled by customary dependence on men.

I do not mean to whole-heartedly agree with critics such as Cora Kaplan, who argues that Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* demands of women ‘a little death, the death of female desire, the death of female pleasure.’ Of course, her position on female sexuality is more complex than this, as many critics have demonstrated. For Gary Kelly, ‘it is not so much female sexuality that [Wollstonecraft] denies as its distortion by dominant ideology and culture – a distortion that works to subordinate and

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229 Ibid., 75, 72.
230 Ibid., 74.
231 Ibid., 74.
232 Ibid., 174.
233 Ibid., 155, 113, 133.
234 Ibid., 119.
oppress women.’

Similarly Katherine Binhammer insists that Wollstonecraft’s intention was not to ‘deny or repress sexuality carte blanche,’ but to ‘empty out, from the image of the female body, its ideological and social construction as licentious, seductive, aggressive, uncontrollable, and sexually objectified.’

Indeed, Jane Moore asserts that Wollstonecraft in fact ‘opens a space for women to assert autonomy as subjects alongside the right to voice their sensuality.’

Finally, Barbara Taylor argues that for Wollstonecraft female sexuality re-emerges in ‘eros,’ the ‘erotic imagination implanted in us by God to lead us towards him,’ which ‘became the emotional engine of a revolutionary-utopian programme.’

Indeed, in the text Wollstonecraft at times celebrates a more radical sensibility as the impetus to reason. This sensibility she refers to as the ‘grand,’ ‘nobler,’ or ‘strong, persevering passions’ gained through rational intercourse with the world, and she opposes them to the ‘romantic wavering feelings’ of sensual, ‘feminine’ indulgence.

Further, she also refers to some ‘exceptional’ women, including ‘Sappho, Eloisa, Mrs. Macaulay, the Empress of Russia, Madame d’Eon, etc,’ to whom these rules of self-restraint need not apply, because theirs is ‘the romantic passion, which is the concomitant of genius.’ Nevertheless, as her primary concern is with women in general, Wollstonecraft finds self-restraint a safer path to the attainment of virtue. ‘Love, such as the glowing pen of genius has traced, exists not on earth’ for the majority, she insists, and she therefore wishes ‘to see women neither heroines nor brutes, but reasonable creatures.”

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237 Jane Moore, ‘Wollstonecraft’s Secrets,’ *Women’s Writing*, 4.2 (1997): 247-262 (255); my emphasis.
239 Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 185, 155, 146.
This is not, however, an example of the ‘feminist misogyny’ that Susan Gubar reads into Wollstonecraft’s antipathy to the desiring female body.\textsuperscript{242} Indeed, Wollstonecraft does not only ask women to conform to this standard of self-restraint; men, too, are called to reject the ‘sentimental lust’ of sensibility.\textsuperscript{243} Insisting that her call for bodily reserve ‘has nothing sexual in it, and I think it \textit{equally} necessary in both sexes,’ Wollstonecraft turns the restrictive discourse of chastity back onto men.\textsuperscript{244} Thus, where eighteenth-century actresses and the scandalous memoirists had denounced the discourse of chastity entirely, Wollstonecraft instead converts the sexual virtue to a universal one, reimagining the masculine/feminine distinction of virtue into a public/private distinction that is applicable to all citizens: ‘[t]he little respect paid to chastity in the male world is, I am persuaded, the grand source of many of the physical and moral evils that torment mankind, as well as of the vices and follies that degrade and destroy women.’\textsuperscript{245}

For Wollstonecraft, this is the answer to the problem of female suppression. Turning away from the complex problems inherent in the sexual female body and its corrupt associations with vice until some future time when men and women would have sufficient reason to master a passionate sensibility, Wollstonecraft instead reimagines male and female sexuality in an image of enlightened parenthood and citizenship, calling them to exchange ‘passion’ for ‘friendship,’ and to invest their energies into the education of their children for the progress of civilisation and the glory of God:

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens.\textsuperscript{246}

\textsuperscript{243} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Rights of Woman}, 65.
\textsuperscript{244} \textit{Ibid.}, 206; original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{245} \textit{Ibid.}, 249.
\textsuperscript{246} \textit{Ibid.}, 195, 231.
Thus released from the sexual connotations of her sensual body, woman would be free to join man as his equal. For the time being at least, ‘feminine’ sensibility and passion seemed a small price to pay for this greater good of humankind.\footnote{Of course, this sexual asceticism that can be detected in Wollstonecraft’s \textit{Rights of Woman} was not her final say on the matter. In her later works, especially in her \textit{Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark} (1796), Wollstonecraft re-evaluates the discourse of feminine sensibility and sensuality, finding within them possibilities for female expression that had been closed off in her earlier repudiation of these categories. For an interesting examination of this return to the feminine in Wollstonecraft, see Ashley Tauchert, \textit{Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of the Feminine} (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). As I will go on to discuss in Chapter 5, feminine sensibility is also reimagined in Wollstonecraft’s last novel, \textit{Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman} (1798).}

For Robinson, of course, as a celebrity actress and courtesan whose body and sexual indiscretions were claimed by the press as public property, this sort of disavowal of the sexual female body and passionate sensibility was impossible. Instead, she turns once again to the performative possibilities of the one-sex model in which to find a space to express female sexuality beyond the confines of incommensurable sexual difference. As we have seen, where Wollstonecraft advocated self-restraint, Robinson advocates self-defence, seizing on older discourses of performative and sometimes violent masculinity through which she could lay claim to a virtue that would neither define her by, nor restrain her within, her sex.

As Craciun has recognised, for Wollstonecraft, violence, like sensibility, was too high a price to pay for women’s freedom. While sensibility dragged women down into the sensual clutches of the physical sexual body, female violence was equally dangerous, ‘because it would mean the overthrow of woman’s virtues as well as of her chains.’\footnote{Craciun, \textit{Fatal Women}, 72.} For the early Wollstonecraft of 1792, clinging to the promise of a better life with God, sacrificing this new moral high ground that the two-sex model allowed women risked leaving them without a positive identity through which to imagine future good. For Robinson, looking back resentfully in 1799 over a life in which her sexual virtue had been sacrificed to the baying mob, there was no such romanticising of sexual asceticism. Unwilling to wholly abandon the sexual female body and the power it
contained for women (the only power that she had been able to cling onto in her life as a public woman) Robinson in her Letter replaces Wollstonecraft’s call for modesty with an ostentatious self-display of woman’s power, celebrating the feminine delineation of sensibility and the passions, and manipulating these discourses to create a new vision of ‘omnipotent’ genius in which women could become pre-eminent.

As Jerome McGann has argued of Robinson’s earlier publication, the book-length poem Sappho and Phaon (1796),

Robinson does not disagree with Wollstonecraft about the terms or issues at stake; what she contests is Wollstonecraft’s recurrent tendency to denigrate the importance of ‘passion,’ ‘love,’ and the philosophy of sensibility that underpins those ideas and experiences. While Robinson recognises the dangers of feminine sensibility as it is defined under the two-sex model, still she refuses to capitulate to the rejection of sensibility that this model entailed. Instead, she rejects the constraining limits of the two-sex model and, uniting feminine sensibility to the older model of masculine virtue that she had already revisioned for women, reclaims both as a powerful site of transcendence from the confines of biological incommensurability.

Unlike Wollstonecraft, Robinson refuses wholly to reject the category of the ‘feminine’ or of sensibility, instead making a distinction between the debased and superficial ‘femininity’ of the two-sex model that Wollstonecraft disdains, and the transcendent ‘feminine’ of sublime sensibility that enables enlightened women to overtake men in the powers of intellectual genius. Robinson recognises the culturally constructed category of femininity within the two-sex model that subordinates women through associations with weakness, ignorance, frivolity, and servility. Nonetheless, she also identifies more positive facets of the feminine that have allowed women to develop traits such as passion and, above all, radical sensibility: traits that allow them to attain

250 This linguistic distinction between debased ‘femininity’ and the enlightened ‘feminine’ is not exact in Robinson’s Letter. I use it here for clarity in my analysis.
‘natural genius’ (60) to a degree that surpasses that of the cold and rational man of the
two-sex model, whose emotions are limited to base and licentious desires.

Indeed, in Robinson’s delineation of gender difference, man is a ‘sensual egoist’
(79), who suppresses female genius in order to satiate his dissipated sexual urges:

> There are but three classes of women desirable associates in the eyes of men:
> handsome women, licentious women; and good sort of women. – The first for
> his vanity; the second for his amusement; and the last for the arrangement of his
> domestic drudgery. A thinking woman does not entertain him; a learned woman
does not flatter his self-love, by confessing inferiority; and a woman of real
genius, eclipses him by her brilliancy. (65)

In his desire for instant gratification, Robinson argues, man will tolerate only attractive,
promiscuous, or domestic women. He rejects ‘women of real genius’ as they fail to
‘flatter his self-love.’ By contrast, woman, in Robinson’s view, possesses a sensitive
sensibility, so that while ‘man loves corporeally, woman [loves] mentally’ (44). Thus,
Robinson’s text inverts the dominant gendered binary of incommensurability that
locates the rational mind in the masculine realm and the corporeal body in the feminine
realm.

Building on the new foundations of performative female power that she had
reclaimed from the early eighteenth-century discourse of self-defence, the result of this
binary inversion for Robinson is the celebration of positive elements of the feminine
that Wollstonecraft was unable to perceive in the *Vindications*. Indeed, Robinson
refuses to reject the category of the feminine, or ‘the desire of being woman,’ as
Wollstonecraft does, arguing that there is ‘something peculiarly unjust in condemning
woman to suffer every earthly insult, while she is allowed a sex; and only permitting her
to be happy, when she is divested of it’ (48). This, in Robinson’s opinion, is the real
‘injustice of mental subordination.’ When women such as Wollstonecraft are driven to
despise femininity, they are rendered incapable of recognising the true transcendent
power of the feminine. Thus, she suggests, they become less threatening to the
patriarchal cultural economy, as they ultimately recapitulate to the two-sex model’s depiction of woman as impotent and passive.

Robinson, by contrast, boldly rejects the notion that ‘the desire of being woman’ is inherently shameful, and in her Letter she celebrates the performative power of the feminine. Arguing that, at present, the potential power of woman is ‘too formidable in the circle of society to be endured, much less sanctioned’ (72), Robinson asserts that women have the potential for pre-eminence:

Man is a despot by nature; he can bear no equal, he dreads the power of woman; because he knows that already half the felicities of life depend on her; and that if she be permitted to demand an equal share in the regulations of social order, she will become omnipotent. (72-73)

Indeed, for Robinson, intellect in its most refined form has significant feminine attributes. Arguing that the ‘natural genius’ is ‘prompted by the purest and most feminine passion of the human soul’ (60; my emphasis), Robinson establishes ‘feminine passion’ as an essential component to the development of genius. Celebrating the category of the feminine as that which allows women to develop a genius that stems from ‘mental strength […] blended with the most exquisite sensibility’ (60), Robinson develops a theory of gender that constructs ‘natural genius’ as a category that requires an active performance of both masculine (rational strength) and feminine (passionate sensibility) attributes in order to transcend the limits of biological incommensurability.

As I have explained, for Robinson, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are mobile descriptives, relating to cultural rather than biological attributes. Thus, a ‘masculine woman’ is not unsexed; she is ‘a woman of enlightened understanding’ (73). Woman does not need to reject her own sex in order to attain genius, but rather must allow her rational intellect to be improved by an active sensibility, the ‘most feminine passion of the soul’ (60). Similarly, men are encouraged to ‘unit[e] the softest passion of the soul, with the enthusiasm of valour’ (60). In this way, Robinson’s extends her vision of
transcendent genius to all, regardless of sex, if only they could overcome the corruptive discourse of incommensurable sexual difference.

When Robinson asserts the ‘omnipotence’ of women, then, she is not dealing in essentialism. Rather, she is arguing that women are better enabled by culture to unite these two gendered attributes. At the time of her writing, women had greater access to sensibility than men, not because of their biology, but because cultural femininity allowed for a deeper experience of this quality than did cultural masculinity, especially as the discourse on masculinity became more hardened against sensibility as the 1790s progressed.\(^{251}\) That she is talking in specific rather than universal terms is demonstrated in *The False Friend*, in which her riposte to Mr. Treville is that, ‘If I speak individually at the present moment,’ woman will become ‘your superior.’\(^{252}\)

Thus, where Wollstonecraft had pitted ‘feminine’ sensibility against the cold rationality of ‘masculinity,’ Robinson instead unites them, drawing on positive aspects of both one-sex masculinity (self-defence) and femininity (passionate sensibility) that had been cast aside by the two-sex model in order to promote a union of ‘manly values’ with the ‘most feminine passions of the soul’ (60) as most productive of the mind of true genius. This is not to say that Robinson chooses the one-sex model over the two-sex model unconditionally. Rather, she takes advantage of the instability and overlap of 1790s sex and gender discourse to manipulate the positive aspects of both models. From the one-sex model she takes gender fluidity and performance, female passion, and the idea of women and men on a continuum. At the same time, however, the emergent discourse of the two-sex model allows Robinson to avoid the misogynist implications of the hierarchal nature of the one-sex model. Rather than the hierarchical one-sex model of ‘difference only in degree,’ or the incommensurable two-sex model of ‘separate but equal,’ then, this complex engagement with both models allows Robinson to stage a

\(^{251}\) See Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen Press, 1986), especially the chapter ‘The Attack on Sensibility,’ 149-146, for more information on this trend. See also Chapter 4 of this thesis.

\(^{252}\) Robinson, *The False Friend*, ii, 78; my emphasis.
new, more nuanced theory of sex and gender, in which men and women are presented as equals, and it is only through a performative union of gendered attributes that transcendent genius can be attained: a union which eighteenth-century theatrical women, with their unique position in the liminal space on the borders of acceptable femininity, were best placed to attempt.

Thus, while Robinson rejects the ‘glittering shackles’ of culturally constructed femininity that, she argues, ‘debase[s]’ (83) women in its superficial promotion of weakness and ignorance, she nonetheless refuses to discard the feminine passion of sensibility altogether. Instead, she promotes a concept of genius that allows her to maintain a joyful celebration of the feminine, while at the same time revealing the flaws inherent in the discourse of the two-sex model that had entrapped women in ‘mental subordination.’

In this way, Robinson encourages women to enact a form of performative power through her text. By refusing to reject the power of the feminine along with her repudiation of superficial two-sex femininity, Robinson is able to avoid the outright dismissal of sensibility that Wollstonecraft’s early gender theory entailed. Instead, looking back on the discourses of subversive gender performance contained within the writings of her theatrical forebears, Robinson locates in her Letter a new space for women beyond the restricting categories of incommensurability that had held them in ‘mental subordination.’ Drawing together ‘feminine’ passionate sensibility with the ‘masculine’ discourse of self-defence on the stage of eighteenth-century sex and gender discourse, she is thus able to create new possibilities for both sexes, if they would be willing to take up the subversive performance themselves.

In boldly challenging the categories of sex and gender that underpinned the two-sex model by detaching the categories of masculinity and femininity from their biological implications, then, Robinson thus reveals the incommensurability of the
sexes as, in Judith Butler’s words, a ‘revelatory fiction.’ In so doing, she is able finally to turn away from the ascetic moral feminism of Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, towards a theory of gender grounded in the theatrical discourses that did not require woman to conform to such strict moral codes of sexual self-restraint; a code which Robinson, in her life as a woman on display, could never fully live up to.

Instead of a feminism of ‘modesty, temperance, and self-denial,’ Robinson seeks in her *Letter* for a feminism that delights in the pleasure of sensibility and the passions. In uniting ‘mental strength’ with ‘the most feminine passion of the soul’ (60), Robinson thus finds a place in which women could claim a right to true equality with men. In so doing, she allows women to envision a utopian space in which the repudiation of the feminine would not be a prerequisite for equality, and to explore the possibilities that performance could open up for the hitherto repressed women of the late eighteenth century.

In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I will turn back to the early 1790s in order to trace the roots of Robinson’s unique articulation of theatrical feminism in her *Letter to the Woman of England*. I will demonstrate how Robinson was able to move from the position of celebrity actress to that of such a radical political commentator through her engagement with the radical politics of the French Revolution, and in her personal identification with powerful female figures, both contemporary and historical. For Robinson, I argue, this story starts with the sad demise of Marie Antoinette.

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CHAPTER TWO

Mary Robinson’s French Revolution: Marie Antoinette and the Theatrical Power of Female Self-Display

In the manner of the Messalinas-Brunhildes, Frédégonde and Médicis, whom one called in previous times queens of France, and whose names forever odious will not be effaced from the annals of history, Marie-Antoinette, widow of Louis Capet, has been since her time in France, the scourge and bloodsucker of the French.

Antoine Fouquier-Tinville, ‘The Trial of the Widow Capet’ (1793)\textsuperscript{254}

\textit{SHUNN’D be the FIEND, who, in these dreadful times, Would brand her mem’ry with INFERNAL CRIMES!} \\
\textit{[…] For, though insulted, massacred, defam’d,} \\
\textit{The LAUREL, STILL, her peerless virtues claim’d!}

Mary Robinson, \textit{Monody to the Memory of the Queen of France} (1793)\textsuperscript{255}

Depicted as ‘the scourge and bloodsucker of the French’ in the political and pornographic pamphlets that proliferated the streets of Paris in the 1780s and early 1790s, the symbolic presence of Marie Antoinette looms large in the great purge of the French court undertaken by the revolutionary National Assembly. Even after she had been stripped of her title, her power, and her family, and locked away in the Temple prison in Paris, militant republicans continued to demand her trial and execution, as if it were only by finally destroying the living body of the last Queen of France that a symbolic catharsis could be attained, and the corruption of the ancien régime would finally be at an end.\textsuperscript{256}

In the period between Marie Antoinette’s arrest and execution, 1789-1793, Mary Robinson was working to establish herself on the British political scene as a radical voice, openly celebrating the ideals of the French Revolution. It may seem odd, then,


\textsuperscript{255} Mary Robinson, \textit{Monody to the Memory of the Queen of France} (London: 1793) ll. 167-168, 171-172.

\textsuperscript{256} The ‘ancien régime’ is the name given to the French cultural and political economy prior to the French Revolution.
that Marie Antoinette – as a symbol of ancien régime power – should have become an important site of identification for Robinson. Indeed, despite the fact that the majority of Robinson’s works were published after the queen’s death, the political texts that frame her oeuvre – *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France* (1791) and *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799) – both position Marie Antoinette as a positive figure of performative female power.

It is perhaps partly because of Robinson’s strong identification with Marie Antoinette that she has sometimes been seen as less radical than her female contemporaries, Hays and Wollstonecraft. Amy Garnai, for example, argues that this identification marks the point at which Robinson compromises her revolutionary vision to focus ‘almost exclusively on the personal story of sexual victimisation.’ To a point, this reading is understandable. Like Marie Antoinette, Robinson was a woman on display. Rumours abounded of her illicit sexual liaisons with high profile men, leaving her exposed to public opprobrium as the British equivalent of the voluptuous French queen: the quintessential symbol of female licentiousness.

Despite this, I argue that Robinson’s depiction of Marie Antoinette cannot be reduced simply to a melancholy posture of feminine sorrow. Rather, the figure that emerges from Robinson’s writings on the queen is a powerful symbol of female strength, uniting theatrical self-display with radical virtue in an expression of transcendent genius. Indeed, in Robinson’s identification with Marie Antoinette, I contend, we can detect the origins of the unique strain of radical theatrical feminism that would lead her finally to envisage an escape from the limiting categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender, and to articulate a bold declaration of female rights in her *Letter to the Women of England*.

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257 Amy Garnai Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 84.
In total, Robinson wrote three pieces dedicated to the French Queen: the political tract, *Impartial Reflections* (1791), the periodical poem, ‘Marie Antoinette’s Lamentation’ (1793), and the book-length poem, *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793). As I will demonstrate, in each text Robinson draws the figure of Marie Antoinette beyond the passive, sentimental figure of pity found in writings by other 1790s women, into an active performance of female genius. Indeed, her biographical empathy with Marie Antoinette is, I argue, exactly that which allows her to move beyond sentimentality. For Robinson, the queen’s power in popular culture is, like her own, that of theatrical female self-display. As a woman in public who did not conform to the limits of sexual virtue in chastity, Robinson could not countenance the rejection of female passion demanded by the discourse of biological incommensurability as Wollstonecraft had done. Resisting this impossible position, Robinson’s performative identification with the figure of Marie Antoinette instead enables her to develop a feminist vision that would allow her to seize back control of her own representation, and to celebrate the ‘feminine’ trait of passionate sensibility as a potential source of female power.\(^{258}\)

This display of female power that Robinson detects in Marie Antoinette’s theatrical presence is, I argue, that which she comes to identify as the transcendent genius: a position that could allow women finally to escape the confines of the discourse of biological incommensurability that excluded women entirely from the republican citizenship of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Through her identificatory relationship with Marie Antoinette, Robinson thus exposes the inadequacy for women of the masculinist revolutionary discourse that demanded the suppression of women in the private sphere of the home as a prerequisite to assimilation in the republican nation. It was this recognition, I argue, that draws Robinson ultimately to reject the cold

\(^{258}\) Of course, as I explain in my Introduction and in Chapter 1 of this thesis, when I use the term ‘feminine’ here I am referring to cultural rather than biological femininity.
rationalism of masculinist French revolutionary discourse in order more fully to realise her own radical utopian vision, in which the woman on display could at last become an active citizen in a truly egalitarian state.

‘GLITTERING LIKE THE MORNING-STAR’: THE TRIAL OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

In order to understand Marie Antoinette’s importance in the development of Robinson’s revolutionary politics, we must first negotiate her complex symbolic significance in late-eighteenth-century French culture and politics. By the time of her trial in 1793, Marie Antoinette’s symbolic presence had become so great – and so threatening – for the new revolutionary government that the ‘evidence’ provided to support the charge of treason against the republican state was less to do with any political crimes than with her near-mythical representation in French culture. As my epigraph to this chapter demonstrates, one of the queen’s prosecutors, Antoine-Quentin Fouquier-Tinville, opened his argument by comparing her to ‘the Messalinas-Brunhildes, Frédégonde and Médicis,’ queens of centuries past whose vices – sexual, political, and tyrannical – had developed folkloric status.259 In equating Marie Antoinette with these historic figures of female vice, then, the prosecutor was not only emphasising her individual guilt, he was also suggesting that the queen, as a public woman in a position of power, was in essence corrupt, licentious, and as dangerous to the nascent political system as the legendary women with whom she had been equated.

As Joan Landes has argued, this belief in the corruptive influence of public women on political power was part of a larger shift in late-eighteenth-century French discourse to exclude women from the bourgeois public sphere, in which the new republican politics was first developed, articulated and implemented.260 By the time of the French Revolution, aristocratic women had, to some extent, liberated themselves

259 Fouquier-Tinville, trans. in Hunt, ‘The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette,’ 118.
from intellectual subordination through the salon culture of the ancien régime. As hostesses, or salonnières, of these intellectual gatherings, women were able to engage publicly in politics, literature, and culture, and to influence the actions of the powerful men who attended them.

For the republican men of the bourgeois public sphere, these women signified a dangerous menace to the revolutionary state. In their eyes, Landes argues, the ‘metaphor of “the reign of women”’ had come to signify ‘the corruption of society at its height.’

Marie Antoinette, with her supposed sway over the court and king, was the reigning figure of this dangerous group of public women, symbolising the effeminate impotency of the ancien régime, brought to its knees by the corrupting power of female influence. For the men of the revolutionary tribunal, the queen, with her public status and her visibly sexualised and powerful body, thus posed an ominous threat to the virility of the masculinist republican state.

Indeed, the most damning evidence brought against Marie Antoinette at the trial was not of political plots, but of sexual depravity. Her greatest crime, they contended, was that of incest with her young son. This accusation has been described by Chantal Thomas as ‘the peak of misogynist exaltation.’ With scant evidence to support the allegation, the tribunal against Marie Antoinette had moved squarely from the realm of truth to that of fiction. Indeed, the charge was based on ‘suborned evidence’ from Marie Antoinette’s son himself, who is believed to have been intoxicated and beaten into betraying his mother. Susan S. Lanser, ‘Eating Cake: The (Ab)uses of Marie Antoinette,’ in Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 273-289 (282).

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261 Landes, Women and the Public Sphere, 27. Although Landes’ work provides an excellent analysis of the place of women in France at the end of the eighteenth century, surprisingly little is said about the importance of Marie Antoinette to the development of the new revolutionary symbology. However, her analysis of the place of aristocratic women under the new public sphere has clear parallels with the experience of Marie Antoinette.


263 Indeed, the charge was based on ‘suborned evidence’ from Marie Antoinette’s son himself, who is believed to have been intoxicated and beaten into betraying his mother. Susan S. Lanser, ‘Eating Cake: The (Ab)uses of Marie Antoinette,’ in Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 273-289 (282).
that littered the streets of Paris. In this way, as Elizabeth Colwill has argued, ‘[t]he incest charge marked Marie-Antoinette irretrievably as Other, unnatural and monstrous,’ and sealed her fate in the revolutionary imaginary as the symbol of ancien régime effeminised corruption.

Pierre Saint-Amand argues that these shocking allegations stemmed from ‘the fear of women in power, of women’s empowerment.’ In his reading, ‘the entire symbolic system of [French revolutionary] politics is articulated using the body.’ The trial of Marie Antoinette thus exposes the paranoia of the revolutionaries, who sought to ‘seiz[e] woman’s body,’ and therefore her power, ‘by way of sexual appropriation.’ Indeed, he argues, the republicans located within her specifically female sexual body the ‘entire symbolic system’ of the ancien régime.

Moreover, the incest charge indicates that, for the revolutionaries, the queen’s power – represented by her body – had escaped all boundaries of virtue and nature in her violation of the sacred bond between mother and son. In order to replace the degenerate old order with a new virtuous revolutionary politics, then, the republicans first had to ‘seiz[e]’ Marie Antoinette’s body and control its representation. In so doing, they sought finally to silence not only the queen, but all aristocratic women who, in their ‘intellectual promiscuity,’ had imposed themselves on the bourgeois public sphere. Ultimately, it seems, the guillotine did the job of removing the head not only of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, but of the entire body politic of pre-revolutionary France.

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264 These pamphlets depicted Marie Antoinette as a nymphomaniac who indulged herself with her husband’s brother, his father, and several women of her acquaintance. For some examples of these pamphlets, see Chantal Thomas, The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie Antoinette (1989), trans. Julie Rose (New York: Urzone, 1999), 183-255.
268 Ibid., 253.
270 Ibid., 257.
In *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1992), Lynn Hunt contends that this body politic must be recognised as a *familial* one: the royal family were seen as the mother and father of the nation.\(^{271}\) In order better to understand how this familial model of politics can help us to elucidate the threat that Marie Antoinette posed to the new French Republic, it is useful to turn to Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* (1988). Here, Pateman sheds light on an often overlooked aspect of social contract theory, the ‘sexual contract.’ Contrary to arguments that the social contract was developed in opposition to patriarchy in order to give civil freedom to all citizens, Pateman argues that it is in fact ‘the means through which modern patriarchy is constituted.’\(^{272}\) Under the social contract, political right becomes ‘patriarchal right or sex-right,’ and civil freedom becomes ‘a masculine attribute’ that depends on this patriarchal right.\(^{273}\)

The myth that the social contract erased patriarchy comes about because generally, in discussions of social contract theory, patriarchy is defined as paternal ‘father-right.’ However, Pateman exposes how, in the formation of the social contract, political freedom is won by ‘sons’ of the nation who ‘cast off their natural subjection to their fathers and replace paternal rule by civil government.’\(^{274}\) This overthrow of the father does not constitute an overthrow of patriarchy, then, but rather a replacement of paternal patriarchy with ‘modern *fraternal patriarchy,*’ in which women are subjected to men as husbands and political rulers.\(^{275}\)

While paternal patriarchy oppresses the majority, under the new fraternal social contract oppression becomes gendered and, for the first time, women are excluded from citizenship on the basis of biology alone. Indeed, their suppression in the private sphere is a central tenet of the contract, upon which the civil public sphere is built. The social

\(^{275}\) *Ibid.*, 3; original emphasis.
contract thus gives power to men as men and as brothers, and this power is enacted over women’s bodies. In order to replace women as the prime creators, men must create a myth of the primacy of paternity, to allow them to become the fathers of ‘social and political life.’ Ultimately, then, ‘[t]he [maternal, creative] power of women has to be defeated’ for civilisation to emerge.276

An understanding of the sexual contract helps to explain the symbolic significance of the execution of the French royal family. In many ways, the Revolution of 1789 enacted the replacement of paternal patriarchy with fraternal patriarchy. As Hunt has argued, in ancien régime ideology, the king was understood as the father of the nation.278 For the Revolution to succeed, then, republicans had to find a way to replace this father figure with a new symbol of virile power and creation that could be shared between the fraternité. This literal desire to ‘father’ a new state is demonstrated in an engraving in which a (male) member of the National Assembly is depicted as physically giving birth to the constitution [see figure 4]. Moreover, in order fully to command control of the new fraternal state, this symbolic gesture had to be coupled with a

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276 Ibid., 36; original emphasis.
277 Image taken from Hunt, Family Romance, 100.
278 Hunt, Family Romance, 11.
physical one, the actual murder of the father/king, Louis XVI. Even with the father/king deposed, however, the mother/queen remained. Indeed, Marie Antoinette posed a powerful symbolic threat to the Republic as the sole woman who could escape the control of the masculinist state in her literal mothering of the nation through her son and heir.

Thus, the threat that Marie Antoinette posed to the Republic resided in her body, and more specifically in her maternity. As Hunt argues, during the revolutionary era Marie Antoinette ‘had, in a manner of speaking, many bodies, […] [that] could signify a wide range of threats.’ The most significant – and dangerous – of these bodies, I contend, was her maternal body. If Marie Antoinette had literally given birth to the nation in bearing the royal heir, then her destruction by the revolutionaries could threaten the health of the nation. Without the mother there might be no more regeneration, no more rebirth. In order to eradicate the symbolic importance of the queen’s maternal body to the body politic, then, the republicans first had to break down her symbolic significance as mother of the nation.

For this reason, republicans both before and during the Revolution fostered the depiction of Marie Antoinette’s body as sexually degenerate, writing pornographic pamphlets that would serve to remove her positive reproductive image from the public mind, turning her into a figure of vice to be reviled by the virtuous men of the Revolution. These pamphlets depicted the queen rejecting her feminine maternal body in favour of masculine acts of lesbian tribadism [see figure 5]. By thus destroying the reverence that was usually accorded the symbolic image of the French queen, the republicans were able, finally, to begin to enact the removal of Marie Antoinette as symbolic mother of the nation. However, in order to do so, they first had to conceive of

279 Hunt, Family Romance, 96. See also Hunt, ‘The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette,’ 94, 120-121.
a figure with which she could be substituted, just as they themselves, as the new republican brotherhood, had replaced the father/king, Louis XVI.

It is my contention that the figure that came directly to replace Marie Antoinette in the new revolutionary symbology was ‘Marianne.’ In Marianne Into Battle, Maurice Agulhon argues that the new republican state lacked symbolic significance in its anonymity. While the ancien régime had been represented in the collective imagination by the monarchy, the Republic had no such stable figure on which to rest its new ideology. The figure of ‘Liberty, or the Republic’ was thus personified as a woman. By the mid 1800s, Agulhon explains, ‘Liberty’ had been renamed ‘Marianne,’ but the name was first used ‘during the Revolutionary period,’ in ‘Year II,’ or 1793. Although nothing can be known for certain, Agulhon suggests that the name ‘Marianne’ was chosen as a derogatory term by counter-revolutionaries ‘because it was very Catholic [and] very popular.’

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281 Engraving from the pornographic pamphlet, Vie privée, libertine, et scandaleuse de Marie-Antoinette d’Autriche (Paris: 1793).
283 Agulhon, Marianne Into Battle, 33.
was a perfect term by which the aristocratic monarchists could mock its lower class roots.\textsuperscript{284}

Although there is no evidence to support it, this explanation has thus far gone uncontested in academic thought. However, I want to argue that a more interesting connection exists between Marianne and Marie Antoinette. Hunt has discussed the way in which ‘Liberty’ appears to supersedes Marie Antoinette as the symbol of republican motherhood: ‘Marie-Antoinette in particular was the negative version of the female icon of republican liberty, the bad mother in a republic that was supposed to be shaped by the lessons of good republican mothers.’\textsuperscript{285} The concept of republican motherhood brings us back to the two-sex model. Excluded from citizenship, French women were encouraged to contribute to the success of the Republic through the power of their maternal bodies, giving birth to and rearing the young citizens of revolutionary France. Rather than Marie Antoinette alone, this discourse promised that all women could be mothers of the nation, allowing them to participate in citizenship from the private realm of the home.

Thus, if we substitute Hunt’s ‘Liberty’ for her more popular personified name, Marianne can in fact be read as the republican doppelganger of Marie Antoinette. Marie-Antoinette is replaced by Mari-anne, the new mother of the nation in the symbolic iconography of post-revolutionary France. Entering republican symbology in 1793, she becomes significant in the year of the queen’s execution, as the revolutionaries attempted to seize the power of reproduction for themselves. Moreover, Hunt has written that the personified French nation, ‘La Nation,’ was ‘in effect, a masculine mother, or a father capable of giving birth.’\textsuperscript{286} If we once more substitute for this the alias of Marianne, then, this new female figure of the Republic can be seen to supersede directly the symbolic motherhood that gave Marie Antoinette her threatening

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\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 33. \\
\textsuperscript{285} Hunt, \textit{Family Romance}, 122. \\
\textsuperscript{286} Hunt, Family Romance, 99. 
\end{flushright}
power. Thus, through the creation of Marianne, the menace of the French queen’s sexual and productive body could finally be expunged in the new revolutionary symbology.

Unlike Marie Antoinette, Marianne could not threaten the virility of the Republic in the way that the queen’s maternal body had done, because she is an abstract, even masculinised concept, relegated to the position of a disembodied object over which the republicans would have total control. In the creation of a bodiless mother, then, the republicans were able at once to (a) erase the dangerous-because-sexually-embodied mother, Marie Antoinette, from the symbolic iconography of the body politic; (b) develop an ideology of republican motherhood for the women of the nation that would enclose them in the private sphere; and, (c) retain the power of reproduction for themselves. Once her powerful, ideological tie to the people had been broken, the republicans could finally condemn Marie Antoinette to death, and destroy the last vestiges of the ancien régime familial body politic. Divested of her mythic status, the queen had nothing left to lose but her head.

‘TRIUMPHANT MAN BE FREE!’: MARY ROBINSON AND THE JOY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

For Mary Robinson, surveying the political landscape in 1790, the radical ideals of the French Revolution seemed to promise liberty for all humankind. Unaware as yet of the suffering of Marie Antoinette, she celebrated the Revolution as an event that could herald a new era of equality, in which she could finally escape the sordid gossip that surrounded her public presence on the British cultural scene, and take up her place as an active citizen of the revolutionary new world order.287

Robinson had reason to be hopeful. In the early days of the Revolution, French women had played a visible and active role. Taking up the mantle of liberty, Parisian

women had participated in the storming of the Bastille in the July of 1789, and in October of the same year ‘asserted their right as women to participate in public affairs,’ leading the famous march to Versailles that would force Louis XVI to cede his power to the people. Public women, such as Théroigne de Méricourt, were visible and active figureheads of the revolutionary process, and women’s participation extended not just to the physical acts of the Revolution, but also to its philosophical and cultural development.

In 1789, the ‘Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King’ made the case for women to have a more equal standing under the new Republic as Republican Mothers: ‘we ask to take leave of ignorance, to give our children a sound and reasonable education so as to make of them subjects worthy of serving you.’ Other women were more radical in their feminist aims. In 1790, Etta Palm d'Aelders made a speech concerning the condition of women under the ancien régime, in which she declared: ‘we are your companions and not your slaves.’

Men also took up the call for women’s rights. In ‘On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship’ (1790), the Marquis de Condorcet argued that, in excluding women from citizenship, the revolutionary government had ‘violated the principle of the equality of rights.’ Insisting that ‘inferiority and superiority are equally divided between the two sexes,’ Condorcet contends that the only true source of difference between the sexes, is found in ‘education.’ Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that it was sexual inequality itself that had brought about the ancien régime ‘empire’ of women: ‘Is it not probable that [women’s] special empire would diminish if […] it

288 Landes, Women and the Public Sphere, 109.
289 Like Robinson, Méricourt was a former courtesan, which must have inspired her with hope.
291 Landes, Women and the Public Sphere, 119.
293 Condorcet, ‘On the Admission of Women,’ 5, 8.
ceased to be for them their sole means of defence, and of escape from persecution?294

With the assertion that ‘he or she who votes against the rights of another, whatever may be his or her religion, colour, or sex, has by that fact abjured his own,’ Condorcet thus boldly demands the rights of woman.295 It is not difficult to see why, at this particular moment, the Revolution appeared so auspicious to Robinson, watching events eagerly from across the Channel.

Indeed, Robinson was so enthused by the Revolution’s potential for universal emancipation that in 1790 she published the celebratory poem, *Ainsi va le Monde*. As Garnai has noted, this poem has gone virtually unacknowledged in the recent academic recuperation of Robinson as a political writer.296 Despite this neglect, *Ainsi va le Monde* marks Robinson’s first sustained piece of revolutionary writing, built on her involvement with Della Cruscanism.

Robinson’s involvement in the Della Cruscanism is often dismissed as an embarrassing misadventure in the early formation of her authorial self. However, as this poem demonstrates, Della Cruscan verse held within its overwrought form the potential for a radical critique of contemporary British politics and culture. Robinson’s affiliation with the Della Cruscanism is here marked in her Della Cruscan signature, Laura Maria, and in her dedication to Robert Merry, the founder of the movement. This dedication also references Merry’s own poem on the Revolution, ‘The Laurel of Liberty’ (1790). In this way, Robinson signals her intention to directly engage with British political discourse on the Revolution.297

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294 Ibid., 9.
295 Ibid., 9.
296 Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings*, 81. Daniel Robinson’s *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) has begun to correct this neglect, but even here his interest is less in Robinson’s politics that in her poetic practice.
In *Anisi va le Monde*, Robinson’s concern is with the state of both contemporary culture and politics, and political oppression is depicted as the grave of artistic genius. Looking back on a catalogue of British genius from centuries past (including Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, Dryden, Spenser, Chaucer, Otway and Chatterton), she bemoans the dearth of artistic genius in contemporary society, stating that the ‘Muse’ of artistic ‘Genius’ has ‘pin’d neglected in oblivion’s shade.’ In its place, Robinson argues, the ‘vapid throng’ of society worships only that which is ‘flippant, senseless, [and] aery’. The ‘True Wit’ and ‘Reason’ of Genius is substituted for ‘wanton mirth and fulsome ribaldry,’ while ‘motley mumm’ry holds her tinsel reign’.

This critique of late eighteenth-century British society as superficial, obsequious, and licentious echoes the revolutionary disparagement of ancien régime culture in France. For Robinson, it is the contemporary British genius, Merry, who must ‘pluck the weeds of vitiated taste’ and reform society in the image of the Muse:

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The task be thine to check the daring hand
That leads fantastic folly o’er the land;
[...]
To cheer with smiles the Muse’s glorious toil,
And pant perfection on her native soil. (53-54, 59-60)
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Anne Janowitz has dismissed Robinson’s praise of Merry as the misguided adoration of a poet whose style consisted of ‘mannered and cloying tangles.’ However, I read Robinson’s depiction of Merry as the poet who will revive the ‘banish’d Muse’ somewhat differently. In taking Merry to be representative of the modern Muse, I argue, Robinson was not only praising a poet who had innovated a new poetic form and reinvigorated British poetry, she was also paying tribute to a man who used his status as a great modern poet to publish political verse that sought to enlighten the British people in favour of the French Revolution.

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298 Mary Robinson, *Anisi va le Monde* (London: John Bell, 1790), 2, l. 32. All further quotations of this poem refer to this edition and will be referenced in the body of the text by their line numbers. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.

For Robinson, Merry attains the title of genius because he unites artistic production to political progress:

The Arts, that thro’ dark centuries have pin’d,
Toil’d without fame, in sordid chains confined,
Burst into light with renovated fire,
Bid Envy shrink and Ignorance expire.

[…]
The gothic phantoms sick’ning fade away,
And native Genius rushes into day. (61-64, 71-72)

It is only once society has cast off the ‘sordid chains’ of its oppressive political system in favour of the ‘renovated fire’ of enlightenment, Robinson argues, that the ‘gothic phantoms’ of ancien régime corruption will ‘fade away,’ and ‘native Genius’ can return to Britain to herald a new era of equality. For Robinson, I argue, Merry represented this ‘native Genius,’ and it for this reason that she names him as her champion.

In Robinson’s elucidation, the ‘senseless chaos’ (104) of modern culture is caused by the unjust domination of the aristocracy. It is to please this ‘pert tribe in flimsy greatness drest’ (106), that ‘empty witlings sate the public eye / With puny jest and low buffoonery’ (133-134), while the ‘sweet blossoms’ (147) of Genius ‘shrink from the sun’ (149) of fame. In this hostile atmosphere, the ignorant become ‘pois’nous weeds’ (146) that smother British enlightenment. They corrupt art with the false wit of ‘cunning arrogance’ (143), knowing that celebrity will be rewarded to those ‘who can flatter most’ (142). This bold class critique thus marks a shift in the poem from art to politics, explicitly linking artistic deterioration to the inequality of contemporary British society. Implicit in this critique is the suggestion that, could Britain follow France in seeking universal emancipation, native Genius could once more take its place as the apotheosis of British culture.

In the next stanza this critique becomes more radical as Robinson describes the transcendent power of emancipation:

Thro’ all the scenes of Nature’s varying plan,
Celestial Freedom warms the breast of man;
Led by her daring hand, what pow’r can bind
The boundless efforts of the lab’ring mind. (159-162)

This is pure political broadcasting. Robinson here casts off all hesitancy, summoning her art to call for universal enlightenment. For Robinson, ‘Freedom’ is the most important precursor to enlightenment and artistic genius: ‘From her, expanding reason learns to climb, / To her the sounds of melody belong’ (170-171). Interestingly, Freedom is gendered feminine. She is the goddess who ‘bids each passion live’ (173), and this allows Robinson to imagine both Liberty and Genius as modes of being that can belong to women alongside men.

Moreover, this also allows her to position herself in her catalogue of British Genius. As the herald of the goddess Freedom who answers the call of the neglected Muse, Robinson becomes Merry’s female counterpart, a poetic Genius who must use her talents to enlighten the British people. As I will explain in Chapter 3, this argument will be echoed throughout Robinson’s writings. Indeed, Robinson’s desire is to privilege Genius over and above the false supremacy of the aristocracy, uniting it with the image of Freedom to break down the barriers between ‘the peasant’ and ‘the throne’ (176), and rejecting all titles ‘but SUPERIOR WORTH’ (186).

In a bold celebration of the Revolution, Robinson turns to ‘ENLIGHTEN’D Gallia’ (187), rejecting the ‘pale Slav’ry’ (196) of the ancien régime to praise the extensive freedoms of revolutionary France. The ancien régime is depicted as a time of cruelty, where ‘pride was consequence, --- and pow’r was law’ (228). Dominated by the ominous shape of the ‘black BASTILE’ (235), this era is painted as a dystopia of ‘avarice’ (225), ‘destruction’ (226), ‘DESPAIR’ (234), and ‘death’ (240). In opposition to this, Robinson greets the Revolution with proud enthusiasm. Importantly, she depicts emancipation as a ‘birth-right’ (247) of the French people. Freedom is not a gift to the

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300 Indeed, according to Anne Janowitz, Robinson’s daughter removed this appeal to Freedom from her 1806 edition of the poem, signalling the radicalism of Robinson’s words here. Janowitz, Women Romantic Poets, 73.
French, but a *right* with which all individuals are born. This right has been falsely suppressed by the tyranny of ancien régime power, but is now awakened by ‘the rapt’rous energies of social love’ (258) that the Revolution has engendered.

It is at moments like this, when, writing before the explosion of the pamphlet wars, Robinson exposes the true extent of her radical political project. Indeed, her aim here is actively to inspire revolution, and she praises the National Assembly as ‘the favor’d delegates of heav’n, / To whose illustrious souls the task was giv’n / To wrench the bolts of tyranny’ (273-275) and set free humankind. The violent nature of the verb ‘wrench,’ along with her celebration of the ‘red vengeance’ (248) that republicans had wrought on their deposed tyrants, indicates that, unlike many British radicals, Robinson accepted the ferocity of the early Revolution as a necessary seizing of power, and an understandable desire for retribution. Once more, this demonstrates the radical extent of her revolutionary zeal, as she accepts revolutionary violence as a natural retribution for the past crimes of the ancien régime.

Behind this violence Robinson detects an unstoppable desire for freedom, and this, she argues, is the most natural urge in the world:

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What is the charm that bids mankind disdain
The tyrant’s mandate and th’ Oppressor’s chain;
What bids exulting Liberty impart
Extatic [*sic*] raptures to the Human Heart;
Calls forth each hidden spark of glorious fire,
Bids untaught minds to valiant feats aspire;
What gives Freedom its supreme delight?
‘Tis Emulation, Instinct, Nature, Right. (279-286)
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This is Robinson’s fundamental belief. For her, the Revolution is so significant because it represents the reclamation of the Rights of Man, a conviction that she holds as strongly as any member of the newly elected National Assembly. Moreover, freedom is the source of all human greatness and endeavour. It is the mother of Genius and the foundational right to which all people lay claim. Indeed, Robinson calls on all humankind to demand this entitlement to freedom: ‘Nor yet to Gallia are her smiles
confin’d, / She opes her radiant gates to *all mankind*’ (303-304). In so doing, she states her ambition for the Revolution’s fervour to spread its influence abroad, perhaps even to British shores.

Robinson had begun her poem with a call to Genius; she ends it with a call to Freedom. For Robinson, these concepts are intrinsically connected. In the achievements of the Revolution she could envisage a space for herself, and for all public women, beyond the oppression of hierarchical British society. Here, she hopes, she could live as a truly emancipated citizen, and produce art that would propel her to the only status that mattered, that of ‘*SUPERIOR WORTH*’ (186).

Robinson closes *Anisi va le Monde* with a final edict from the goddess of freedom:

The Goddess speaks! O mark the blest decree, ---
Tyrants shall fall --- triumphant Man be free! (341-342)

Unfortunately for Robinson, her words would prove only too accurate. In the new French Republic, triumphant *man* would be set free, but the same could not be said for woman. As Marie Antoinette mounted the scaffold, Robinson would have to confront the masculinist outcome of the French revolutionary project, and reassess her desire directly to reproduce France’s Revolution in Britain.

‘*A H! MUCH I MOURN THY SORROWS, HAPLESS QUEEN!*’: 1790s WOMEN WRITERS AND MARIE ANTOINETTE

For Mary Robinson, the trial of Marie Antoinette would disrupt her wholehearted celebration of the Revolution. Robinson was not the only 1790s woman writer to discuss the fate of the French queen, however. In both England and France, radical women struggled to come to terms with Marie Antoinette’s fraught symbolic presence in French revolutionary discourse. In Britain, this difficult position was negotiated by Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith, and in France by Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël.
For Wollstonecraft, Marie Antoinette symbolised all the evils of the ancien régime. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft derides the ‘deplorable state’ in which aristocratic women existed: ‘Women then must be considered as only the wanton solace of men, when they become so weak in mind and body, that they cannot exert themselves, unless to pursue some frothy pleasure, or to invent some frivolous fashion.’ It was in this category of degenerate women that she placed Marie Antoinette.

In *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), Wollstonecraft directly reproduces the masculinist republican version of the French queen’s history, expressing disgust at her supposed licentiousness. According to Wollstonecraft, Marie Antoinette’s ‘ruinous vices’ include ‘the most profound dissimulation,’ ‘intolerable family pride,’ and ‘continual and unrestrained indulgence of pleasure.’ She even goes so far as to repeat the sexual slanders of the pamphlets, writing that the queen’s ‘strange predilection for handsome women blighted the reputation of every one, whom she distinguished.’ As Adriana Craciun rightly observes, this depiction of Marie Antoinette is ‘virtually indistinguishable from unabashedly misogynist attacks.’ Indeed, so severe was her attack on the queen that it caused Horace Walpole to label her a ‘hyena in petticoats,’ an insult that has remained with her to this day.

Charlotte Smith, on the other hand, takes a more sympathetic view of the queen. In her book-length poem, *The Emigrants* (1793), Smith celebrates the ideals of the Revolution while lamenting the fate of Marie Antoinette and her family: ‘Ah! much I

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mourn thy sorrows, hapless Queen!” Although, like Wollstonecraft, Smith acknowledges the crimes that Marie Antoinette had been said to have committed, she excuses them, writing, ‘Whate’er thy errors were, / Be they no more remembered’ (160-161). Further, she suggests that many of the accusations against the queen may have been ‘swell’d’ (162) – or exaggerated – beyond her actual misdeeds.

For Smith, the queen has suffered enough, and should be awarded her freedom along with the rest of the French people:

More than enough
Thou hast endur’d; and every English heart,
Ev’n those, that highest beat in Freedom’s cause,
Disclaim as base, and of that cause unworthy,
The Vengeance, or the Fear, that makes thee still
A miserable prisoner! (164-169)

Like Robinson, Smith feels affiliated with Marie Antoinette in a shared sense of female victimhood – ‘Ah! who knows, / From sad experience, more than I, to feel / For thy desponding spirit’ (169-171). For Smith, Marie Antoinette is, like her, a ‘wretched Mother’ (152), and it is this that ultimately draws her into a position of heartfelt sympathy for the queen’s suffering.

In France, both Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël express their allegiance to Marie Antoinette in their writings of the early 1790s. Olympe de Gouges opens her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (1791) with a dedication ‘To the Queen.’ Olympe de Gouges had published this radical and revolutionary call for gender equality in response to the National Assembly’s Declaration of the

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306 Charlotte Smith, The Emigrants (1793), II, l. 154. All further quotations of this poem refer to this edition and will be referenced in the body of the text by their line numbers.
307 Smith’s sense of identification with Marie Antoinette is also noted by Jacqueline Labbe, who writes that Smith ‘identifies with Marie Antoinette on the basis of their shared motherhood.’ Jacqueline Labbe, Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 133.
308 Helen Maria Williams was another British woman who wrote about Marie Antoinette, but her position is more ambivalent. She discusses the trial and execution in some detail in her Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France (1795), but her own emotional state is not mentioned. This is perhaps explained by the political climate for British citizens in France at the time, who were under constant threat of imprisonment and execution.
Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789). In it, she called for the men’s new rights of citizenship to be extended to women.

Although the Dedication, written before Marie Antoinette’s imprisonment, does not directly address the queen’s plight in the way in which Smith or Robinson would do, de Gouges uses this literary space as a way of cementing her allegiance to Marie Antoinette. Describing her as ‘wrongly accused,’ de Gouges positions the queen as a sympathetic victim of court intrigue. Despite the hostile cultural milieu in which she wrote, she refuses to contribute to rumour, stating that ‘I alone had the strength to champion your cause.’

As the champion of the queen, de Gouges not only resists the dominant republican symbology that denigrated Marie Antoinette in scandal. She also liberates the queen from this desolate state, positioning her as a powerful female symbol, and as the woman best placed to advocate for women’s rights. Indeed, she calls on Marie Antoinette to champion the cause of women, just as de Gouges had championed her own:

Only a woman fate has raised to a high position can lend credence to the rise of the Rights of Woman and hasten their success. […] This revolution will only come when all women have fathomed their deplorable fate and the rights they have lost in society. Support this wonderful cause, Madame, uphold your unfortunate sex, and you will soon have the backing of half the kingdom, and of at least a third of the other half.

With this statement, de Gouges marks the queen as the symbol of women’s potential redemption, rather than of their degeneration. Rather than seeing her powerful position as a threat to the new Republic, as Wollstonecraft did, de Gouges instead identifies within her the potential for women’s emancipation, and the restoration of the ‘rights they have lost in society.’ In this elucidation, there is no conflict inherent in praising the Revolution and the French queen in one breath. For de Gouges, Marie Antoinette

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310 De Gouges, ‘To the Queen,’ 1.
311 Ibid., 1.
312 Ibid., 2.
represented the sleeping women of France, who only had to wake up to their ‘deplorable fate’ for a new, feminist ‘revolution’ to be engendered, and for women to take up their place as the equals of men.

Germaine de Staël published the anonymous Réflexions sur le procès de la reine (Reflections on the Trial of the Queen) in 1793. Like de Gouges, de Staël defends Marie Antoinette against all wrongdoing. Indeed, her defence of the queen goes further than this. While de Gouges was denouncing Marie Antoinette’s detractors in the press, de Staël castigates the eminent republicans of the court. This was a daring position for a woman living through the Terror of the Jacobin purges to take.

De Staël echoes de Gouges’ belief that Marie Antoinette symbolises the fate of the public woman in French society, and uses this conviction as a basis from which to summon ‘women of all countries, of all classes of society’ to the queen’s aid: ‘Republicans, constitutional monarchists, aristocrats, if you have known unhappiness, if you have needed pity, if the future raises in your thoughts any sort of fear, come together, all of you, to save her!’313 This is the most radical declaration of fidelity to the queen that we have encountered up to this point. De Staël does not merely lament the queen’s fate. Rather, her pamphlet actively encourages a physical uprising in defence of the French queen.

For de Staël, Marie Antoinette’s accused crimes are no more than the deceitful manipulation of ‘the genre of calumny with which it is so easy to weaken all women.’314 In reality, the queen is the doting mother of the people, who lived only to serve: ‘if you are happy, so was she.’315 Indeed, for de Staël, the fate of Marie Antoinette is that which all women would suffer under the rule of masculinist French Republic. Marie

314 De Staël, Reflections; trans. in Thomas, ‘The Heroine of the Crime,’ 115; original emphasis.
315 De Staël, Reflections; trans. in Sheriff, 64.
Antoinette symbolises all women who hope for freedom and the power to decide their own way of life:

I return to you, every woman who is sacrificed in so tender a mother; all sacrificed by the attack which is committed on weakness by the annihilation of pity; this is what will become of your empire if ferocity reigns, what will be your destiny if your tears fall in vain.316

As de Staël recognised, the ‘destiny’ of French women was only too tied up in the trial of Marie Antoinette. As a symbol of the powerful woman on display in the ancien régime, the last queen of France would come to mean very much indeed to women who hoped for freedom in the new world order.

‘A SMALL SPACE DIVIDED THE QUEEN FROM MRS. ROBINSON’: MARY ROBINSON, MARIE ANTOINETTE, AND THE THEATRICAL POWER OF FEMALE SELF-DISPLAY

For Mary Robinson, watching the events of the queen’s trial across the Channel, the execution of Marie Antoinette seemed to signal the death of all public women in the new French Republic. In this, Robinson’s feelings were similar to those of her French contemporaries. However, while de Gouges and de Staël focus on the queen as symbolically representative of women in their familial roles as wives and mothers of the nation, Robinson instead foregrounds the queen’s explicitly female body beyond the realm of the maternal.

For Robinson, Marie Antoinette represents the passionate woman revelling in theatrical power of self-display. The queen’s destruction by the National Assembly – both symbolic and physical – thus forced Robinson to reconsider her own place as a publically desiring – and desired – woman in the post-revolutionary cultural economy she had originally so admired. It is this that sets Robinson’s writings on the queen apart from those of other women of the 1790s. Through her identificatory relationship with Marie Antoinette as a woman whose sexuality could not – and should not – be reduced to the sanitised image of domestic Republican Motherhood, Robinson would articulate a

316 De Staël, Reflections; trans. in Thomas, 115.
new feminist politics in which the theatrical power of female self-display could be celebrated, rather than silenced.

As Craciun has written, ‘women writers of the Romantic period always addressed the body when they considered issues of intellect, subjectivity, sexuality, agency, and power.’\(^{317}\) However, as I have explained, this interest in the sexed female body is usually expressed through discussions of the *maternal* body. For women such as Wollstonecraft, Smith, de Staël, and de Gouges, the positive power of the female body was the power of creation. It is for this reason that the concept of Republican Motherhood was so appealing to these women. They hoped to influence the body politic through the physical act of mothering the children of the Republic. Thus, in *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues, ‘Let an enlightened nation* [*France*\(^{318}\) then try what effect reason would have to bring [women] back to nature, and their duty.’\(^{319}\) Women’s ‘first duty [...] in point of importance, as citizens,’ she asserts, ‘is that [...] of a mother.’\(^{320}\) For promoters of Republican Motherhood, then, women could perform the rights of citizenship just as well from the domestic as from the public realm. Their power lay in their motherhood, and in their virtue. For Robinson, however, this was not a choice that she was easily able to make.

As a woman who, in her own words, was ‘known, by name, at every public place in and near the metropolis,’ Robinson could not hope for such solace in the domestic pleasures of maternity.\(^{321}\) Instead, like the French queen, Robinson’s sexual liaisons were the talk of London. At the height of her notoriety, she could daily be

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\(^{317}\) Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 4.

\(^{318}\) Wollstonecraft’s note.

\(^{319}\) Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 252.

\(^{320}\) Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 226. The significance of Republican Motherhood to Wollstonecraft’s feminist project has come under question by Barbara Taylor, who argues that Wollstonecraft’s focus on maternity was ‘driven mostly by the book’s anti-elitism.’ However, even Taylor acknowledges that ‘Certainly the *Rights of Woman* contains hints of such a notion,’ and the evidence from the text demonstrates that Wollstonecraft was certainly influenced by the concept in a way that Robinson was not. Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 223.

found in the society pages of the press, and her supposed sexual adventures were depicted in graphic detail in pornographic pamphlets and caricatures.

One such caricature, ‘The Thunderer’ (1782), depicts her lover, Colonel Banastre Tarleton, standing dominantly beside the Prince of Wales, identified by the royal insignia of ostrich feathers sprouting from his neck [see figure 6]. By Tarleton’s head is a pub sign, ‘The Whirligig,’ and atop this sits Mary Robinson, breasts bared and legs spread. As Paula Byrne explains, the ‘whirligig’ was ‘a large cage suspended on a pivot, in which army prostitutes were hoisted for punishment.’ In this image, as in many others like it, Robinson is thus positioned as a prostitute to be publically shamed for her deviant sexuality. With such a reputation, the position of the ‘virtuous’ doting mother of the private sphere was just not an option.

It is for this reason, I argue, that Robinson’s identification with and analysis of the symbolic potential of Marie Antoinette differs so interestingly from her contemporaries. In Romantic Theatricality, Judith Pascoe argues that Maria Antoinette

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323 James Gillray, ‘The Thunderer’ (1782). Caricature of Banastre Tarleton, the Prince of Wales and Mary Robinson.
was ‘the most theatrical woman of the 1790s.’ I would go further than this. In their notorious lives, both Marie Antoinette and Robinson were, one could argue, the most theatricalised women of late eighteenth-century society. Both women were forced onto the public stage by the salacious gossip of pornographic pamphleteers, who, in Robinson’s case as in Marie Antoinette’s, depicted them as the ‘scourge and bloodsuckers’ of modern society, the immoral and insatiable symbols of corrupt female power. However, at the same time, neither woman can be said to capitulate fully to this passive theatricalisation of their bodies by society. Rather, both women actively engaged with this complex experience of display, self-consciously performing their public image, and in so doing seeking to regain control of their bodies and their identities through the theatrical power of female self-display.

Indeed, Pascoe has discussed the way in which Robinson confounded gender categories in her position as a ‘spectacular flâneuse.’ As an iconic celebrity on the London scene, Pascoe argues, Robinson ‘uses her position as spectacle (“Behold me”) to draw attention to her position as spectator, finding within the metropolis a sustaining rather than alienating vision.’ Rather than being rendered passive by her position as spectacle, then, Robinson instead puts herself on display in order to seize control of her own identity. She uses this theatrical act of self-display as a position of power from which to critique contemporary society, through which she could begin to contemplate an escape from the limiting categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender that sought to reduce her worth to that of biological maternity.

For Robinson, Marie Antoinette was the ultimate symbol of this performative power of female self-display. Having attained a position of power without having to

325 Fouquier-Tinville, ‘The Trial of the Widow Capet,’ (1791). For examples of pornographic pamphlets about Mary Robinson, see The Memoirs of Perdita (London: 1784) and The Vis-à-Vis of Berkeley Square (London: 1783).
renounce the pleasure of passionate sensibility and performance, Marie Antoinette was the foremost woman of the 1790s who appeared to revel in the power of her own theatricality. As such, she seemed to Robinson to offer a model of theatrical womanhood that contained everything Robinson wished to achieve for women in the revolutionary world order she had celebrated in *Ainsi va le Monde*.

Robinson’s identificatory relationship with Marie Antoinette had first been developed in a meeting between the two women in 1783, an encounter described in her *Memoirs*:

A small space divided the queen from Mrs. Robinson, whom the constant observation and loudly whispered encomiums of her Majesty most oppressively flattered. She appeared to survey, with peculiar attention, a miniature of the Prince of Wales, which Mrs. Robinson wore on her bosom, and of which, on the ensuing day, she commissioned the Duke of Orleans to request the loan. Perceiving Mrs. Robinson gaze with admiration on her white and polished arms, as she drew on her gloves, the queen again uncovered them, and leaned for a few moments on her hand. The duke, on returning the picture, gave to the fair owner a purse, netted by the hand of Antoinette, and which she had commissioned him to present, from her, to *la belle Angloise*.328

In an unpublished manuscript, Jane Porter describes a further encounter that suggests a close relationship between the two women: ‘Even Antoinette herself used to say, “Send for the lovely Mrs. Robinson. Let me look at her again, and hear her speak, before I go to sleep!’”329 In both of these scenes, the reciprocal nature of theatrical self-display is foregrounded, as the two women celebrate their shared dual role of performer and audience, displaying themselves to each other and marveling at the thrilling power of each other’s theatrical self-display.

Pascoe explains Robinson’s engagement with Marie Antoinette as an act of ‘reciprocal fetishisation,’ in which Marie Antoinette becomes the ‘model and mirror’ through which Robinson can negotiate the politics of female spectacle.330 Similarly, Elizabeth Fay writes that, for Robinson, Marie Antoinette was the ‘performative model

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328 Robinson, *Memoirs*, 123; original emphasis.
par excellence.’\textsuperscript{331} Indeed, for both women, theatrical performance was an important site of expression beyond the limits of the class and gender roles of eighteenth-century society. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Robinson found within the subversive potential of the eighteenth-century celebrity actress a place in which to experiment with new ways of performing womanhood. Marie Antoinette was also fascinated with the stage, as Robinson would have been aware at her time at Versailles, and, prior to the Revolution, she was famed for staging theatrical productions in which she would play various roles deemed unsuitable for a queen.\textsuperscript{332}

For both women, acting thus became a means through which to experiment with identities that stood outside the rigid barriers of eighteenth-century cultural categories of class and gender. It is for this reason, I argue, that Marie Antoinette provides a source of powerful theatrical identification for Robinson. Just as the celebrity actress was able, as Felicity Nussbaum has shown, to ‘heral[d] new possibilities for women, in [her] ability to fashion a complex yet recognisable personality that projected a combination of public display and personal revelation,’ so too, the theatrical power of self-display that Marie Antoinette and Robinson enacted enabled them to envisage new ways of performing womanhood in the new revolutionary cultural economy.\textsuperscript{333} In the French queen’s masterful performance of her own identity, Robinson thus found the inspiration to experiment with the possibilities inherent for women in the subversive performance of passionate sensibility and theatrical female self-display.

In Byrne’s reading, this encounter between the two women represents a moment of rebirth for Robinson. After fleeing Britain to escape the scandal of the pornographic


\textsuperscript{332} Antonia Fraser writes that Marie Antoinette first began performing in theatrical productions for the court in the summer of 1780, three years before Robinson’s encounter with the queen. She writes that ‘Significantly, Marie Antoinette’s chosen parts had absolutely nothing to do with the gorgeously attired stately role she played day by day at Versailles. She played shepherdesses, village maidens, and chambermaids.’ Antonia Fraser, \textit{Marie Antoinette: The Journey} (London: Phoenix, 2002), 212.

pamphlets, Robinson’s meeting with Marie Antoinette inspired her with the strength to return to Britain triumphant: ‘far from being abashed and humiliated, [Robinson] returned from France more resplendent than ever, given new glamour by the latest Paris fashions and renewed confidence as a result of Marie Antoinette’s praises.’ For Robinson, the theatrical figure of the French queen thus seemed to promise a new way of life for women, in which female power on the public stage could be celebrated, rather than calumniated, perhaps even in the field of politics, as well as in the field of culture. It was with this powerful and theatrical idea of Marie Antoinette in mind that Robinson watched the joyful Revolution in France turn into the Jacobin Terror that would claim the queen’s life. In her trial and execution, Robinson would see her dream of a new and better world for women evaporate. In the end, the French Republic would resecure women ever more closely in the private realm of the home.

‘AND GIVE NOBILITY A LOFTIER NAME!’: ROBINSON’S MARIE ANTOINETTE WRITINGS

In Ainsi va le Monde (1790), Robinson had written a poem that enthusiastically heralded the ideals of the French Revolution. However, just three short years later, she ended a second poem on the Revolution, Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France (1793), with a strong denunciation of its actions. It is through an examination of Robinson’s Marie Antoinette writings that we can discover the cause of this dramatic shift in outlook.

In the early years of the 1790s Robinson published three pieces of writing on Marie Antoinette: a polemical essay, Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France (August, 1791); a short periodical poem, ‘Marie Antoinette’s

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334 Byrne, Perdita, 179.
335 The Jacobin Terror was the period of the French Revolution in which the Jacobins, headed first by Marat and then by Robespierre, ruled the National Assembly. During this time – roughly spanning from May or June 1793 to July or August 1794 – the guillotine gained its reputation as the symbol of the Revolution, as mass executions were held and the Jacobins sought to wipe out all those they deemed ‘enemies’ of the Republic. For more information on the Terrors, see Hugh Gough, The Terror in the French Revolution, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also Chapter 5 of this thesis.
Lamentation’ (March, 1793); and finally her Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France (December, 1793). In the progress of these writings, Robinson moves from a tentative celebration of the new Republic to a position of outright rejection of the turn the French Revolution had taken. This shift is, I argue, motivated almost entirely by her reaction to the fate of the French queen. While in 1791, Robinson could still hope for an outcome in which Marie Antoinette – and with her all public women – could be integrated as citizens into the new political order, by 1793, the queen’s trial and execution had forced Robinson to recognise the full extent of the Republic’s patriarchal and misogynist intent.

Certain critics have read this shift as indicative of Robinson’s wholehearted turn away from revolutionary politics. Amy Garnai, for example, writes that, ‘Robinson’s defence of the Queen supersedes, and even conflicts with her earlier positioning in regard to revolutionary ideals’ to become a ‘personal story of sexual victimisation, social ostracism, and the fall from prominence’ that would culminate in an ‘ultimate narrative of decline.’ However, I argue rather that Robinson’s defence of the queen is exactly that which allows her to see through the misogynist undertones of the French revolutionary project and to develop a more radical and more positive alternative of her own. In opposition to this failed vision of emancipation, I contend, Robinson instead rebuilds Marie Antoinette as a powerful symbol of theatrical female self-display through which she is able to articulate a new revolutionary vision: one in which women could seize back control of their own representation, and their performative power could be celebrated, rather than denigrated, by their fellow citizens.

Impartial Reflections (1791)

In Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France (1791), Robinson mounts a contribution to the British pamphlet wars that would combine

336 Garnai, Revolutionary Imaginings, 71, 84, 87.
Burke’s sentimental portrait of the queen with a bold celebration of the new Republic to rival Paine and Wollstonecraft. This may seem a curious position to have been adopted by a radical writer in the early 1790s. Burke’s mournful and theatricalised depiction of Marie Antoinette as a tragic heroine who had ‘glitter[ed] like the morning-star’ before being driven ‘almost naked’ from her bed by the ‘cruel ruffians and assassins’ of the Revolution had been thoroughly ridiculed by both Wollstonecraft and Paine.\(^{337}\) Paine derides Burke’s account of the queen’s capture as ‘neither the sober style of history, or the intention of it. It leaves everything to be guessed at, and mistaken.’\(^{338}\) Wollstonecraft goes further, mocking Burke’s ‘servile eulogiums’ on the queen, and accusing him of gross sentimentalism: Misery, to reach your heart, I perceive, must have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved, […] for the downfall of queens, whose rank alters the nature of folly, and throws a graceful veil over vices that degrade humanity.\(^{339}\)

When we turn to the *Impartial Reflections*, however, Robinson seems to echo the very embellishment for which Burke had been criticised. In Robinson’s text, Burke’s vision of the queen as the ‘morning-star’ becomes ‘the burning orb [of] renovated splendour,’ and the queen is once more held up as an idol to be worshiped.\(^{340}\) Nonetheless, Robinson’s theatrical figuration of Marie Antoinette does differ greatly from that of Burke. As I have explained in Chapter 1, the difference between their positions can be explained by the distinction between conservative and radical strains of sensibility in the 1790s. In the *Reflections*, Burke uses his sentimental depiction of the vulnerable body of the queen as an object on which to build an idealistic image of the


\(^{340}\) Robinson, *Impartial Reflections On the Present Situation of the Queen of France, by a Friend to Humanity* (London: 1791), 29. All further quotations from this text are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
past and to celebrate the class system. In Robinson’s text, however, the queen is described in the terms of radical sensibility as *transcending* the limits of the ancien régime. Through her theatrical power of self-display, Marie Antoinette seemed to Robinson to promise emancipation for all women under the enlightened French Republic.

As Craciun has observed, Robinson’s *Reflections* are *Impartial*. In this way, she aligns her text squarely on the side of Wollstonecraft, Paine, and rationality, rather than on that of Burke and sentimentality. That she signs her text with the performative pseudonym, ‘a Friend to Humanity,’ is interesting on two counts. Firstly, this emphasises her identification as citizen of the new world order that transcends nation, class and gender. She is an ally to all humankind, the ideal citizen of the new French Republic. Secondly, by not declaring her gender, Robinson is able to argue from the position of an equal (assumed male) citizen of the bourgeois public sphere, and in this way she can ensure that her defence of the queen would be taken seriously by those she intends to persuade. As I have explored in Chapter 1, Robinson’s choice of pseudonym is thus a performative act, allowing her to inhabit the ideal character through which to argue her case.

Robinson immediately aligns her *Impartial Reflections* within British radical discourse, stating that her tract is driven by ‘reason,’ and by the ‘pure light of impartiality’ (5). This ‘impartiality’ is positioned in direct opposition to ‘popular prejudice’ and to the ‘absurd fabrications’ made about both the Revolution – referring to Burke – and the queen – referring to the slanderous pamphlets that denigrated Marie Antoinette. This second implication is emphasised in Robinson’s rebuke of the ‘unprecedented reproaches upon the conduct of an illustrious Character’ – soon revealed to be Marie Antoinette – which ‘call forth from every feeling mind both indignation and pity’ (6). That ‘every feeling mind’ would pity Marie Antoinette is clearly stretching the
truth, given the views expressed by Wollstonecraft in her *Historical and Moral View*. However, by stressing the injustice of Marie Antoinette’s vulnerable position, Robinson here lays the foundation for a text that would combine reason with a defence of radical sensibility to call for an end to the queen’s persecution.

Indeed, as I have shown in Chapter 1, this privileging of sensibility on a par with reason was central to Robinson’s unique articulation of revolutionary feminism. It was only through the union of reason and sensibility, she believed, that one could transcend the limits of culturally dictated biological incommensurability to become truly enlightened citizens of the new world order. Moreover, women, as the cultural arbiters of sensibility, were most primed to attain such genius. Without the ‘celestial energy’ of sensibility, and a concomitant sense of empathy for all humankind, Robinson asserts, the ‘standard of liberty’ would only ‘fan the embers of persecution, and re-illumine the dying flame of popular frenzy’ (6), and no amount of reason would be sufficient to carry the revolutionary project to its utopian limits. Instead, reason – ‘judgement’ – must be accompanied by sensibility – ‘philanthropy’ – in order to avoid the breakdown of revolutionary principles into an ‘insatiable craving after power’ (6), and to bring the ‘agonies of corroding oppression’ to an end (7).

In Robinson’s elucidation, it is this ‘craving after power’ that caused the injustices of the ancien régime. The ‘possessor of a throne’ had become the ‘petty tyrant,’ whose subjects ‘groan[ed] under the ponderous yoke of despotism’ (7). This bold statement calls into question the very legitimacy of the monarchy. The divine right to rule is dismissed by Robinson as ‘vaunted omnipotence’ (7), and the ruling ‘tyrant’ is rendered ‘a disgrace to his country, and an outcast of society’ (8). With its call to level all class distinctions, this statement thus exposes the radical extent of Robinson’s revolutionary vision.
Robinson celebrates the Revolution as ‘the most glorious achievement in the annals of Europe,’ and declares ‘Man’ as ‘the Commoner of Nature,’ yoked to no ruler (8-9). Within it, she sees radical possibilities for the future emancipation of humanity:

[To bear the fullest sunshine of prosperity; to bask in the radiant beams of unlimited power, and to guide the helm of dispassionate reason through the broad torrent of popularity, with unassuming urbanity; is more than philosophy, it is the very essence of Virtue; the perfection of Intellect; the glory of Humanity! (10)

In Robinson’s revolutionary future, ‘power’ and ‘prosperity’ would be held in ‘popularity,’ rather than by the privileged few alone, and, together with ‘dispassionate reason,’ would allow the creation of a cosmopolitan society in which all people, regardless of class or gender, could share the rights and duties of citizenship. In this utopian space, Robinson would at last be able to escape the slander of her past and regain control of her representation, to claim her rightful place as a possessor of natural genius. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, here again we see Robinson’s understanding of virtue as a universal and radical concept. Virtue is here not defined by biology, but by mental pre-eminence and political participation, and is available to all men and women who are able to go beyond cold ‘philosophy’ to unite ‘Intellect’ (reason) with ‘Humanity’ (sensibility).

This radical reconfiguration of virtue as a quality that is perfected through intellectual enlightenment is further emphasised in Robinson’s argument that a ‘vacuity of Mind, is the most dangerous calamity that can threaten humanity’ (11). Robinson here emphasises the importance of education for both sexes in freeing them from the corruptions of ancien régime profligacy. It is ‘trivial dissipation, and unsubstantial enjoyment,’ she argues, that ‘dwindles [reason] into the vapid insipidity of childish insignificance’ (12). Here, as in Ainsi va le Monde, Robinson rejects the licentiousness of the aristocracy. Once more, however, she does not include Marie Antoinette in their excesses.
Indeed, for Robinson, Marie Antoinette has ‘an innate dignity of mind, approaching to divinity itself’ (14). This intellect is blended with a ‘transcendent beauty’ (14), which locates the queen’s power directly in the theatricality of her performative self-display. In an age where the ideas of physiognomy were prevalent, a beautiful body could represent a mind and soul of equal splendour, and Marie Antoinette is depicted as displaying all of these attributes.\textsuperscript{341} In Robinson’s elucidation, the queen is the perfect symbol of female virtue (despite her suspected lack of chastity), whose ‘unsuspecting temper, and elevated soul’ (15) left her vulnerable to corruption by the French court: ‘the unaffected and artless vivacity of her mind, was but feebly armed against the united machinations of envy and detraction’ (14). Robinson thus reverses the dominant republican narrative in which Marie Antoinette was the source of French court degeneracy, instead making her the innocent victim of the crimes of others.

In opposition to the evils of the court, Robinson paints the French people as the honest heroes of France who rose up to claim the liberty they deserved:

\[\text{[T]he eyes of the enlightened multitude pointed out the sordid ministers of mischief, the hand of unerring justice snatched off the cloak of hypocrisy; and the sun of truth, darting through the cloud of superstition, revealed to the illumined globe the monstrous deformity of inordinate ambition. (16-17)}\]

However, due to the ‘illiterate, unsteady, factious’ (21) influence of a few corrupt members of the new republican government, she argues, these ‘sordid ministers of mischief’ have been able to seek ‘safety in flight,’ while the ‘lovely victim’ Marie Antoinette is left behind to face the ‘horrors of mistaken vengeance’ (17). In this way, Robinson excuses Marie Antoinette from all association with ancien régime corruption, and rewrites her story as one of innocent victimhood: a damsel in distress to be rescued by ‘inspired patriots of France’ (20).

\textsuperscript{341} Physiognomy is the study of character through external features. Its principle theorist in the eighteenth century was Johann Kaspar Lavater, who first published his German essays on the subject in 1772. Indeed, Wollstonecraft translated these essays in 1789-1790. Although her edition was never published, it is fair to assume that Robinson might also be familiar with this increasingly popular theory. Taylor, \textit{Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination}, 7.
Appealing to the ‘justice and humanity’ (20) of the Republican leaders, Robinson thus recasts Marie Antoinette as yet another victim of the ancien régime: trapped in her role as mother of the nation and blinded by ‘feelings of divine philanthropy’ (18), she insists, the queen was unable to protect herself from the evils of the court. Aligning her with the virtuous concept of Republican Motherhood that the National Assembly so valued – ‘Was it consistent with the character of a Wife, a Mother, or a Woman, to refuse what virtue, nature, and affection dictated to her feelings?’ (26) – Robinson emphasises the queen’s ability to adapt to the new social order of the French Republic. It is up to the National Assembly, she asserts, with their egalitarian notions of liberty for all humankind, to free Marie Antoinette from the slanderous rumours that have made her so vulnerable to attack.

Indeed, Robinson goes on to hint at the horrifying possibility of the queen’s murder, if the republicans would refuse to vindicate her:

Let it be asked, what might have been the situation of the Queen had she been […] marked as the helpless victim of an enraged populace. Events, at which nature shudders, might then have tarnished the expanding glories of a nation just emancipated from the shackles of ignominious slavery; horrors might have been perpetrated which even the moderation, virtue, and discretion of the National Assembly could not have prevented. It is now in the power of the august Tribunal to prove, that […] as they have given innumerable testimonies of their patriotism and judgement, they also cherish the laudable and dignified sentiment of justice and humanity! (27)

In this last call to the National Assembly, Robinson turns the original values of the Revolution back upon itself, appealing to the republicans to add Marie Antoinette’s absolution to the ‘expanding glories’ of the emancipated state. She positions the ‘august Tribunal’ as the rightful protectors of the ‘persecuted and amiable’ (30) queen, and aligns her on the side of ‘moderation’ and ‘virtue,’ in opposition to the ‘shackles of ignominious slavery’ which she, like they, sought desperately to escape. Arguing that the queen’s imprisonment is contrary to all ‘sentiment[s] of justice and humanity,’ Robinson concludes her text with the confident statement that ‘Every impartial eye has
a tear for her sufferings’ (30-31). Unfortunately, her call for the protection of Marie Antoinette would go unheeded, and in her later writings on the queen Robinson would have to come to terms with her loss of faith in the French Revolutionary project.

‘Marie Antoinette’s Lamentation’ (1793)

In ‘Marie Antoinette’s Lamentation, in her Prison of the Temple,’ published in the Oracle under the Della Cruscan signature, Laura Maria, on 8 March 1793, Robinson’s tone shifts from that of a courageous republican defender of the French queen, to perform the sorrowful voice of the calumniated queen herself. Written two months after the execution of the queen’s husband, Louis XVI, on 21 January 1793, this poem reflects the shockwaves that this event sent through the radical British community. Indeed, it sparked a rift in the relationship between the British and French republicans that would go on, for many, to mark a turning point in support for the Revolution. For Robinson, however, the execution of the king was shocking not only in its political implications, but also because it threatened to signal the imminent death of her idol, Marie Antoinette.

In the ‘Lamentation,’ Robinson builds on the sentimental image of the queen that she had begun in her Impartial Reflections to paint a portrait of a wronged and sorrowful widow, terrified at what the future might hold for her young children. Indeed, here, Robinson momentarily seems to adopt the classic female portrayal of the queen’s maternal body given in writing by Wollstonecraft, Smith, de Gouges, and de Staël, as Marie Antoinette’s maternity is foregrounded to become the main focal point of the queen’s virtue and innocence. The king’s execution is the ‘dreadful Record – written with my Tears!’ that the widowed queen carries with her always, as she stares at the

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342 For more information on this shift in the beliefs of British radicals, see Gregory Claeys, The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Claeys quotes the radical George Skene Keith’s Tracts on the Reform of the British Constitution (1793) on the subject: ‘Louis XVI’s execution in January 1793 convinced many that France was “not capable of receiving liberty, and of preserving it for any time.”’ (93).
moon from the ‘thrice-grated window’ of her prison. Here, the ‘burning orb’ of light that symbolised Marie Antoinette in *Impartial Reflections* is now replaced by the ‘awful Midnight, with her Ebon Wand’ (7). For Robinson, it seems, the light and enlightenment that the Revolution promised in 1791 has been replaced with the horror of darkness and suffering. The ‘blissful morn’ (18) of the queen’s earlier transcendent life has by taken from her, and instead she is ‘doom’d to mourn’ (17) her unjust fate at the hands of her persecutors.

The injustice of Marie Antoinette’s imprisonment is emphasised in the biblical allusion to the ‘wounding thorns [that] o’erspread’ (12) her brow. Boldly aligning the French queen with the suffering of Jesus, Robinson thus underscores her belief that the queen will be crucified for the sins of others. However, for Marie Antoinette, it is not for her own fate, but that of her ‘darling INFANTS’ (19), that she fears. In this way, Robinson is able once more to align the queen with the concept of Republican Motherhood, and so to emphasise her ability to integrate as an active member of republican society. This emphasis on motherhood also evokes Marie Antoinette’s queenly status as mother of the nation. When she expresses her fears that she might live to see her ‘sweet CHERUBS on their Funeral Bed!’ (24), then, Robinson is perhaps also warning that the progress of the Terror – initiated in the execution of Louis XVI – could perhaps signal the death, rather than the rebirth, of the French nation, the queen’s ‘children’ in the symbology of the ancien régime.

Nonetheless, although this national role is hinted at, it is Marie Antoinette’s personal role as a literal, rather than metaphorical, mother that is the focus of this poem. Indeed, the poem is in fact another plea to the National Assembly to spare this mother from the ‘inhuman’ (29) fate of being separated from her children. Here, the Jacobin

343 Mary Robinson, ‘Marie Antoinette’s Lamentation, in her Prison of the Temple,’ *Oracle* (8 March 1793); repr. in Daniel Robinson, ed., *The Works of Mary Robinson*, 8 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), i, 193-195 (ll. 6, 2). All further quotations of this poem refer to this edition and will be referenced in the body of the text by their line numbers. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
orchestrators of the Terror replace the corrupt courtiers of *Ainsi va le Monde* as the purveyors of horrifying violence. They are represented as ‘SAVAGE TIGERS’ (46); the ‘angry Tempest’ (37) that threatens to uproot the ‘lofty PINE’ (38) of the French monarchy. The demise of the royal family is anticipated in the regal symbol of the ‘with’ring LILIES’ (44) of the fleur-de-lis, and her children’s destiny, once bound for ‘Greatness,’ is now ‘consign’d to Woe!’ (48).

The triumphal celebration of revolutionary success becomes a chaotic cacophony, as ‘The merry BELLS – the boist’rous SONGS of Joy!’ (52) clash with ‘The CITY’s din – the TOCSIN’S fateful sound – / The CANNON thund’ring though the vaulted Sky’ (55-56) that signify the terrible work of the guillotine. It is this dissonance between the hopeful sounds of revolutionary exultation and the awful realities of the Terror that leads Marie Antoinette to ‘shriek in vain’ (59). The degradation of the Revolution’s original values is made clear when her cries are met only by the ‘mock[ing]’ of the ‘TYRANT JAILOR’ (60) who has come to replace the tyrant monarch of the *Impartial Reflections* as the purveyor of inhuman cruelty.

Indeed, the ‘glorious achievement’ of the Revolution that had been celebrated in the *Impartial Reflections* is here nowhere to be seen, as Robinson’s admonition against ‘insatiable craving after power’ and ‘ungovernable ambition’ is revealed to be only too apt.344 Instead, like the oppressed multitude who had been trapped beneath the corrupt evils of ancien régime power, Marie Antoinette is here surrounded by ‘a thousand ills’ (67), while ‘hoodwink’d Murder’ (69) and ‘Coward Cruelty’ (70) have wholly subsumed the utopian aims of the Revolution, culminating in a vision of ‘The mangled bosom of my bleeding LORD!’ (72). Thus, in the horror of the king’s execution lies the death of hope for the French Revolution. For Marie Antoinette, Death – ‘sweet Oblivion’s dream’ (75) – can be her only escape from this prison of decayed hope. In

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this way, Robinson adopts the performative voice of the innocent queen in order to reveal that her fears, so tentatively expressed in the *Reflections*, have been realised. The French queen has indeed become ‘One Victim from the Last Despair!’ (78), the ultimate sacrifice to the treacherous aims of the masculinist republican Terror.

*Monody on the Memory of the Late Queen of France (1793)*

Given the mournful conclusion to the ‘Lamentation,’ it is perhaps understandable that Garnai reads into Robinson’s Marie Antoinette writings a narrative of decline that represents an ultimate loss of hope in all Revolution: ‘the defence of the original revolutionary agenda would re-emerge in Robinson’s writings,’ she argues, but only ‘at a distance from the imprisonment and execution of the Queen, and dissociated from the referentiality of her story.’345 However, I argue that in Robinson’s final Marie Antoinette poem, *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793), published two months after her execution, the figure of the queen allows Robinson not only to engage with and reject the Jacobin Terror, but also to develop in its place a new feminist revolutionary agenda in which women such as Robinson and Marie Antoinette would transcend the limits of the mournful maternal body to be allowed to participate fully as citizens in the new world order, where the theatrical power of female self-display would at last be celebrated.

Robinson begins her *Monody* by surveying ‘the dread scene of death and horror’ that the French Republic had become during the Terror. In response to this awful scene, she imagines a future time of peace in which Marie Antoinette would be remembered as a ‘MARTYR,’ whose ‘FAME, ILLUSTRIous SOUL! shall Ne’ER DEcay!’346 This emphasis on the eminence and legacy of the French queen immediately foregrounds what is to become the main thrust of the poem: that in the future, far beyond the reaches of the

345 Garnai, Revolutionary Imaginings, 95.
346 Mary Robinson, *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (London: 1790), ll. 1, 3, 10. All further quotations of this poem refer to this edition and will be referenced in the body of the text by their line numbers. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
Terror, there will come a utopian time and place in which Marie Antoinette would be celebrated as a ‘devoted host’ (4), a goddess symbolising the transcendent potential of female power in the attainment of enlightened genius.

Returning to the light imagery of her earlier writings, Marie Antoinette is described by Robinson in transcendent terms as ‘MORE LUSTROUS THAN THE MORN’ (36). Blending the possession of ‘pow’r’ with a ‘WISH TO PLEASE’ (38), the French queen thus represents genius in Robinson’s ideal union of reason and sensibility, combining political influence with a humanity and compassion that enabled her to transcend the corruption of the ancien régime. That the queen’s ‘DOMESTIC VIRTUES’ (42) are highlighted alongside her sublime splendour ensures the reader that there is no contention in pairing the ‘domestic’ duties of a wife and mother with the public obligations of the ‘THrone’ (42). In this way, the young Marie Antoinette represents, for Robinson, all that a woman of the public sphere could aspire to be.

Despite this, Robinson makes it clear that the queen’s possession of transcendent genius remained ‘to GALLIA’S SONS UNKNOWN’ (41). Instead, her true powers were lost beneath her licentious portrayal, ‘By all suspected, and by all betray’d!’ (58). The National Assembly are here firmly displaced from the role of the ‘inspired patriots of Paris’ in the Impartial Reflections, to that of the queen’s ‘TYRANTS’ (48).\(^3\) In the world of the Terror, the ‘celestial bounty’ (89) that had blessed France with Marie Antoinette is swept away, and only the Jacobins remain as a violent mob that ‘blurs, with crimson spots, fair NATURE’s page!’ (93) and ‘roots up all the sacred rights of TRUTH!’ (95).

Indeed, all the original aims of the Revolution have been forgotten in the ‘dreadful CHAOS [which] triumphs o’er the waste!’ (90). In this dystopian land, the utopian ideal of universal freedom has been subsumed by a corrupting desire for power, and this has led ultimately to a devastating fall back into bondage: ‘While all are

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\(^3\) Robinson, Impartial Reflections, 21.
RULERS – ALL, alas! are SLAVES!’ (101). This is a far cry from the dawning of genius that she had envisaged with the coming of the Revolution in her Ainsi va le Monde. On the contrary, here the actions of the French Republic have driven ‘Genius from the madd’ning tumult’ (111) to ‘weep o’er’ France’s ‘withering’ hopes (112), and hide away once more.

For Robinson, ‘Genius’ is the ‘sacred Minister of HEAV’N!’ (114), whose ‘MIND enlighten’d’ and ‘nobl[e] birth’ (116) set him above all others. Nevertheless, Robinson is careful here to emphasise that ‘rank’ is only a ‘SECONDARY claim’ (118) to greatness. It is intellect, and above all ‘VIRTUES’, that mark the ‘proudest’ (117) distinction of genius. Robinson is here drawing her radical conception of virtue together with a similarly radical analysis of class. As Craciun has highlighted, Robinson constructs in her utopian vision a new class that she terms the ‘Aristocracy of Genius.’ In Craciun’s view, this new nobility is ‘that of the Romantic poet.’

Robinson, she argues, raises herself to the same level as Marie Antoinette by championing ‘the (woman) poet above all others.’ She does not ‘leve[l] class privilege altogether,’ however, but rather matches it with a new aristocracy of her own.

In my reading of Robinson’s Monody, however, I want to push the argument further than this. I propose that Robinson’s ‘Aristocracy of Genius’ is one available to all those who unite the traits of reason and sensibility in a performance of transcendent genius. Indeed, in my elucidation, the ‘Aristocracy of Genius’ does in fact level class privilege. As I will demonstrate, the nobility that Robinson celebrates in this poem does not refer to titles and birthright, but to a meritocratic nobility consisting of those who are enlightened and empathetic enough to recognise the need for true emancipation for all humankind. In Robinson’s vision of the ‘Aristocracy of Genius,’ I argue, women of genius would be fostered, and the transcendent potential of theatrical self-display would

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348 Craciun, Fatal Women, 90.
349 Ibid., 90.
be celebrated, rather than consigning women to become like the silent broodmare of the nation, Marianne. In this ‘Aristocracy of Genius,’ men and women would at last be able to escape the confines of the discourse of biological incommensurability to become truly enlightened citizens of an emancipated nation.

Marie Antoinette is the symbol of Robinson’s transcendent genius because she is the ‘Epitome of ALL – to worth ally’d!’ (140). Indeed, for Robinson, Marie Antoinette is truly the queen of this ‘Aristocracy of Genius.’ This is not due to her noble birth. Rather, she is queen because ‘She made the mis’ries of mankind her own!’ (164). This radical and virtuous sensibility leads her to shine ‘like a SUN, sublime!’ (159). She is truly the child of ‘NATURE’ (168), untouched by the corruptions of the court that caused such degeneracy in the old nobility of the French upper class. ‘Form’d to adorn a cottage or a throne’ (201), Marie Antoinette’s greatness transcends class and gender boundaries, just as Robinson’s own genius does, and in this way both women are seen to transcend such superficial distinctions.

For Robinson, the murder of the ‘guiltless’ (252) Marie Antoinette is thus the deed that signals the death of the Revolution’s values. It is at this moment, she argues, that ‘FREEDOM’ (248), ‘TRUTH’ (249), and ‘GODLIKE VIRTUE’ (250) are driven from the French Republic. In a Republic that could seek to destroy such a transcendent being, there can be no space for a woman who wished to become more than her biology. Indeed, in such a place Genius itself is exiled. Without the feminine quality of sensibility there could be no true freedom, truth or virtue. In a state in which the public woman is expurgated from society, the heavenly minister ‘Genius’ cannot survive.

Indeed, in Robinson’s elucidation, the French Revolution has become the ‘æra [most] blacken’d with such wanton crimes’ (370). At the centre of this turbulent barbarity stands ‘pale LIBERTY’ (377) drawing her ‘faulchion’ (380) sword against the nation. This figure of ‘Liberty,’ I suggest, is none other than the theatricalised figure of
Marianne, the doppelganger of Marie Antoinette who served as the tool through which the Jacobins could wield control over the people. Here, she is a terrifying vision:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Pow’r in her arm, and murder in her eyes;} \\
&\text{Scar’d by the clamours of the furious rage,} \\
&\text{She spares not worth, nor genius, sex, nor age!} \ (382-384)
\end{align*}
\]

As Liberty/Marianne, this inverted image of Marie Antoinette possesses all of the queen’s power, but without the sensibility that allowed her to transcend its corrupting potential. Instead, Liberty/Marianne represents the culmination of the Jacobins’ lust for power, destroying all who stand in her path, and she becomes the theatrical villain in Robinson’s play on the tragedy of the Revolution’s corruption.

Robinson’s horror at this figure of ‘Liberty’ fits well into my earlier discussion of Marianne’s place in the new Republic. Robinson refuses to accept Marianne as a replacement for Marie Antoinette because that acquiescence would involve also consenting to the female suppression in the private sphere that Marianne represented. For both Robinson and Marie Antoinette, with their powerful, theatrical, sexual bodies, this was simply not an option. The power that Robinson detects in Marie Antoinette’s performance of theatrical self-display is threatened with destruction by the masculine, destructive, and disembodied figure of Liberty/Marianne. Under the sway of this dreadful warped figure, genius and freedom are banished, along with Robinson’s reconfigured virtue of ‘VALOUR’ (386), ‘Heap’d in one sacrilegious ruin’ (391).\(^{350}\) In their place, in the ruins of the revolutionary project, only ‘IGNORANCE’ (393), it seems, can remain.

Despite this mournful rejection of the Jacobin Republic, however, Robinson does not abandon the original values that the Revolution had first represented. Instead, in the final part of her poem she constructs a new revolutionary vision: one in which female displays of power and worth could be embraced, and Genius could blossom once more. She begins this development of this new revolutionary utopia with a reiteration of

\(^{350}\) For an explanation of this reconfigured virtue, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.
her radical ideas on class. Writing that ‘VIRTUE is still ILLUSTRIOUS, still sublime, / In EV’RY station, and in EV’RY clime!’ (453-454), Robinson stresses that her ‘Aristocracy of Genius’ would eradicate the inequalities of economic class. For Robinson, the failure of the French Revolution lay in the assumption that all people of noble birth should ‘suff[er] for the GUILTY FEW’ (442). In Robinson’s revolutionary vision, however, all class differences are overcome in a celebration of ‘virtue’ and intellect, and there would be a space for all people in her new world order.

It is for this reason that Robinson’s championing of Marie Antoinette as the figurative queen of this ‘Aristocracy of Genius’ does not, for her, jar with the French queen’s noble background. While ‘TRUTH can derive no eminence from birth’ (455), Robinson argues, neither can the possession of ‘RANK […] be a crime’ (463). Birth is irrelevant to intellect, and people must be judged only by ‘the proud supremacy of WORTH’ (456). Her new social structure would extend far beyond the limits of the hierarchical society under which both Robinson and Marie Antoinette had suffered: ‘It’s blest dominion cast and unconfin’d, / It’s CROWN ETERNAL, and its THRONE THE MIND!’ (457-458). This throne is not that from which the French queen had been dragged in the violent days of the French Revolution. Rather, it is the throne of mental pre-eminence, on which Marie Antoinette and Robinson could sit side by side, crowned with the legacy of their genius.

For Robinson, then, despite the corruption of the new Republic, the revolutionary spirit still ‘seems to climb / SUPREMELY GRAND, and AWFULLY SUBLIME!’ (493-494). Indeed, it is Robinson herself, with her understanding of the importance of sensibility and genius to that spirit, who leads the bastion of true freedom. From the ashes of the French Revolution, she argues, ‘HEAV’N-taught REASON’ (495) will unite with ‘EXPERIENCE’ (499) to encourage afresh the pursuit of ‘KNOWLEDGE’ (501). This
in turn will spur on humankind to ‘tear’ the trappings of ‘Folly’ from their ‘breast’ (503) and replace it with the ‘invulnerable vest’ of ‘Truth’ (504).

Thus enlightened, Robinson asserts, virtue and genius would be restored to their rightful place as the epitome of human worth, and humankind would once more be inspired to demand true emancipation. Indeed, for Robinson, genius is the very quality that will eventually drive all men and women of the world to seek their freedom in this utopia:

Then, GENIUS, let the toilsome task be THINE,  
To LABOUR in the dark precarious MINE;  
And if, amidst the chaos, thou shouldst find  
One great, one beauteous attribute of mind,  
To twine round MERIT’S brow the wreath of FAME,  
And give Nobility a loftier name!  
(527–532)

It is women such as Robinson and Marie Antoinette, whose performative genius unites reason and sensibility to transcend the barriers of gender and class, that will regenerate the seeds of enlightenment in the minds of humankind. ‘One straggling spark of worth’ (523), Robinson insists, will be enough to encourage the pursuit of Merit over that of wealth. Once this shift in cultural attitudes has been attained, the ‘Aristocracy of Genius’ would replace the old hierarchy to ‘give Nobility a loftier name,’ and the world would finally be ready to enact a second revolution. In this enlightened future time, she insists, emancipation would be extended to all public women, and their theatrical powers of self-display would allow them finally to seize back control of their own representation, and rise to the heights of transcendent genius.

‘AN AWFUL LESSON FOR EACH FUTURE AGE!’: TRANSCENDENCE IN THE FIGURE OF THE QUEEN

Thus, in Robinson’s writings on Marie Antoinette, the queen becomes the ultimate symbol of female theatrical power and performative genius. Her dreadful fate at the
hands of the Jacobins is an ‘AWFUL LESSON FOR EACH FUTURE AGE’ that would one day drive humanity to cast off old prejudices and to embrace Robinson’s conception of a new revolutionary vision: one in which women as well as men could be accepted as public citizens beyond the boundaries of gender and class. For Robinson, Marie Antoinette is the quintessential model of the female potential for genius, whose powerful performance of theatrical female self-display is celebrated as the source of her transcendence.

In processing the events of the Revolution, Robinson thus works to separate the utopian ideals of the revolutionary project from the devastating corruption of its outcomes. Although she would remain a vocal supporter of the Revolution’s ideals of universal enlightenment and emancipation throughout her life, by the execution of the queen in 1793, she comes wholly to reject the Jacobin system of government and the constrained place of women within it. In the end, what the execution of Marie Antoinette taught her was that the French Revolution alone could not be enough to liberate women if the constraining discourse of eighteenth-century sex and gender were not also re-envisioned.

For Robinson, Marie Antoinette is not a purveyor of the ancien régime, but a product and victim of that social order, just as the ordinary people of France were victims of the courtly depravity. Thus, Marie Antoinette can be rescued from her denigration as the last of the corrupt upper classes, and could instead be reclaimed by Robinson as a symbol of transcendent womanhood. In her vision of the ‘Aristocracy of Genius,’ Robinson thus liberates Marie Antoinette from this corrupt aristocracy and resituates her as the queen of a new meritocratic nobility. In this new social order, both Robinson and Marie Antoinette would be able to embrace, rather than repress, their theatrical powers of self-display in a celebration of the transformative power of

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sensibility and genius to eradicate gender and class distinctions. Through the delineation of this ‘Aristocracy of Genius,’ Robinson is able to imagine a time in which the balance of power between the sexes would be realigned, and all public women could finally claim the right to active citizenship.

Thus, through the figure of Marie Antoinette, Robinson is able to identify the gendered injustice that was rooted in the French Revolutionary cultural economy. In the end, this Revolution may not have been all she once hoped, but its establishment as a radical power on the world stage led her to believe that, one day, a truly utopian society could at last be summoned into being. Ultimately, it is this belief that drove her, for the rest of her literary life, to attempt the articulation of a new revolutionary vision: one that would finally allow her to escape the limiting categories of sex and gender in her vision of transcendent genius; to regain control of her representation through the theatrical power of self-display; and to erase the damages inflicted on the bodies of women by the patriarchal cultural economy – damages that were epitomised in the body of the fallen French queen, Marie Antoinette. She would begin this project with a new site of performative female identification, in the figure of the ancient Greek poet, Sappho.
Chapter Three

Speaking Of/As Woman: Robinson Performs 'The English Sappho'

The fair writer of these poems has been, for some time past, known to the literary world under the assumed names of Laura, Laura Maria, and Oberon. [...] If people of taste and judgment were impressed with a favourable idea of the poetess [...] they will deem yet higher of our English Sappho, after the perusal of the present volume; in which are some pieces, equal, perhaps, to the best productions (so far as the knowledge of them is come down to us,) of the Lesbian Dame, in point of tenderness, feeling, poetic imagery, warmth, elegance, and above all, delicacy of expression, in which our ingenious countrywoman far excels all that we know of the works of the Grecian Sappho.

[Review of Poems by Mrs. Robinson], Monthly Review (1791)\(^ {352}\)

For Robinson, surveying the cultural and political landscape of Britain in October of 1793, the prospect was bleak. With the death of her transcendent idol, Marie Antoinette, Robinson's imminent hopes for a radical and truly egalitarian French republic died also. Having fully invested her utopian vision of the radical female citizen in the body of the now-decapitated French queen, this murderous act by the new French government seemed to mark the end of the optimism that had appeared so promising in the early days of the 1790s.

It would be easy to read Robinson's turn away from French revolutionary discourse at this point as indicative of a wholesale turning away from political radicalism. Indeed, Amy Garnai sees in Robinson’s post-1793 works, not the proactive radicalism of her early political writings, but rather ‘an articulate sigh that acknowledges what might have been’; one that is still ideologically radical perhaps, but ultimately hopeless.\(^ {353}\) Similarly, Anne Mellor argues that Robinson’s fictional and poetical writings are always ‘translate[d]’ into ‘the genre of prose autobiography,’ reflecting only her personal tales of woe, rather than carrying any more political or

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\(^ {352}\) [Review of Poems by Mrs. Robinson], Monthly Review, 6 (1791): 448-450 (448).

\(^ {353}\) Amy Garnai, Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119.
radical connotations.\textsuperscript{354} Having established her career as a popular novelist a year earlier with the 1792 publication of \textit{Vancenza}, Robinson appears to have spent the rest of the decade working within the fantasy realms of fiction and poetry, only returning to politics with the publication of her feminist tract, \textit{A Letter to the Women of England}, in 1799. However, if we look more closely at Robinson's extensive and performative use of poetical pseudonyms throughout the decade, something quite unexpected emerges.

Mellor has identified these multiple pseudonyms as ‘ranging from the Della Cruscan “Laura Maria” and the feminine “Julia” and “Portia,” through the eroticised “Sappho” and “Lesbia” and the crossdressed “Oberon,” to the feminist “Ann Randall” and the old crone of the \textit{Morning Post}, “Tabitha Bramble,”’ and throughout the decade Robinson can be seen to experiment with the performance of these various poetic voices in the daily periodical press.\textsuperscript{355} Daniel Robinson has done the most extensive work on these pseudonyms. He argues convincingly that ‘Robinson’s signatures […] are formal features of the poems to which they are attached,’ rather than presenting any ‘fictional authorial persona or character that Robinson is performing.’\textsuperscript{356} Rather than denominating these signatures as pseudonyms, he prefers the term ‘avatars.’ As he explains:

\begin{quote}
I use the term \textit{avatar} because I want to distinguish the Della Cruscan use of pen names from the trope of pseudonym-as-costume, which is limiting because it assumes that the pseudonyms are characters with coherence and consistency. But my conception of pseudonym-as-avatar also distinguishes Robinson’s avatars from the trope of pseudonym-as-disguise, which provides a writer with ways of effacing his or her authentic self for protection from persecution or prosecution […]. Robinson uses her pen-names not merely to network with actual associates but to network with popular culture and literary tradition. The avatar is the figurative incarnation of the textual and contextual identity adopted by a poet, and thus allows for a multiplicity of poetic performances. Any one of Robinson’s avatars, to put it another way, is not unlike a brand-name.\textsuperscript{357}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{355} Mellor, ‘Making an Exhibition of Herself,’ 297.
\textsuperscript{357} Robinson, \textit{Form and Fame}, 20-21; original emphasis.
Daniel Robinson, then, understands Robinson’s pseudonyms first and foremost as formal signs that mark the type of poetry about to be undertaken while simultaneously advertising themselves as ‘the poetry of Mrs. Mary Robinson,’ rather than as forming any coherent and distinctly individualised voices. Although I agree with him that not all of Robinson's pseudonyms can be read as fully cohesive characters throughout her oeuvre – sometimes appearing to be chosen merely for an appearance of authorial variety in the periodical papers rather than to give any particular slant to the poetry – I argue that thematic connections can be traced through some of her more performative poetic voices. Of all Robinson's theatrical experiments with these authorial voices, it is the performative figure of Sappho that proves to be the most intriguing and cohesive.

Throughout Robinson’s poetry and prose, Sappho’s name looms large as the epitome of radical female power and poetical genius. Including the forty-four sonnets of her book length sequence, *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), there are sixty-six poems in Robinson’s oeuvre that are either signed by or dedicated to ‘Sappho’ or her alternative appellation of ‘Lesbia.’ Although Robinson was first given the appellation of 'the English Sappho' on the publication of her 1791 volume of *Poems* (quoted in the epigraph to this chapter), her own theatrical experimentation with the Sappho moniker does not begin until the fifth of October 1793 in the signature to the periodical poem ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ just nine days before the trial and eleven days before the execution of Marie Antoinette. This is not, I believe, a coincidence. Rather, I argue, it marks the moment at which Robinson, dreading the loss of one figure of powerful and performative female identification in the imminent execution of the queen, first turns unconsciously towards a new site of female identification, and that she found it in the theatrical, disembodied – and thus immortal – figure of the ancient Greek poet, Sappho.
With her early utopian vision of Marie Antoinette as representative of the radical and revolutionary female body in tatters, the figure of Sappho provided Robinson with a promising alternative as a site of female identification. Like Marie Antoinette, the figure of Sappho would allow Robinson to marry the performance of passionate sensibility and theatrical female genius with a radical political project. However, unlike Marie Antoinette, Sappho’s immortalisation and valorisation in the classical literary canon made her impermeable to the kinds of attack that had muted the French queen’s power. Further, as a disembodied figure, Robinson was able to inhabit the space of Sappho, performing the voice of the preeminent and immortal female genius in order to transcend the cultural limits of eighteenth-century discourses of sex and gender.

Indeed, in her *Sappho Companion* (2001), Margaret Reynolds writes of Sappho's constant re-emergence in literary history that “‘Sappho’ is not a name, much less a person. She is, rather, a space. A space for filling in the gaps, joining up the dots, making something out of nothing.” As a semi-mythic figure whose history is intertwined with fiction and legend, and whose poetry remains only in fragments, Sappho, more than any other poet from history, lends herself to revisioning by future writers. Indeed, as Reynolds demonstrates, writers throughout the eighteenth century had turned to the figure of Sappho to imbue their writings and their own reputations with a little of the renown of the famous Greek poet.

For Robinson, Sappho was a potent symbol of the radical potential of female sensibility and genius. Turning away from the failed potential of the executed French queen, Sappho’s dual identity as a powerful, desiring woman and disembodied figure of transcendent genius made her an ideal figure for Robinson’s future meditations on the revolutionary potential of the powerful female genius in the radical symbology of mid-1790s Britain. With her theatrical penchant for self-reinvention and multiple

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pseudonymous personalities, Robinson was able to find in the disembodied-yet-desiring figure of Sappho a space in which to ‘fill in the (gendered) gaps’ in the literary canon, to ‘join the dots’ between Sappho and herself to emphasise her own literary worth, and to ‘make something’ out of the histories that both she and Sappho shared as explicitly sexualised public women, in order to create a new and radical vision of the powerful and desiring female genius.

In order to trace the radical significance of the figure of Sappho to Robinson’s utopian vision of the female citizen, in this chapter I will explore the presence of Sappho as she appears in Robinson’s poetry, fiction and polemical prose in her post-1793 writings. Through her Sappho poetry, and especially in her book-length sonnet sequence, *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), I argue, Robinson uses the performative voice of Sappho to explore her theory of female genius as a transcendent union of reason and passion in order to defend her own refusal to abandon passionate love and feeling, despite their significant risks.

In her penultimate novel, *The False Friend* (1799), Robinson explores the fraught relationships that eighteenth-century female writers shared with the fragmentary and semi-mythic figure of the ancient Sappho as foremother. In so doing, she demonstrates both the difficulties inherent in embracing such a figure, and the necessity of doing so in order to develop the strength to overcome the destiny of Sappho’s own fatal passion in patriarchal mythology.

Finally, in her feminist tract, *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), Robinson works to cement her own links with Sappho as a literary genius in tracing a female literary heritage that begins with Sappho and ends with Mary Robinson. In the substitution of her own name in this tract for the new pseudonym ‘Anne Frances Randall,’ Robinson creates a performative space in which she could finally cement the connection between her own work and Sappho’s in print, as the structure of the text and
its construction of a female literary history leads the reader to see, first Anne Randall, then Sappho, and finally Mary Robinson. In so doing, Robinson could finally lay claim to the wreath of posthumous fame that had preoccupied so many of her writings, and would go on to be a significant concern in the writings of the Romantic poets who followed her.

Thus, in her Sappho writings, Robinson uses the performative space of Sappho in order to take advantage of the Greek poet’s noble reputation as both a passionate woman and a literary genius as a stage on which to position herself similarly as a bold and radical literary genius, without having to foreswear her passionate sensibility. For Robinson, Sappho represents an escape from the sordid body of her past – and that of the beheaded queen of ancien régime femininity – and a turn towards the freedom of transcendent posterity through literary art. As the superlative figure of mythical female genius, Sappho functions in Robinson’s works as a literary foremother, a marker of respectability for her writing, and, above all, as a proof of Robinson’s own genius as a joyful and transcendent expression of, rather than shameful repudiation of, theatrical female power and passionate sensibility. Despite the failure of the radical promise of Marie Antoinette, then, in the figure of Sappho there remained for Robinson the possibility that the utopian female citizen could still perhaps be reclaimed in a post-revolutionary future.


We can never really know Sappho. Her history is one of rumour, of supposition, and above all, of fragments. As Margaret Reynolds tells us, ‘We can only ever know Sappho as she is “carried across” to us by some other. She is always in translation.’

From the stories carried across to us, we can gather that she was alive in around 600 BC, that she lived on the island of Lesbos, that she was widowed at a young age

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and never remarried, but spent the rest of her life in educating the women of Lesbos and the surrounding islands who came to her, and in writing what is widely regarded as some of the most beautiful lyric poetry in history.\textsuperscript{360} This poetry now only exists in fragments – and in the eighteenth century these fragments were much fewer than have been recovered today – but through these fragments we can discover that Sappho loved passionately and violently, and that she turned this excessive sensibility into the most exquisite art.

Writing about a woman whose history is always at least partly myth is a difficult endeavour. To claim any factual truth in a description of her life would be a falsehood. For this reason it is more useful to talk in terms of the received history of Sappho as it stood in the eighteenth century. Who Sappho actually was is, in the end, of less importance for the purposes of understanding Mary Robinson than who she was thought to be, and what she might be able to represent in Robinson’s vision of her life and art.

There are many eighteenth-century sources that discuss Sappho’s ‘history.’ Joseph Addison’s three letters in \textit{The Spectator} (1711), Francis Fawkes’s \textit{The Works of Anacreon, Sappho, Bion, Moschius and Musaeus} (1760), and J.J. Barthelemy’s \textit{Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece, during the middle of the fourth century before the Christian era} (1789), translated into English in 1790, provide perhaps three of the most thorough histories of Sappho in the eighteenth century, and all are sources that can be read into Robinson’s own history of Sappho in the prefatory material to \textit{Sappho and Phaon}.

All three tell us how, following the death of her husband, Sappho conducted many love affairs. However, her strongest passion was for the ferryman, Phaon, whose

\textsuperscript{360} For a modern history of Sappho, see Reynolds, \textit{The Sappho History} and \textit{The Sappho Companion}. As I will discuss, eighteenth-century histories of Sappho include those given in Joseph Addison’s letters in \textit{The Spectator} (1711), the 1739 translation from the ancient Greek of Dionysus Longinus on the Sublime, Fawkes’s \textit{Works of Anacreon, Sappho, Bion, Moschius and Musaeus} (1760), and Barthelemy’s \textit{Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece} (1790). Another significant eighteenth-century source on Sappho was Alexander Pope’s translation of Ovid’s ode, ‘Sappho to Phaon,’ taken from his \textit{Heroides} and published in 1712.
rejection of her advances drove her to despair. This leads us to the most pervasive image of Sappho in eighteenth-century cultural mythology: that of her taking the ‘lover’s leap’ from the cliff-top promontory of Leucadia by the temple of Apollo, of which it was fabled that one who survived the leap would be cleansed of the disease of unrequited love. Unfortunately for Sappho, so goes the story, she perished in the attempt.

For these eighteenth-century historians, Sappho’s passion and sensibility were central to her poetic genius. Addison’s writings on this matter are some of the most repeated by other eighteenth-century poets and critics:

Among the mutilated poets of antiquity there is none whose fragments are so beautiful as those of Sappho. […] One may see by what is left of them, that she followed nature in all her thoughts […] Her soul seems to have been made up of love and poetry. She felt the passion in all its warmth, and described it in all its symptoms. She is called by ancient authors the Tenth Muse; and by Plutarch is compared to Cacus the son of Vulcan, who breathed out nothing but flame. I do not know by the character that is given of her works, whether it is not for the benefit of mankind that they are lost. They are filled with such bewitching tenderness and rapture, that it might have been dangerous to have given them a reading.  

This sense of an excessive rapture that borders on becoming dangerous – of Sappho’s poetic compositions as a kind of fire-breathing – gives us a glimpse into the reason for her figuration in eighteenth-century symbology as the ultimate female genius, and a potential figure of female power.

Sappho’s love is not the soft, non-threatening depiction given in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), whose gendered construction of ‘masculine’ sublime and ‘feminine’ beautiful categories reflects the strengthening of the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference in the mid-eighteenth century. Burke defines feminine love as a soft, passive category:

Those virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublimer kind, produce terror rather than love. Such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like. Never

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was any man amiable by force of these qualities. Those which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality.  

In stark contrast with this gendered delineation, Sappho’s expressions of love are powerful, overwhelming, terrible and sublime.

Barthelemy tells us that Sappho loved ‘to excess, because it was impossible for her to love otherwise, and she expressed her tenderness with all the violence of passion.’ Of her poetry, he writes:

But with what force of genius does she hurry us along when she describes the charms, the transports and intoxication of love! What scenery! what warmth of colouring! Agitated, like the Pythia by the inspiring god, she throws on the paper her words that burn. Her sentiments fall like a cloud of arrows, or a fiery shower about to consume every thing. She animates and personifies all the symptoms of this passion, to excite the most powerful emotions in our souls.

‘Excess,’ ‘violence,’ ‘passion,’ ‘force,’ ‘genius,’ ‘agitated,’ ‘words that burn,’ ‘a cloud of arrows,’ ‘a fiery shower’: this is the language of sublimity. Indeed, in Dionysius Longinus’s famous treatise on the sublime, Sappho is presented as a perfect example of sublimity in art, depicting the ‘anxieties and tortures inseparable to jealous love’ and ‘connecting them together with so much art’ to create an image of passion that is as transcendent as it is violent.

Addison’s warnings of the ‘dangers’ of Sappho’s verse present us with another facet of the Sappho myth. Not merely limited to the excesses of her passion, these dangers also hint at the ever-pervasive rumours of Sappho’s love for women. This part of Sappho’s story is less celebrated in the eighteenth century, and in some quarters is

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363 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. Adam Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 100. Burke’s distinction between the sublime and beautiful had far-reaching consequences for eighteenth-century cultural theory. On this distinction he writes that, ‘the sublime and beautiful are built on principles very different, and […] their affections are as different: the great has terror for its basis; which, when it is modified, causes that emotion in the mind, which I have called astonishment; the beautiful is founded on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling, which is called love’ (145).

364 J.J. Barthelemy, The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece, during the middle of the fourth century before the Christian era (1790), 7 vols, 2nd edn (London: 1794), II, 63.

365 Barthelemy, The Travels of Anacharsis, II, 63.

366 Dionysius Longinus, *Dionysius Longinus on the Sublime, Translated by William Smith* (1739), 4th edn (London: 1770), 50. The original author of this ancient Roman text is now under question, but in the eighteenth century at least its accreditation to Longinus was thought to be certain.
used as an example of the immorality of female passion and creativity, while in others it is depicted as a cruel slander on Sappho’s name by those jealous of her immense talent. Fawkes is the historian most explicit about this rumour, recounting that Sappho refused to renounce ‘the Pleasures of Love; not enduring to confine that Passion to one Person, which, as the Ancients tell us, was too violent to be restrained even to one Sex.’ Barthelemy tries to reinterpret Sappho’s poetic fragments that speak in passionate language to other women as innocent symptoms of the ‘excessive sensibility of the Greeks,’ that lend to ‘the most innocent connections’ the ‘impassioned language of love,’ and he ascribes any alternative interpretation as mere jealousy on the part of her enemies. Addison is less certain of this, however, imposing an intentionally incorrect reading on one of Sappho’s fragments in order to overlook its homoerotic undertones: ‘Whatever might have been the occasion of this Ode, the English reader will enter into the beauties of it, if he supposes it to have been written in the person of a lover sitting by his mistress.’

Sappho’s reputation in the eighteenth century was not, then, one of uncontested praise. Rather, there are two Sapphos that exist in eighteenth-century cultural consciousness. Alongside the Sappho of sublime genius and passionate love sits, sometimes uncomfortably close by, the Sappho of corrupt and illicit homosexual excess. She is revered for her genius at the same moment that she is reviled for her ‘unnatural’ passions. It is for this reason that Alexander Pope could write one of the most famous eighteenth-century poetical depictions celebrating Sappho in his interpretation of Ovid’s ode, ‘Sappho to Phaon’ (1712), and at the same time could use the Sappho moniker to attack Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, writing snidely of her in

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368 Barthelemy, The Travels of Anacharsis, II, 63.  
369 Addison, letter dated ‘Thursday, November 22, 1711,’ in The Papers of Joseph Addison, 331; my emphasis.
his ‘Second Satire of Dr. John Donne’ (1735) that ‘who knows Sapho [sic] smiles at other whores.’

Despite her controversial reputation – or perhaps because of it – Sappho was a figure of inspiration and admiration for eighteenth-century writers, and especially for women. As Reynolds writes:

Because both Sappho’s work and Sappho’s person are ‘in pieces’ it means that it and she are neither whole, nor wholly independent. So it – and she – can be possessed, taken, raped, riddled, rapt, wrapped, ventriloquised, impersonated, forged. On the one hand, she represents a falling short – she is crude, unshewn, unripe, sketchy. On the other hand, she posits an excess, as she is made multiple, decimated, many-sided. Her hand can be forged, her deeds are overwritten, her text is a palimpsest, her imprint is graffiti, her life is an apocrypha and her words are a set of tall stories. […] These meaningful remains hint at a larger conception which is grander, more perfect, more sublime that anything fully realised and readily accessible.

As a woman made of fragments, Sappho could thus provide a space in which eighteenth-century writers could experiment with the figure of the transcendent genius, and this potential was especially appealing to women writers, whose own works were so often dismissed as soft and quotidian examples of the Burkean ‘beautiful’ that is in every way opposite to the genius of sublime transcendence.

Sappho, the quintessential female genius, leaves gaps in her story and in her writings that provided tantalising spaces in which eighteenth-century women writers – especially those, like Aphra Behn and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who refused to conform to the feminine domestic ideal imposed on them by theorists such as Burke and Pope – could act out their own mythologies of transcendent female genius. For these women, it seemed worth the risk of being tarnished by Sappho’s second reputation as a

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'lewd and infamous creature,' if they could at the same time take advantage of the liberating poetic potential that the performative space of her name could conjure.\[372\]

It was this complex combination of lack and excess, of sublime sensibility and explicitly female genius that is at the same time temptingly unfinished, that made the figure of Sappho so appealing to Mary Robinson, concerned as she was with female performance of theatrical self-authorship, and self display. Moreover, in Sappho’s expression of a sublime love that resisted the limiting categories of biological incommensurability that made up the two-sex model, she provided a performative space in which Robinson could negotiate her own release from the constraints of this discourse. In Robinson’s post-1793 writings we can thus trace an interest in and negotiation with Sappho’s complex cultural position that could, perhaps, allow Robinson, too, finally to perform the part of the excessive, desiring, sublime and transcendent female genius.

MARY ROBINSON’S SAPPHO POETRY: ARTICULATING SUBLIME DESIRE

Robinson’s negotiations with Sappho begin in her poetry. Hailed as the ‘English Sappho’ following the publication of her 1791 book of Poems, Robinson’s reputation continues to be elided with Sappho’s in periodical puffs and reviews of her writings throughout the decade. Despite this, Robinson’s own use of Sappho as an experimental and performative poetic space does not begin until 1793.

In a poem entitled ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ signed ‘Sappho’ and published in the Oracle magazine on October fifth, 1793, Robinson makes her first foray into Sapphic mythmaking. As observed in the introduction to this chapter, this date is significant.

\[372\] Alexander Pope on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s adoption of the name ‘Sappho’ in her verse; qtd. in Reynolds, The Sappho Companion, 124-125. Reynolds writes that despite the derogatory terms of Pope’s insult, Montagu continued to ‘insist on identifying herself with the name’ (125). Indeed, both Behn and Montagu were, like Robinson, called ‘the English Sappho.’ In the Memoir of William Oldys, Behn is praised in these terms, but here again the compliment contains an implication of her laxity in sexual virtue: ‘none among us may, perhaps, more justly be called the English Sappho, equalling her either for description, or perhaps experience, in the flames of love, and excelling in her personal temptation to it.’ A Literary Antiquity: Memoir of William Oldys, Esq., ed. James Yeowell (London: 1862), 49.
Robinson’s first poetic dalliance with the Sappho signature comes a mere five days before the trial and eleven days before the execution of her previous symbol of female identification, the French queen Marie Antoinette. Turning from this failed figure of female identification and power (following her Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France, published in 1793, Robinson would not address the queen again until her Letter to the Women of England in 1799), Robinson seeks in the Sappho signature an alternative image of female power: one that would be rooted in the transcendent sublimity of the mind rather than in the limitations of culturally understood biology, and that would require, not a rejection of female desire, but rather a translation of it from the limitations of that biology to the utopian possibilities of the mind.

Indeed, female desire is at the forefront of ‘Sonnet to Lesbia.’ With her first attempt at the Sapphic voice, Robinson writes not to Sappho but as Sappho, adapting her celebrated ode, praised by both Longinus and Addison, that begins (in its most famous eighteenth-century translation by Ambrose Philips) ‘Blest as th’ immortal Gods is he.’ In so doing, Robinson is making a bold claim for her own skill and poetic genius.

In his letters on Sappho, Addison had written:

I cannot but wonder, that these two finished pieces have never been attempted before by any of our own countrymen. But the truth of it is, the compositions of

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373 That Robinson would have been aware of the queen’s suffering and imminent trial is clear from the newspapers of the time. Two days before ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ was printed, several newspapers printed an account of the queen’s experience in prison, in which it is reported that ‘her eyes are red, from weeping and restlessness; her hair turned grey; her looks still remain sweet, and her deportment royal and majestic.’ London Chronicle, 5795 (3 October 1793). Further, the first reports of the queen’s trial circulated on the day Robinson’s poem was published: ‘Marie Antoinette yet remains in the Conciergerie: when the last accounts left Paris, it was generally understood that her trial would take place in a few days.’ London Chronicle, 5796 (5 October 1793). Indeed, news of the queen’s suffering had permeated popular British culture, as is seen in a theatrical advertisement for a new play, The Royal Prisoners, which promised to portray ‘MARIE ANTOINETTE and her FAMILY, during their confinement at the TEMPLE. With a view of the NATIONAL CONVENTION.’ Public Advertiser, 18505 (3 October 1793).

374 This translation can be found in Addison, ‘Thursday, November 22, 1711,’ 332-333; and in Longinus, On the Sublime, 50-51. Philips’s translation, along with Robinson’s ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ is reproduced in the Appendix to this thesis. That Robinson is familiar with Addison’s writings on Sappho is demonstrated in her preface to Sappho and Phaon, where she references his opinions on the subject. Mary Robinson, ‘Account of Sappho,’ in Sappho and Phaon. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets, with thoughts on poetical subjects, and anecdotes of the Grecian poetess (1796); repr. in Mary Robinson: Selected Poems, ed. Judith Pascoe (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2000), 144-181 (152).
the ancients, which have not in them any of those unnatural witticisms that are the delight of ordinary readers, are extremely difficult to render into another tongue, so as the beauties of the original may not appear weak and faded in the translation.\footnote{Addison, ‘Thursday, November 15, 1711,’ 321-322.}

In presenting to the public a revisioning of Sappho’s second ode, then, Robinson is directly responding to Addison’s call for a skilled British poet to overcome the ‘difficulties’ of Sappho’s writings and to reimagine their ‘beauties’ for a late eighteenth-century audience.

Indeed, Robinson’s ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ is a revisioning, rather than a translation. Beyond her own necessary distance from the original text in terms of language, Robinson intentionally changes the form and meaning of the poem to suit her own purposes. While Sappho’s ode is also ‘sapphic’ in the sense of its homoerotic overtones – it is a love poem addressed to a Lesbian maid as Sappho jealously regards her male lover’s caresses – in Robinson’s interpretation of the poem these homoerotic overtones are erased, as the poem is transformed into one addressing a Lesbian maid with regards to a lost male love object: ‘\textit{FALSE is the YOUTH, who dares by THEE reline}.’\footnote{Mary Robinson, ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ (1793); repr. in \textit{The Works of Mary Robinson}, ed. Daniel Robinson (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), i, 214 (l. 1). All further references to lines in this poem are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.} This translation from homoeroticism to hetero-eroticism should not be read as a sign that the poem is conservative, however, as the positioning of female desire at centre stage mirrors the lustful imagery of the original Sappho poem to powerful effect.

The poem is also a rewriting from a formal perspective. While the original poem is a Sapphic ode, Robinson reimagines it in her version as a Petrarchan sonnet, her first attempt at this difficult form. Daniel Robinson has written at length on the centrality of Robinson’s use of the Petrarchan sonnet form in her quest for poetic fame. Explaining the significance of the sonnet form for female poets in the late eighteenth century, he argues that ‘the sonnet claim is a bold statement of intellectual and poetic superiority, an implicit act of self-canonisation,’ allowing women poets to demonstrate their virtuosity
in verse by writing in a form that was highly regarded in the English canon, but was at the same time one which had been neglected since the time of Milton, and was thus ripe for revisioning in the female voice.377

This ‘sonnet claim’ was first made in earnest by a woman poet in the late eighteenth century with the publication of Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays* (1784), a hugely successful volume which went through nine editions before her death in 1806, and in its final form (the posthumous tenth edition of 1811) contained ninety-two sonnets.378 While Smith’s sonnets are mainly written in Shakespearean or nonce forms,379 Anna Seward was at the same time experimenting with the Petrarchan sonnet, finally collecting and publishing her sonnets in *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects* (1799). In writing her first Sappho poem in the Petrarchan sonnet form, then, Robinson is inserting herself into a tradition that is both very modern, and very explicitly female.

Rather than using the nonce form made popular by Charlotte Smith, however, Robinson chooses the more difficult Petrarchan sonnet form in order to demonstrate her own extensive skills in the mastering of complex verse forms. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Robinson had already demonstrated her interest in metrical variation in her engagement during the years of 1789 to 1791 with the Della Cruscan school of poetry, which privileged the intricate and ornate language of sensibility and was imaginative and experimental in its use of nonce verse forms.380 In her poetical writings in the 1790s Robinson would go one to experiment with a wide variety of forms, both classical and

379 A nonce form is one that is irregular or experimental, rather than following a recognised scheme.
nonce. Indeed, Stuart Curran has said of her metrical experimentation in her final book of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), that Robinson’s poetry represents ‘the single most inventive use of metrics in English verse since the Restoration.’

In the eighteenth century the Petrarcan (or Italian) sonnet was privileged as the ‘legitimate’ sonnet, while Shakespearean (or English) and nonce forms were deemed ‘illegitimate.’ Rejecting Smith’s claim in the original preface to her *Elegiac Sonnets* that ‘the legitimate sonnet is ill calculated for our language,’ Robinson in her poem executes the more difficult Petrarcan form in order to position herself as an exceptional poet with exceptional skill. Indeed, as I will discuss, in the ‘Preface’ to *Sappho and Phaon*, a text that is also written ‘in a series of legitimate sonnets,’ Robinson would go on to set out a theory of poetry that defends her use of the Petrarcan sonnet as a marker of true poetic genius.

As Francis Fawkes informs us, Sappho also experimented with form: ‘She was the Inventress of that Kind of Verse which (from her Name) is called the *Sapphic*. She wrote nine Books of *Odes*, besides *Elegies, Epigrams, Iambics, Monodies*, and other *Pieces*. Here, then, is perhaps another reason for Robinson’s identification with Sappho. By aligning herself with the female poetic genius *par excellence*, Robinson could lay claim to Sappho’s mastery of both poetic language and poetic form. For this reason, I reject Daniel Robinson’s contention that in writing in the Petrarcan form Robinson was turning away from the feminine to the masculine poetic voice.

Daniel Robinson argues that ‘Robinson practices a masculine poetics that distinguishes her poetry from her female contemporaries,’ and again, that ‘although she was frequently hailed as “the English Sappho,” Robinson actually wanted to be the

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382 The Petrarcan sonnet is arranged in an octave and a sextet, and usually has the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA CDCDCD. The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains of alternating rhymes followed by a couplet, with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EEF GG.
384 Fawkes, *The Works*, 178; original emphasis.
English Petrarch. However, I see something quite different in Robinson’s decision to adopt the Petrarchan form at this point in her poetic career. Indeed, in following in the footsteps of Smith and Seward in choosing the newly revived sonnet form in which to stake her claim to literary genius, Robinson was in fact demonstrating a poetic mastery that was as explicitly female as it was explicitly prodigious, and was thus the perfect vehicle for presenting herself to the public in the performance of ‘the English Sappho.’

In Robinson’s revisioning of Sappho’s poem in ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ she draws on the Sapphic myth as it is presented in Pope’s ‘Sappho to Phaon’ (1712) in order to present the reader with a bold declaration of frustrated female desire. Speaking from the privileged position of the spectator-subject who possesses more knowledge than the couple she regards, Robinson’s Sappho takes on the sibylline voice of the prophet. Warning the woman she watches about the man who appears to dote on her to ‘fear him, LESBIA – fear him, Nymph divine!’ (5), Sappho foretells that the words of Lesbia’s partner – later in the poem revealed to be Phaon himself – are merely ‘LOVE’S deceitful transports’ (4), that will ultimately drive her to ‘DESPAIR!’ (14).

Reversing the gendering of the classical subject/object position of Petrarch’s original sonnets to Laura, Robinson’s Sappho renders Phaon as the object who exists to be desired. As with Petrarch – and as with Sappho – this is not a requited passion; rather it is the violent and frustrated desire of rejected love. In Robinson’s revisioning of Sappho’s poem, Phaon is transformed from a man ‘Blest’ to a man who is ‘False’ (1), and there is the hint of a threat apparent in her choice of words, that he ‘dares’ (1) to court another while Sappho still loves and wishes to be loved. Sappho’s suffering is revealed to the reader as she tells how her ‘transient hour of bliss [is] flown’ (6), as Phaon has abandoned her ‘to scenes of Care’ (10). She has no hopes of future happiness.

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385 Daniel Robinson, *Form and Fame*, 112, 120.
386 Robinson was very familiar with Pope’s poetry and used lines from his ‘Sappho to Phaon’ as the epigraph to *Sappho and Phaon*: ‘Love taught my tears in sadder notes to flow, / And tun’d my heart to elegies of woe.’ Pope, ‘Sappho to Phaon,’ ll. 7-8.
as he has ‘dimm’d each prospect fair’ (12). Sappho’s semi-sibylline status as the prophetic voice of foreboding is further emphasised when she reveals that ‘for me the Muse unfolds her store’ (9). Without Phaon’s love, however, these spiritual prompts to poetry are ‘In vain’ (9), as she cannot tempt him back to her desiring arms, and though her ‘Soul must still adore’ (13) him, his addresses to another serve to ‘MOCK [her] DESPAIR!’ (14).

Here, then, we see Robinson playing with images of the violent suffering of female desire that Longinus had praised in Sappho’s poetry as presenting examples of the sublime in art. Robinson’s Sappho is a sibylline genius whose poetry comes to her unbidden from the ‘store’ of the ‘Muse.’ However, desire and poetic genius are set up in conflict with one another as Sappho’s ‘DESPAIR’ at Phaon’s cruel treatment of her leads her to shun the Muse’s offerings, which she claims are shown to her ‘In vain.’

In this way, Robinson’s ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ is a bold statement of things to come. Marking her place among the ranks of poetic genius with her use of the ‘legitimate’ sonnet, Robinson uses this poem to experiment with ideas about female desire, excessive sensibility, and poetic genius; ideas that she had first posited in her writings on Marie Antoinette. Setting up a tension between violent feminine passion and the creative impulse, we begin to see in Robinson’s ‘Sonnet to Lesbia’ the inklings of a theory of an explicitly feminine model of poetic production that would seek to incorporate an understanding and appreciation of sensibility and female desire into the image of the poetic genius. Robinson would go on to explicate this theory in much greater detail three years later, in her book-length production, *Sappho and Phaon. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets, with thoughts on poetical subjects, and anecdotes of the Grecian poetess* (1796).
Jerome McGann has called *Sappho and Phaon* ‘the single most important English contribution to the Sapphic tradition.’\(^{387}\) Despite this, the text is often overlooked by critics of Robinson’s work, and those who do address it often come to vastly different conclusions about its meaning. In my reading of *Sappho and Phaon*, I contend that in this fascinating work Robinson presents to the world a bold declaration of her own place in the canon of literary genius, at the same time as laying out a radical theory of specifically female sublimity and transcendence centred in the complex and often contradictory figure of the fatally destined poet, Sappho.

The complexity of *Sappho and Phaon* has led to some very conflicting readings by previous critics. Jerome McGann reads the text as a Della Cruscan ‘manifesto for [...] a poetry of sensibility’ that is ‘specifically gendered female.’\(^{388}\) Similarly, Ashley Cross reads the sequence as speaking ‘directly to the woman poet’ s struggle to balance her intense desire with her writing,\(^{389}\) and Margaret Reynolds sees Robinson’s ‘governing principle’ in the text as ‘the oxymoron of a passionate Reason, an intellectual feeling, an erotic intelligence.’\(^{390}\) In contrast to this, Anne Janowitz argues that ‘the sonnet sequence’s politics are neither apparent nor decipherable,’ and that Robinson writes *Sappho and Phaon* merely to position herself in the public eye ‘as a tempest-tost abandoned lover.’\(^{391}\) Finally, Daniel Robinson reads a quite opposite movement in the sonnet sequence, in which, he argues, Robinson adopts an explicitly ‘masculine poetics,’ seeking ‘to kill "the Lesbian Poetess”,’ because ‘Robinson’s

\(^{387}\) McGann, The Poetics of Sensibility, 94.


\(^{390}\) Reynolds, The Sappho History, 38.

Sappho is the public image of herself that she must publicly renounce in order to be recognised as a legitimate artist.\textsuperscript{392}

In my reading of the text, I reject the readings of Robinson and Janowitz, arguing rather that \textit{Sappho and Phaon} demonstrates a radical poetics that is both explicitly political and specifically female. My reading agrees most closely with McGann and Reynolds in recognising the clash between reason and sensibility that lies at the core of the text. I go further than this, however, in arguing that Robinson’s text also evinces a desire for sublime transcendence that connects her more closely with the Romantics who would follow her than with the Della Cruscans who preceded her.

In delineating the philosophy of Romantic transcendence, Thomas Weiskel explains in \textit{The Romantic Sublime} (1976) that ‘the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and speech, transcend the human.’\textsuperscript{393} For Thomas McFarland, in \textit{The Paradoxes of Freedom} (1996), the chief means to attaining this transcendence – the act ‘by which human life orients itself’ – are religion, love, and freedom.\textsuperscript{394} While religion and love have long represented transcendence in philosophy, he argues, it was in the Romantic era, following the ‘the psychic explosion of the French Revolution,’ that freedom became intimately connected with the idea of sublime love, and was raised to the ‘apotheosis’ of transcendental aspiration: ‘the Romantics admired and cherished (indeed, they were intoxicated by) the ideal of freedom.’\textsuperscript{395}

In other words, then, the ultimate aim of Romantic transcendence was to escape – if only for a moment – the limitations of human life, among which, one could argue, the constricting categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender played a central role. For the Romantics, this escape was countenanced primarily in terms of the ideal of

\textsuperscript{392} Robinson, \textit{Form and Fame}, 112, 149.
\textsuperscript{395} McFarland, \textit{Paradoxes of Freedom}, 24, 28.
freedom, with which the sublime emotion of love was often inextricably linked. ‘Like love,’ McFarland explains, ‘freedom has been both historically and existentially illusive, elusive, and characterised by transcendence in the highest degree.’ However, while sublime love is understood by the Romantics to be attainable, the Romantic transcendence of freedom is always couched in future terms, ‘as something to come, or at best as looming in the immediate future.’ As such, the Romantics frequently dreamed of love as that which could lead them towards the ultimate future goal of freedom. They experienced sublimity in the contemplation of that freedom, which they imagined would occur in some future utopia beyond the failed project of the French Revolution: ‘Forgive me, Freedom!,’ cries Coleridge in his ‘France: An Ode’ (1797), displaying this experience of transcendence in the contemplation of a future attainment, ‘nor ever / Didst breathe thy soul in forms of human pow’r,’ but despite this lack of actuality, ‘O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there!’

In her depiction of Sappho’s sublime passion as ultimately leading her into a transcendent leap towards freedom, Robinson, I will argue, expresses this very idea of Romantic transcendence in Sappho and Phaon. As in the case of the Romantics, this was a desire for complete freedom from oppression. However, while for the Romantics this freedom was imagined primarily in class terms, for Robinson, this included, first and foremost, the freedom from the oppression of the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference. Indeed, Robinson’s conception of transcendent genius cannot be said to fit simply into a strictly Romantic framework. In opposition to the aggressive masculinity of Romanticism, epitomised in William Wordsworth’s call for poetry to be

396 Ibid., 102, 83.
written in the ‘real language of men,’ Robinson’s idea of sublime transcendence here figured as explicitly female in its expression.398

In the ‘Preface’ to *Sappho and Phaon*, Robinson lays out a manifesto for the production of poetry and the cultivation of poetic genius that would later find echoes in Wordsworth’s famous 1800 ‘Preface’ to his *Lyrical Ballads*, uniting poetry and politics in a revelatory vision of British civilisation and culture. Opening her ‘Preface’ with a meditation on the sonnet as poetic form, Robinson draws on the eighteenth-century hierarchical relationship between the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets in order to make a wider comment on the present state of British society and culture. Although ‘every admirer of poetical compositions’ must admit that the ‘LEGITIMATE’ sonnet is a more perfect poetic vehicle than the ‘modern’ sonnet, Robinson argues, this ‘legitimate’ form is ‘seldom attempted in the English language.’399 Instead, the modern British literary landscape is infused with the ‘heterogeneous mass of insipid and laboured efforts’ (145) of ‘self-important poetasters’ (146). This is not just a preamble designed to set Robinson up as an exceptional poet who dares to write in a form ‘which even the best poets have thought it dangerous to tread’ (146), however, although the preface does do this to great effect. There is a more didactic and philosophical argument at work here.

In writing about the ‘disrepute’ (145) of the ‘modern’ sonnet, Robinson is making a wider claim for the degeneration of poetry in modern Britain, corrupted by the ‘ignorance’ of ‘poetasters’ who threaten artistic expression by reducing poetry to ‘the non-descript ephemera’ (146) of light entertainment. This ‘chaos of dissipated pursuits,’ in which ‘every rhapsody of rhyme, from six lines to sixty’ is falsely denominated a


399 Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon* (1796); repr. in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. Judith Pascoe (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2000), 144-180 (144). All further references to the text are from this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
sonnet, constitutes a direct threat to true artistic talent, casting ‘an overwhelming shadow’ over ‘the lustre of intellectual light’ and reducing poets of true genius to ‘the lowest degradation’ (146).

In opposition to these ‘self-important poetasters,’ Robinson stands as the ‘enthusiastic votary of the Muse’ (146). Unlike these modern pretenders who write ephemeral nonsense for payment, Robinson’s interest in poetry borders on the spiritual. She stands, like the sibylline Sappho of ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ searching in her poetry for something more, for something that sounds like transcendence. For Robinson, poetry is not just a source of entertainment; it has ‘the power to raise’ and ‘the magic to refine’ (146). The poet likewise has ‘powers’ that are ‘mystically fraught’ (147). This mysticism in the poetic project, this sense of being ‘raised’ out of oneself, of being transformed, or ‘refined,’ by a ‘magic’ that lies within poetry itself, introduces to Robinson’s poetic theory a sense of transcendent sublimity that, as I will go on to discuss, is essential to understanding her poetic project.

Like Wordsworth, and other Romantic theorists of poetry who would follow her, Robinson is not merely writing poetry here, she is writing politics. Poetry in this elucidation does not exist merely to entertain; it is a politically charged and civilising influence in itself. ‘That poetry ought to be cherished as a national ornament,’ Robinson argues, ‘cannot be more strongly exemplified than in the simple fact, that, in those centuries when the poets’ laurels have been more generously fostered in Britain, the minds and manners of the natives have been most polished and enlightened’ (147). In so doing, she joins a long tradition of British poets in the eighteenth century who engaged in what Howard Weinbrot has called ‘a poetics of nationalism.’ Here, however, this nationalism is turned to radical effect.

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400 Howard D. Weinbrot, Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6. For more information on ‘the centrality of the nationalist concerns’ of eighteenth-century British poetry, see Suvir Kaul, who writes that ‘[British] poets in the long eighteenth century imagined poetry to be a unique and privileged literary form for the
For Robinson, poetry is connected to the general enlightenment of the nation in such a way that implies a causal link. In order for society to progress in civilisation, poetry must not only exist, it must also be celebrated in its rightful place as a ‘national ornament.’ Echoing her earlier ode to genius and politics, *Ainsi va le Monde*, she proceeds with a litany of great British poets that includes Pope, Milton, Spenser and Collins. Robinson asserts that, without these ‘attributes of genius,’ Britain as a whole would have found itself ‘deficient’ in ‘the scale of intellectual grace’ (148). In other words, exceptional poets not only reflect the greatness of the nation, they foster it.

Robinson here is talking of Britain’s past greatness. When she turns to the present she finds less to praise. Indeed, she asserts, it is a ‘melancholy truth’ that despite this ‘prodigality’ of intellectual greatness in Britain’s history, the best poetry and poets are neglected in modern society and culture: ‘there has not been, during a long series of years, the smallest mark of public distinction bestowed on literary talents’ (148). This is not due to lack of talent, as ‘I will venture to believe, that there are both POETS and PHILOSOPHERS, now living in Britain, who, had they been born in any other clime, would have been honoured with the proudest distinctions, and immortalised to the latest posterity’ (149). Rather, existing genius is actively denigrated in modern Britain, ‘suffered to languish, and even to perish, in obscure poverty’ (148). This is a bleak picture indeed. Robinson is here tracing the very murder of genius by the shallow and unfeeling attitudes of the modern world, and she is warning the reader that to go on in this way could threaten the very fabric of intellectual enlightenment.

This is not just a cultural concern, however. Robinson is also writing with radical political intent. Adapting the language of rights and revolution that had been used by supporters of the French Revolution in the early years of the decade, Robinson

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401 For more information on *Ainsi va le Monde*, see Chapter 2 of this thesis.
constructs an opposition between the passionate genius who could lead the country to enlightenment, and ‘the interest of the ignorant and powerful’ (148) who seek actively to suppress the poet’s voice in order to keep the people in subordination. This is a ‘perpetual scene of warfare’ (148). The poet is assailed from all directions by ‘concealed assassins’ (148) who wish to silence the transformative power of genius. ‘The enemies of genius are multitudinous,’ we are told, exactly because the poetic genius has the unique power to rescue ‘the slave, spell-bound in ignorance,’ from the abuses of unnatural ‘authority’ (148). It is the poet’s special office to ‘dra[w] forth’ the ‘best powers of reason’ from ‘the dark mine’ of ‘ignorance’ (148) in order to rescue the people of the nation from subordination and mental slavery.

Here, Robinson displays her deep embeddedness in the radical age in which she lived with the bold assertion that genius and revolution are inextricably linked. In this, she echoes revolutionary writers such as Wollstonecraft, who, in her *Historical and Moral View*, writes that the French ratification of the Rights of Man had been ‘fostered’ and ‘promulgated by the men of genius of the last and present ages.’ In Robinson’s view, it is the sibylline poetic genius, ‘possessed [of] the powers of prophecy’ (148) and blessed with the unique ability to inspire the people with the message of enlightenment and liberty, who will ‘diffuse an universal lustre’ across the globe. In a utopian move, Robinson foretells that the ultimate outcome of this poetic power of prophecy will be to free the people from their ‘fetters’: ‘that era is rapidly advancing, when talents will tower like an unperishable column, while the globe will be strewed with the wrecks of superstition’ (148).

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Here then is a treatise in which poetry and politics are inseparably bound up together, with the poet-genius as the ultimate arbiter of truth and enlightenment. For Robinson, the poet holds the unique ability to communicate both with the muses and the people: to transcend the ‘envy’ and ‘malice’ of the ‘ignorant and powerful’ (148); to understand the way to universal enlightenment; and, most importantly, to make that understanding accessible to ‘the slave, spell-bound in ignorance’ (148). This is ‘the majesty of genius’ (148), the sibylline ability to act as a conduit by which the suppressed masses could finally access the liberty of enlightenment.

Robinson, as the ‘enthusiastic votary of the Muse’ who produces poetry ‘in that path, which even the best poets have thought it dangerous to tread,’ and who calls on others to follow her on ‘the track where more able pens may follow with success’ (146), is the high priestess of this transcendent poetic genius. Having established her exceptional ability in poetic creation and criticism through her meditation on poetic form, Robinson here proves her ‘venture’ true. Yes, there are indeed ‘both POETS and PHILOSOPHERS, now living in Britain’ (149), for (as well as philosophers such as Godwin and Wollstonecraft, and poets such as Charlotte Smith and Coleridge, all of whom she greatly admired403) it is Robinson herself who embodies both of these categories, uniting them in a radical vision of intellectual ‘majesty’ (148). In so doing, she lays her claim for the right to be ‘immortalized to the latest posterity’ (149).

In the final paragraph of the ‘Preface,’ this bold statement of the transcendent power of poetic genius is given a new angle, that of gender. In these lines, Robinson

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403 For evidence of Robinson’s admiration of Wollstonecraft, see Chapter 1 of this thesis. For evidence of her admiration of Godwin, see her letters to him, in which she praises him as ‘my dear philosopher.’ Robinson, ‘Letters,’ in The Works of Mary Robinson, vii, ed. Hester Davenport (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 295-332 (320). For evidence of her admiration of Charlotte Smith, see her novel Walsingham, in which she writes ‘I admire all her works […], and some of them to enthusiasm,’ and that they possess ‘the rich and beautiful effusions of imagination!’ Robinson, Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature (1797), ed. Julie Shaffer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 238. Finally, for evidence of Robinson’s admiration of Coleridge, see poems dedicated to him, such as ‘Mrs. Robinson to the Poet Coleridge,’ in which she calls him the ‘GENIUS of HEAV’N-TAUGHT POESY!.’ Robinson, ‘Mrs. Robinson to the Poet Coleridge,’ in Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself, 4 vols (London: 1801), iv, 145-149 (l. 52). For more information on the relationship between Robinson and Coleridge, see Susan Luther, ‘A Stranger Minstrel: Coleridge’s Mrs. Robinson,’ Studies in Romanticism, 33 (1994): 391-409.
invokes the ‘talents of my illustrious countrywomen,’ crowning them with ‘the unperishable lustre of mental pre-eminence’ (149). Finally, Robinson’s entire poetical project is laid bare. Not content to raise the poet to the site of mystical transcendence, Robinson’s ‘pre-eminent’ genius is revealed to be a woman. While ‘the majesty of genius’ has been celebrated in male poets in the past, in the current hostile climate, intellectual women have stepped forward to ‘ennoble themselves’ with the laurels of genius, and to take – rather than wait to be given – their rightful place at the forefront of this powerful phalanx of transcendent genius, just as Sappho herself had done. Indeed, as Robinson goes on to explore her version of the Sappho myth, she works also to invest all female poets with the ‘divine inspiration’ of transcendent genius that could elevate them rightly ‘the first class of human beings’ (150).

‘A Visionary Theme’: Transcendent Passion and Female Poetic Genius

When Robinson turns from the ‘Preface’ to the figure of Sappho herself, she is forced to confront the complexity of her poetic project: how to incorporate the story of Sappho’s excessive and potentially destructive passion into a transcendent vision of freedom through the expression of creative genius. For Robinson, Sappho is ‘a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive controul [sic] of ungovernable passions’ (149). This is not a criticism, however. Rather, in spite of the ‘danger’ of a ‘too luxuriant fancy,’ Robinson finds in Sappho’s poetry a ‘glowing picture of her soul’ (150). Rejecting past portraits of Sappho by Ovid and Pope as ‘replete with shades, tending rather to depreciate than to adorn the Grecian Poetess’ (150), Robinson is moved by the same ‘irresistible impulse’ of prophetic genius that first moved Sappho to explore through her story the complex workings of passionate sensibility and sublime reason that make up ‘the first class of human beings’: the female genius.
This is a bold statement of intent. Setting herself up as an equal to the towering figures of Pope and Ovid, Robinson dismisses their image of Sappho as the abandoned lover who gives in to grief and suicide in favour a different picture: one that would not require her to accept the impossibility of the survival of the female genius. For Robinson, Sappho is proof that ‘it was scarcely possible, that a mind so exquisitely tender, so sublimely gifted, should escape those fascinations which even apathy itself has been awakened to acknowledge’ (152). Thus, in Robinson’s elucidation, passion is in fact a concomitant of genius, and it is only through these passions – dangerous though they might be – that Sappho was able to advance to the ‘superior effulgence’ (153) of ‘intuitive superiority’ (151).\(^\text{404}\)

In her seminal *Fictions of Sappho* (1989), Joan DeJean describes how women writers throughout history have turned to Sappho to enact ‘true rites of passage in which these women take on authorial authority by means of their identification with Sappho.’\(^\text{405}\) We can regard Robinson’s relationship with Sappho in a similar way. Sappho, Robinson informs us, ‘knew that she was writing for future ages’ (153). Robinson also has posterity in mind, and when she embarks on the forty-four sonnets of her sequence, she seeks not only to recuperate Sappho’s name from the ‘depreciation’ of Ovid and Pope, but also to rescue all women poets, including herself, from such a fate.

In the sonnet sequence, Robinson portrays the true image of the female genius as one who is conflicted, tortured, and in constant struggle with passion. Ultimately, however, the pain of passion is preferable to the dullness of philosophy and reason, for without passion there can be no great art. Yes, Robinson tells us, to struggle against

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\(^\text{404}\) Robinson was not the only female writer of the 1790s with an interest in passion. Indeed, passion was also a central concern for Robinson’s friend and contemporary, Mary Hays. In her 1796 novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Hays explores this interest through her heroine, Emma, writing that, ‘my reason was the auxiliary of my passion, or rather my passion the generative principle of my reason.’ Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), ed. Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 142.

passion is to suffer, but if the poet can be brave enough to face passion, in all its torments and in all its sublime terror, if she can draw on that sublime passion in her capacity as an artist, then she might finally be able to harness her passion with the poet’s art in a utopian leap towards transcendence from the suffering of the body into joy, where ‘loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme!’

The forty-four sonnets are spoken in Sappho’s voice, framed by a ‘Sonnet Introductory’ (I) and ‘Sonnet Conclusive’ (XLIV) spoken by a guiding narrative voice that, we can assume, belongs to Robinson. Following the ‘Sonnet Introductory,’ in which Robinson once more reinforces the image of the poet as prophet, ‘ordain’d’ by ‘Heav’n’ (I, 1) with ‘godlike pow’rs’ (I, 9), Robinson shifts to Sappho’s voice to trace her emotional journey from ‘The Temple of Chastity’ (II) through sexual union with (IV) and abandonment by Phaon (XIX), to her final ‘Reflections on the Leucadian Rock before she perishes’ (XLIII).

For Robinson’s Sappho, the ‘Temple of Chastity’ is not Pope’s ‘eternal sunshine of the spotless mind.’ Rather, the temple’s ‘spotless marble’ (II, 9) is lit by the ‘golden crescent’ (II, 6) of the moon, and is ‘Studded with tear-drops petrified by scorn’ (II, 12). In contrast to this cold and uninviting refuge is ‘The Bower of Pleasure’ (III) where Sappho first encounters Phaon under the ‘blazing torch of noon-day light’ (III, 2), and welcomes the ‘tyrant passion’ into the ‘glorious tomb’ (III, 14) of her heart.

In the sonnets that follow, Robinson experiments with the language of sublime passion that the original Sappho fragments were celebrated for. In Sonnet IV, subtitled ‘Sappho discovers her Passion,’ Robinson recreates ‘the anxieties and tortures

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406 Sonnet XLIII, l. 14. All further references to the sonnets will be given parenthetically in the text, with the sonnet number in Roman numerals and the line number in Arabic form. Any references given only in Roman numerals signal the ‘subject’ of the sonnet as it is given in Robinson’s prefatory material (55-56).

407 Alexander Pope, ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ (1717); repr. in The Beauties of Pope (London: 1784), 51-63 (l. 209). As Daniel Robinson notes in Form and Fame, Pope’s ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ is also a strong influence on Robinson’s sonnet sequence: ‘Sappho and Phaon was greatly informed by the simple love lyric associated with Sappho and endlessly replicated in newspaper columns; by the heroic epistle innovated by Ovid and revived by Pope in Eloisa to Abelard; and by the sonnet devised by Petrarch’ (151).
inseparable to jealous love’ that Sappho, according to Longinus, had ‘connect[ed] together with so much art’:\footnote{Longinus, \textit{On the Sublime}, 50.}

\begin{quote}
    Why, when I gaze on Phaon’s beauteous eyes,
    Why does each thought in wild disorder stray?
    Why does each fainting faculty decay,
    And my chill’d breast in throbbing tumults rise?
    Mute, on the ground my Lyre neglected lies,
    The Muse forgot, and lost the melting lay;
    My down-cast looks, my faultering lips betray,
    That stung by hopeless passion, – Sappho dies! (IV, 1-8)
\end{quote}

Here Robinson echoes the painful effects of love described in Sappho’s fragments (see Appendix), and in so doing demonstrates her own ability in performing the sublime of poetic genius. This is the suffering of sexual desire, and that Sappho’s desire is explicitly sexual is emphasised in line 8, where the phallic ‘sting’ of love leads Sappho to ‘die’: the classic literary euphemism for orgasm.

This is not just a sexual death, however. It also suggests the death of Sappho the poetic genius, as she has ‘forgot’ the ‘Muse’ and ‘lost the melting lay’ (IV, 6) of the poet’s song in her passion for Phaon. Calling on her ‘tuneful maids’ (IV, 10) to take over her song, Sappho’s potential death as poet is signified as she lies on the ‘bank of Cypress’ (IV, 13), the Greek symbol of mourning, and gives herself over to ‘the barb’rous triumphs of despair!’ (IV, 14). Here, then, is the conflict of the female genius, who must face the tortures of ‘hopeless passion’ (IV, 8) that threaten to subsume her poetic song. In the poems that follow, Robinson’s Sappho addresses ‘Reason’ and ‘Philosophy,’ but while at first she calls Reason to rescue her from her passions, as the sequence progresses she comes to realise that Reason and Philosophy are helpless against the sublime storms of all-consuming love.

In Sonnet V Sappho still has faith in Reason to rescue her, disbelieving that ‘Love’ can ‘quell’ ‘exulting Reason’ (V, 1) and regretting that she has ‘stray[ed]’ from ‘the tranquil path of wisdom’ to ‘passion’s stormy wild’ (V, 6-7). Similarly, in Sonnet
VII, Sappho ‘Invokes Reason,’ calling it to ‘Lull the fierce tempest of my feverish soul’ (VII, 2) as ‘Estranged from thee, no solace can I find’ (VII, 5). However, here she realises that Reason is unable to achieve what she asks, as ‘O’erwhelmed is every source of pure delight’ (VII, 10) by the ‘stormy tumults’ (VII, 7) of passion’s power.

When she next turns to Reason, in Sonnet XI, it is to mock Reason’s inability to subdue passion. Reason is the ‘vaunted Sov’reign of the mind’ (XI, 1), but it is ultimately a ‘pompous vision’ (XI, 2), unable to ‘tame’ the ‘rebellious passions’ (XI, 3) or ‘bind’ the ‘vagrant fancy’ (XI, 4). Instead, ‘Love’ ‘dim[es]’ Reason’s ‘boasted flame’ (XI, 6), and ‘Pleasure’ and ‘Folly’ triumph over ‘Truth’ and ‘Fame’ (XI, 7-8). Finally, then, Reason is exposed as a ‘visionary theme!’ (XI, 14) that is invaded by ‘hell-fraught jealousies’ (XI, 12) and ‘destructive tumults’ (XI, 11) that leads to the death of hope – ‘hope shrinks and dies’ (XI, 9) – in the face of the suffering torture of unrequited love.

Likewise, in Sonnet XXVI, Robinson’s Sappho ‘Contemns Philosophy’ as the cold offering of unfeeling man. For the sublime and desiring woman of genius, Philosophy is a ‘waste’ of ‘life’ that offers only a ‘fancied rest’ (XXVI, 4). It is ‘dull’ (XXVI, 13), and can speak only to a ‘cold and reas’ning breast’ (XXVI, 8), while it is incapable of the power ‘to heal a lover’s wound’ (XXVI, 14). In this way, Robinson’s Sappho turns from the lessons of rationality and philosophy inculcated by 1790s male radicals such as Thomas Paine and William Godwin as ‘Weak […] sophistry’ (XXVIII, 1) that has no place in the truly feeling mind. Instead, Robinson’s Sappho is searching for something more, for an alternative to ‘cold’ Reason (XXVI, 8) and ‘dull Philosophy’ (XXVI, 13) that could incorporate the wild passions into a vision of transcendence from suffering through art.

This vision is first explored in Sonnet XXVII, in which Sappho turns from the ‘stormy tumults’ (VII, 7) to ‘Address’ an appeal ‘to the Stars’ (XXVII). Here, in the face of the ‘sophistic’ Philosophy that ‘whispers patience to the mind’s despair’
(XXVIII, 2), Robinson’s Sappho instead turns ‘Heav’n[ward]’ (XXVII, 2) to celebrate the sublimity of love and passion, whose ‘flames’ are ‘fierce[r]’ than ‘the proud Sun’ (XXVII, 4-5). For Robinson’s Sappho, her passions are proof of ‘The fine affections of the soul’ (XXVII, 10), as Love ‘only spares the breast which dullness shields’ (XXVII, 8).

In this way, love and passion are strongly linked with the higher mental faculties of genius, and Robinson’s Sappho begins to question the theme that has been seemingly developing in the course of the poem:

If bliss from coldness, pain from passion flows,  
Ah! Who would wish to feel, or learn to love? (XXVII, 13-14)

With this statement, Sappho is not rejecting passion in favour of the ‘bliss’ of ‘coldness.’ Rather, she is questioning the very relationship between these qualities. We have already seen in sonnets II and III that Robinson’s Sappho chooses to reject ‘coldness’ in favour of ‘passion.’ Indeed, as she tells us, a turn away from Phaon and from passion would not lead Sappho to Pope’s vaunted ‘eternal sunshine of the spotless mind,’ but rather to its opposite: the ‘mind’s dark winter of eternal gloom’ (XXV, 12).

In the second half of the sonnet sequence, Robinson’s Sappho seeks to explore this relationship of passion to genius, and to move beyond its initial pains to a space beyond suffering where ‘the feeling heart’ (XXVII, 7) could celebrate the ‘fine affections of the soul’ (XXVII, 10).

Robinson’s solution to this problem of suffering passion is to raise love up to the status of genius. This work begins in Sonnet XXXIV, ‘Sappho’s Prayer to Venus,’ a reworking of Sappho’s famous ‘Ode to Aphrodite.’ 409 In its most famous eighteenth-century version, Ambrose Philips’s ‘An Hymn to Venus’ (1711), Sappho’s ‘Ode to Aphrodite’ is a supplicant poem from a weak, suffering Sappho, who calls out in ‘soft

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409 See Appendix for the full text of this poem, along with the earlier version by Ambrose Philips.
distress’ for the goddess to ease ‘The wasting cares and pains of love.’

Sappho fantasises about taking revenge against her neglectful lover by turning him into her ‘victim’: ‘Tho’ now he freeze, he soon shall burn, / And be thy victim in his turn.’

As the poem ends, however, it is Sappho herself who appears as the real victim, as her calls to Venus to ‘Bring my distemper’d soul relief’ apparently go unanswered, and she continues to suffer ‘grief’ for the lack of ‘all my heart desires.’

In Robinson’s version of the poem, on the other hand, the Sappho that emerges is not the suffering supplicant of Philips’s poem. She does call to the goddess to ‘Attend my pray’r!’ (XXXIV, 5), but here it is in the bold tones of one confident of an answer. Indeed, Robinson’s Sappho is certain of her right to conjure the goddess, as her ‘song, with its ‘strain inspir’d,’ has already, in the past, drawn the ‘madd’ning plaudits’ of the nymph Echo, who repeats only what she admires (XXXIV, 2-4). As in Philips’ poem, Sappho is again a ‘victim’ here, but importantly she is a willing victim: ‘to Phaon’s bosom, Phaon’s victim bear’ (XXXIV, 11). Indeed, the point here is not that Sappho is tortured into unwilling victimhood by her love, but that she must be bold enough willingly to surrender herself up to it. It is only with this release, Robinson suggests, that Sappho will thus be able to enact a transcendent union in ‘the zone divine’ (XXXIV, 10) that would see her raise up the goddess ‘Love’ to the status of genius – symbolised in the ‘prepar[ing] of the ‘wreath’ (XXXIV, 13) – to ‘be crown’d, immortal as the Nine’ (XXXIV, 14), the mystical Muses who inspire her art.

Thus, where the traditional Sappho of Philips’s interpretation is a woman ‘wasted’ by her overwhelming desire, in Robinson’s reading, she becomes bold through her passion, willing to overcome her pain in order to raise love to the level of genius in

410 Ambrose Philips (translation of Sappho), ‘An Hymn to Venus,’ in Joseph Addison, The Spectator (15 November 1711), ll. 8, 6. Interestingly, as Joan DeJean traces in Fictions of Sappho, this poem is now generally regarded as focusing on a female love object. However, in the eighteenth century, all translations of this poem portray this love object as male (see translations by Ambrose Philips and Francis Fawkes for examples). For this reason, it is understandable that Robinson would interpret this male love object as Phaon, even if this is not explicit in previous versions. DeJean, Fictions of Sappho, 317-321.

411 Philips, ‘An Hymn to Venus,’ ll. 35-36.

412 Ibid., l. 40, 39, 42.
a bid for ultimate transcendence from suffering. Indeed, in the final seven sonnets of the sequence, this transcendent union of love and genius becomes the central focus of Sappho’s song. In Sonnet XXXVII Robinson’s Sappho ‘Foresees her Death,’ not as the sorrowful defeat of the female genius by passion, but as a movement into the ‘endless rapture’ (XXXVII, 12) of immortal genius. In death, Sappho would ‘cease to weep’ (XXXVII, 3) and instead become free to be a poetic genius once more: a genius whose renown would draw ‘poets’ to ‘mourn’ her (XXVII, 7-8), while she would be ‘releas’d from ev’ry mortal care’ (XXXVII, 10).

In Sonnet XXXVIII, ‘To a Sigh,’ Robinson’s Sappho is even more positive. Refusing to be controlled any more by her woes – ‘Fond sigh be hush’d! congeal, O! slighted tear!’ (XXXVIII, 9) – she turns instead to the resolution of the ‘busy Fates’ (XXXVIII, 10) to seal her destiny. Recognising that she cannot ‘fl[y] the lover’ without ‘chain[ing] the soul!’ (XXXVIII, 14), she resolves no more to struggle against her consuming passion, but rather seeks ‘Lethe’s […] oblivion’ (XXXVIII, 12). Here, then, is the first suggestion of the Leucadian rock. While ‘oblivion’ could refer to death, it could also refer to the forgetfulness that is the result of drinking the waters of the mythical river Lethe. In this assertive move, then, Robinson’s Sappho seeks to reclaim her body and mind from the storms of painful passion. Oblivion may come, but it will be Sappho, and not Phaon, who incites it, in a gesture towards the sublime that places her trust in the Fates, the prophetic sisters of the Muses.

In Sonnet XXXIX, Robinson’s Sappho turns directly ‘To the Muses’ in a poem that works fully to unite love and poetry in a transcendent image of the female genius. Once more imagining her death, Robinson’s Sappho calls the Muses to ‘strew the tranquil bed where I shall sleep’ with ‘the myrtle and the laurel’ (XXXIX, 2-3). While the laurel is the Greek symbol of poetic genius, the myrtle is the symbol of love and

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413 Philips’s story of Sappho’s victimhood and decline is further emphasised in Pope’s ‘Sappho to Phaon,’ in which Sappho commits suicide in a desperate fit of despair: ‘Poor Sappho dies while careless Phaon stays’ (l. 249).
immortality, sacred to the goddess Venus who Sappho had pledged to raise to the status of the Muses. In asking ‘Erato,’ the Muse of lyric love poetry, to crown her with a wreath of these two ‘trophies twine[d]’ (XXXIX, 4), then, Robinson’s Sappho refuses any more to choose between passion and genius, turning the base struggle between them that had overcome her for so long into a transcendent union that would raise her beyond the conflicts of humanity into the realm of immortality. The ‘branching lotos’ (XXXIX, 10) that stands above her grave instead of a headstone signals the ultimate success of this plan. In Homer’s Odyssey the eating of lotus results in the loss of desire to return home, and here it marks the fact that, with this union of love and poetic genius, Sappho can at last be at peace.

In Sonnet XL Sappho experiences ‘mystic visions’ (XL, 8) that picture to her the lover’s leap of Leucadia. This is not a vision of bleak and defeatist suicide, however, but rather is sublime and transcendent in its imagery. As Sappho watches, ‘a dazzling beam / Shed the bland light of empyrean day!’ (XL, 5-6), and in this heavenly place she is called to try her bid for freedom.

Even when, in Sonnet XLI, she imagines the true awful sublimity of the ‘circling whirlwinds,’ ‘sable grandeur,’ ‘maddn’ing billows,’ ‘wild waves’ and ‘cries’ of the ‘Vulture’ that she will encounter (XLI, 1-8), Robinson’s Sappho is not fearful. Rather, this is a ‘dreadful solace to the stormy mind! / To me, more pleasing than the valley’s rest’ (XLI, 9-10). While Sappho’s passion rages within her she cannot find solace in quiet and ‘rest.’ Instead, she must face up to and conquer ‘despair alone’ (XLI, 13) in order to find ‘That unction sweet, which lulls the bleeding breast!’ (XLI, 14).

Stealing herself against what she has resolved to do, in Sonnet XLII Robinson’s Sappho turns on Phaon to condemn him for his cruel treatment. Even if the leap does not bring her forgetfulness, Robinson’s Sappho is comforted by the knowledge that ‘All of Sappho [will] perish, but her name!’ (XLII, 8). While Phaon is left behind to
‘remember’ and to ‘weep’ (XLII, 3), Sappho is destined for a nobler fate. Whether she survives the leap or not the result will be the same, and Sappho will once more become the poetic genius she has always been intended to be.

In Sappho’s final sonnet, she stands atop the Leucadian rock preparing herself for what is to come. This is not a poem of despair, but one of hope. The terrible sublime language of Sonnet XLI is transformed in Sonnet XLIII into the uplifting sublime of transcendence. The foreboding ‘Vulture’ becomes the regal ‘eagle,’ which is ‘Cloth’d in the sinking sun’s transcendent blaze!’ (XLIII, 3-4), and as Robinson’s Sappho faces into the abyss, it is not the crashing sea but the lofty sky that captivates her. Indeed, this is not a moment of suicide. Rather, Robinson’s Sappho ends the sequence on a bold and positive note, imagining her survival of the leap, as her ‘glowing, palpitating soul’ will be free of suffering to ‘Welcome returning Reason’s placid beam’ (XLIII, 9-10). When she does turn to the waves, they are not the destructive tumults of her nightmares but rather they are ‘calm’ and ‘Lethean,’ offering not death but the liberation of forgetfulness, allowing her at last to be liberated from ‘love’s dread control’ (XLIII, 13) to return to the ‘loftier passions’ and ‘the loftier theme’ (XLIII, 14) of transcendent genius. This then is not a cowardly leap away from suffering but rather a bold and transcendent leap into a utopian future in which passion and poetic genius could at last be united.

In Robinson’s ‘Sonnet Conclusive,’ the muse ‘droops’ (XLIV, 1) not with the image of Sappho’s death, but with the sublime image of her hope atop the cliff as she looks forward towards the light of transcendence and freedom. In this final poem, Robinson offers a ‘sigh’ (XLIV, 6) for the truth that the ‘gaudy buds’ of genius are so often ‘twin’d’ with ‘wounding thorns’ (XLIV, 9). However, this sigh does not lead to condemnation of Sappho’s leap. Rather, Robinson praises the ‘sacred […] name’ of ‘Sky-born VIRTUE!’ (XLIV, 10). This is not, then, the praise for the virtue of chastity
celebrated in the poetry of Alexander Pope that haunts the text, but praise for the virtue of the leap itself.

Sappho’s bold gesture in the leap is the virtue of bravery, embracing the sublime, even in its most terrible form, in the hopes for the attainment of the ‘loftier passions’ that she aspires to. In this way, it reflects Robinson’s conception of a universal virtue that transcends the categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender difference, consisting in intellect, honour and self-defence.\textsuperscript{414} Although Sappho is often judged with ‘frown severe’ (XLIV, 11) and mourned with ‘sorrow’s chilling tear’ (XLIV, 12), Robinson argues, it is in fact because of her leap that Sappho is entitled to ‘claim’ ‘more than mortal raptures’ (XLIV, 13). In Robinson’s elucidation, Sappho’s leap towards transcendence achieves its goal in liberating her from the limitations of the female body as it is defined in culture, and in so doing – in facing her demons and refusing to struggle against her passion – she has been able to ascend to ‘The brightest planet of th’ Eternal Sphere!’ (XLIV, 14). Here, then, is the true source of the mind’s ‘eternal sunshine’: not, as Pope would have it, a solace of the ‘spotless mind,’ but a reward for the bravery of the leap towards transcendence through a bold union of passion and genius, in a utopian achievement of ‘loftier passions’ and a ‘loftier theme.’

As Kari Lokke argues in her work on nineteenth-century women writers, \textit{Tracing Women’s Romanticism} (2004), the function of such transcendent desire in the work of female writers is:

\begin{quote}
not to stifle passion or repress revolt [but] to sublimate these forces into art and ideals that will survive the death of the individual female body, […] and be passed on from generation to generation as agents of inspiration for social change.\textsuperscript{415}
\end{quote}

When we read this celebration of Sappho’s leap in the context of the revolutionary call for social change through the power of poetry that is delineated the Preface, we can see

\textsuperscript{414} See Chapter 1 of this thesis.
Robinson doing exactly this. Sappho may be long dead, but her memory — and the
inspiring sublimity of her poetry — lives on. In performing the voice of Sappho in her
sonnet sequence, and in celebrating the moment of Sappho’s leap as a gesture of brave
and radical transcendence, Robinson thus closes her *Sappho and Phaon* with an
explicitly feminine and feminist call to arms. Sappho’s story is there to teach women
that they can no longer submit to the suffocating dictums of ‘dull’ and ‘cold’
Philosophy, any more than they can survive the tormenting battle against passion.
Rather, the woman poet must, like Robinson, perform the voice of Sappho, and follow
her in a bold enactment of the theatrical power of female self-display, harnessing sexual
passion to poetic genius in order to seek a utopian space beyond female suffering. In the
end, the suggestion is that all women poets might also ascend to this brighter sphere of
‘Sky-born Virtue,’ if only they had the vision and the bravery to leap.

During the final years of her career, Sappho would remain as an important site
of identification for Robinson, and she would go on to explore the fraught relationship
of the modern female genius to her transcendent foremother, Sappho, in the pages of her
1799 novel, *The False Friend* and in her feminist tract, *A Letter to the Women of
England* (1799).

*SAPPHO IN FRAGMENTS: SEARCHING FOR THE LOST MOTHER IN THE FALSE
FRIEND*

‘Merciful powers! Go on,’ said I. ‘You knew my mother?’
‘I did. She was the loveliest work of Nature!’
‘So I have often heard,’ interrupted I.
‘You must have seen that which presented her just as she lived—’
‘A portrait?’
‘No; a bust after the model of the Grecian Sappho.’ — I trembled convulsively.416

In Robinson’s little read 1799 epistolary novel, *The False Friend*, her heroine Gertrude
can be seen to do battle with the same ‘proud, resisting passion’ (III, 206) that Robinson
had explored in her Sappho poetry. While Robinson’s Sappho is able to transcend the

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416 Mary Robinson, *The False Friend, a Domestic Story*, 4 vols (London: 1799), iv, 253. All further
references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
suffering of passion at the end of the sonnet sequence, however, in *The False Friend* Robinson provides us with a picture of the more sorrowful fate of the woman of excessive sensibility and genius in late-eighteenth-century British society. Irrevocably separated from the inspirational guidance of her literary and maternal foremothers by the denigrating anecdotes of the patriarchal father, for Gertrude, Sappho’s transcendent leap can only be mimicked as a fatal fall into derangement and death.

Having been out of print for two hundred years before the 2010 publication of *The Works of Mary Robinson*, this novel has as yet received little critical attention.  

Eleanor Ty criticises the novel’s indulgence in sentimentalism, but, ironically, locates the novel’s power in the sentimental story of the ‘languishing virgin daughter,’ which demonstrates ‘the vulnerability of women’ under patriarchy. Ashley Cross argues that *The False Friend* is a fable about the dangers of the passionate woman writer’s position ‘as a poet whose productivity is threatened by her acute sensibility.’ Margaret Reynolds contends that the heroine’s separation from her mother is symptomatic of ‘the natural bonds in society that have been broken.’ Trapped in a patriarchal world, the mother’s body becomes ‘a site of abjection for Gertrude’ and ‘women are repeatedly silenced and obliterated.’ Finally, William Brewer argues that Sappho is a negative model for Gertrude, who becomes an ‘eighteenth-century copy of the heartbroken and suicidal Sappho,’ and her destiny as a copy is her downfall. Like Reynolds, Brewer concludes that, ‘Instead of hope, her mother bequeaths her misery and death.’ All of the critics (bar Ty) locate the heroine’s most significant relationship in her eternally

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419 Cross, ‘He-Shel Philosophers,’ 60.

420 Reynolds, *The Sappho History*, 68, 70.

the novel follows the trials and tribulations of the orphan Gertrude St. Leger, a young woman of heightened sensibility and Wollstonecraftian sensibilities who is educated in retirement only to be thrown on the vicissitudes of high society. There she develops an overwhelming passion for her guardian, Lord Denmore, who treats her by turns with tenderness and inexplicable cruelty, until she is branded as his mistress and cast out on the world without protection or reputation. After many misadventures and attempts by unscrupulous male characters to seduce her, the novel closes with the exposure of Lord Denmore as her true father. Lord Denmore, we are told, had an illicit affair with Gertrude’s mother, who was the wife of another, Sir William St. Leger, and who died shortly after Gertrude’s birth, swearing Lord Denmore to secrecy. Following this exposure Lord Denmore is killed in a duel with Sir William, and Gertrude dies soon after from a fever of the passions, in the end a true orphan after all.

In his review of *The False Friend* in a 1799 edition of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, Dr. Bisset sums up the perceived dangers of Robinson’s novel with the observation that:

> That which Mrs. Robinson presents may be called a morbid sensibility; a constitution, or state of mind; rarely to be found among the virtuous and wise. If we once open a door to feeling as the excuse of every action which it *may produce*, we may bid farewell to morality, to order, and to every thing valuable in society. […] Perfectly coinciding with Mrs. Robinson, that sentiment, to a certain degree, is necessary to virtue and happiness, we cannot help thinking that she, very probably without intending it, inculcates sensibility much farther than is beneficial, and so far as would be hurtful to its votaries. \[^{422}\]

While contemporary critics of the novel were wary of the ways in which the novel demonstrated that ‘sensibility not being fortified by moral principle […] leads them frequently to the most unwarrantable actions,’ the novel is interesting to the modern feminist reader for the way in which it negotiates this struggle of excessive sensibility,

\[^{422}\] [Review of *The False Friend.*] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 3 (1799): 39-42 (40); original emphasis. The author of this review is identified as Dr. Bisset by Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho History*, 63.
'in which passion, especially the passion of love, triumphs over virtue and reason,' and
the figure of Sappho is a significant influence on the novel in this respect.\textsuperscript{423}

In the prefatory material to \textit{Sappho and Phaon} we are told that Sappho’s
freedom to write stemmed from the more enlightened values of the ancient Greeks,
whose ‘liberal education’ was such that ‘inspired them with an unprejudiced enthusiasm
for the works of genius’ and so led them to ‘idoliz[e] the MUSE, and not the WOMAN.’\textsuperscript{424}

In the degenerate times in which \textit{The False Friend} is set (the letters that make up the
novel are dated between 6 June 1796 and 10 October 1797), however, Gertrude is
forced to be the WOMAN, not the MUSE, as her every gesture of exquisite sensibility is
interpreted as a sexual transgression for which she must be punished.

That Robinson intends the novel to be a comment on the age is spelled out
clearly in its pages. ‘In these extraordinary times,’ we are told,

\begin{quote}
when every thing rational seems verging to oblivion, and every thing
preposterous approaching to its climax, man is like anything but man; and
manners are so degenerated by example, that, in another century, they are likely
to produce a race of beings, aliens alike to nature, feeling, and rationality.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{IV}, 230

In this unstable world, in which ‘[t]he toil of education is, \textit{a bore!} a man of learning, \textit{a quiz!}
and the woman of sentiment, an object of universal ridicule!’ (\textsuperscript{IV}, 229), a woman
such a Gertrude, whose sensibility is compared to that of a character of ‘a Rousseau,’
the lover of ‘a Petrarch,’ and the sorrows of ‘the unfortunate Eloise!’ (\textsuperscript{IV}, 233), is
wholly barred from the freedom of self-expression that had been so essential to the
creation of Sappho’s art.

Gertrude’s distance from the transcendence of Sappho is further emphasised by
her distance from the mother. While Robinson’s Sappho in \textit{Sappho and Phaon} is able to
follow the pattern traced by Kari Lokke in ‘sublimat[ing]’ passion into ‘art and ideals
that will [….] be passed on from generation to generation as agents of inspiration for

\textsuperscript{423} \textit{Ibid.}, 39.
\textsuperscript{424} Robinson, \textit{Sappho and Phaon}, 153.
social change,’ the suffocating secret of Gertrude’s birth means that she has no access to
this power of sublimation that could ‘survive the death of the individual female
body.’ Instead, Gertrude’s mother – who is also Sappho, personified as both women
in the marble bust that stands in Lord Denmore’s library – can only be accessed through
the ‘anecdotes’ (1, 169) of patriarchal male interceptors – first in Lord Denmore’s
recounting of her story and then in the ‘anecdotes’ of Ovid and Pope – that work to
‘depreciate’ her as ‘the victim of an hopeless passion!’ (1, 169).

Indeed, in the novel, Sappho becomes an important site of anxious identification
for the troubled Gertrude. She is ‘irresistibly […] fascinat[ed]’ by this male-authored
presentation of Sappho as a woman who ‘was, at once, the most favoured and the most
unhappy of women’ (1, 165). Barred from access to the inspirational guidance of the
transcendent mother through these male denigrations of Sappho’s story – as in Sappho
and Phaon, these male anecdotes are ‘replete with shades’ – Gertrude instead
develops a morbid obsession with Sappho’s suicide, which she convinces herself she is
destined to replicate as she, too, is one who is ‘exhausted by the perpetual pain of
thought’ (1, 23). Possessing, like Sappho, ‘the soul which is […] ennobled by genius,’
Gertrude sees her ‘fate as ‘dreadful,’ and cannot envisage herself surviving in society as
it is currently constituted, any more than Sappho could survive her own persecution: ‘It
[the prospect] must be brightened, or I must perish!’ (1, 256).

Time and again in the novel Gertrude is attracted to the place ‘where the wild
cascade rushes from the overhanging cliff’ (1, 169), to meditate that ‘she buried her
burning bosom in the deep wave’ (1, 170). Towards the beginning of the novel Gertrude
had herself fallen into this ‘cascade’:

I lost all recollection of the narrow pass, and fell; – the wild water overpowered
me; the foam rolled over my bosom; I was dashed by its force against the rocky

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426 Robinson, Sappho and Phaon, 150.
427 This has also been noted by Brewer, 793.
428 Robinson, Sappho and Phaon, 150.
fragments that were scattered along the stream; and, in a few moments, I ceased to feel sensible of my situation. (i, 26)

Gertrude is rescued from this fall by Lord Denmore, triggering the passion for him that would eventually kill her: ‘I heard such accents as made me doubt this sublunary scene, and fancy myself even in Elysium’ (i, 127). In this reversal of Sappho’s transcendent leap, then, Gertrude’s fall into the river leads not to freedom from passion but to overwhelming absorption in it. Because she does not know the full story of Sappho’s transcendent leap and the possibility and demonstration of freedom from passion in the foremother, she cannot see a way to escaping her destructive love for the father, Lord Denmore.

Indeed, absorption in the patriarchal father leads Gertrude symbolically to destroy the mother. In a significant moment in the novel, Gertrude enters her chamber to encounter the twin busts of Lord Denmore and Sappho (who at this point she does not know resembles her mother) facing her. Gertrude is both horrified and fascinated by the bust of Denmore, which ‘was so placed as to meet my eye in every direction’ and which seemed to stare at her with the ‘vacant horror’ of ‘death’ (iv, 205). In her fear, Gertrude resolves to attempt to move the bust. While weighed down by the head of the father, however, ‘my arm touched the head of Sappho, which fell to the ground, shattered into a thousand pieces’ (iv, 206). Here then, the overwhelming burden of the father, ‘whose weight nearly overpowered my strength’ (iv, 205-206) literally leads Gertrude to destroy the unknown mother.429 Kneeling on the floor, she frantically begins ‘collecting the fragments which lay scattered around me, [and] sighed over them with sorrow and vexation’ (iv, 206). Indeed, Gertrude is here as far removed from access to her mother’s face – and her mother’s story – as the woman poet is from the poetic fragments of Sappho. Unacquainted with the essential knowledge that the bust resembles her mother, these marble fragments are a foreign language to Gertrude; one

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429 This has also been recognised by Cross, ‘He-She Philosophers,’ 60.
that, were she able to read it, may have saved her from her misguided passion – a passion for Denmore that had already killed her mother.

That her fate is elided with that of the sad destiny of both her mother and of Sappho is again suggested in the incident of the ‘little red case’ (IV, 213) belonging to Denmore, which appears to hold Gertrude’s image, initials and hair, and which is thrown by Gertrude’s maid into the brook near the place of Gertrude’s initial fall. Obsessed with gaining proof that Lord Denmore does indeed share her consuming passion, Gertrude flies to the stream to rescue the portrait, hoping that ‘at least some fragments may remain’ (IV, 215), but the image had been ‘entirely effaced’ (IV, 216) by the water. When Lord Denmore reveals to Gertrude that the portrait was in fact ‘of – your mother!’ (IV, 218), Gertrude’s eternal separation from the mother is confirmed. Gertrude, it seems, is a reproduction of her mother who is also Sappho. Just as the image had been ‘effaced,’ however, so the stories of Gertrude’s mother and of Sappho had been effaced from Gertrude’s knowledge. Just as Gertrude is unable to read the fragments of her mother’s face in the shattered bust, here again she is kept apart from the ‘fragments’ that might have saved her.

This final effacement of the mother leads Gertrude to seek to follow Sappho’s miserable fate as she had been taught it. ‘I resolved to dash my burning aching bosom amidst the roaring waters,’ she declares in a fit of passion, ‘I will terminate this scene of torture – I will perish!’ (IV, 223). Gertrude is saved from enacting this suicide, but her separation from the mother and identification with the patriarchal myth of Sappho-the-victim means that ‘all the proud resisting faculties of my soul’ (IV, 238) could not overcome her destiny. As she stands metaphorically staring into the ‘dark and terrifying abyss yawning to receive me’ that mirrors Sappho’s last stand atop the cliff in Sappho and Phaon, she sees not the freedom of transcendence that Sappho hopes for, but only
that ‘all around is fraught with horrors,’ and ‘destruction, without a resisting effort, will be inevitable’ (iv, 237).

When Gertrude discovers the truth that the bust of Sappho was also a portrait of her mother, she attempts one final time to re-establish those maternal bonds that might save her:

The first objects of contemplation were the remains of that model which once presented the resemblance of my lost mother. Oh, Frances! language cannot picture the awful sensation which thrilled through my heart, while I endeavoured, with trembling hands, to select any feature which might still be perfect; nor can my joy be described, when I found that nearly the whole of the countenance had escaped destruction. With eyes, from which a torrent of tears fell involuntarily, I gazed on the precious fragment. I raised it to my lips; kissed it with a mixture of tenderness and awe; talked to it in the language of filial affection; pressed it to my bosom, and on my knees invoked the gentle spirit of my angelic parent to sustain my soul, and to soothe it into resignation. (iv, 262)

Gertrude is left, finally, frantically scrabbling to decipher the fragments of the bust of Sappho who was also her mother. She may have found the ‘precious fragment’ of her mother’s face, but ‘the whiteness of the alabaster’ serves only to remind her of her eternal separation from the mother: “‘So did she look,” said I wildly, “when the hand of death snatched her eternally from me; when my infant breast was given to the miseries of life, unshielded, and unconscious of impending sorrows’” (iv, 263). Gertrude calls to her mother’s ghost to rescue her from ‘the miseries of life,’ and she is shocked to hear a ‘sigh’ in response (iv, 263). While Gertrude prays for this sigh to manifest itself into ‘the pale vision of my departed mother’ (iv, 263), however, she is instead met only with Lord Denmore, who rushes into her chamber with looks ‘wild and haggard’ (iv, 264). With his entrance on the scene, the sigh of the mother is silenced.

In the end then, it is the subsuming presence of the patriarchal father in whom Gertrude lodges her fatal passion because, in eternal separation from both the maternal and literary foremother, she is provided with no alternative. For Gertrude, the mother is eternally ‘Lost!’ (iv, 353), buried beneath the ‘anecdotes’ of the father that denigrate her story. With no access to the stories of female transcendence that would enable her to
escape her mothers’ fate, in the end she, too, is destined to die, the fatal victim of her mother’s – and of Sappho’s – lost selves.

For Robinson, then, Gertrude’s story, and her lack of access to stories, is a warning to all women of genius. If they follow Gertrude’s example and place their passion with the patriarchal father instead of searching for the ‘fragments’ of the ‘lost mother’ they will be deceived. This father is in fact an ‘infamous [...] False Friend!’ (iv, 340), who works to divide the woman poet from her foremothers, without whose influence as an ‘agen[t] of inspiration’ she will never be able to transcend the limits of eighteenth-century femininity, but instead will become the fatally feminine and passive ‘Victim of Sensibility!’ (iv, 367).

While *The False Friend* tells the story of the failure of transcendence for the woman of genius under the suffocating patriarchy of late-eighteenth-century British society, in her *Letter to the Women of England* (1799), Robinson seeks instead to take on the mantle of ‘inspirational agent of social change’ herself: to guide modern British women towards the transcendence that Gertrude had desired so much, and to free them from the shackles of patriarchal stories to once more connect with the transcendent foremother, Sappho.

**A Sapphic Myth ‘For Future Ages’: Robinson’s Utopian Literary Project in *A Letter to the Women of England***

There is no country, at this epocha, on the habitable globe, which can produce so many exalted and illustrious women (I mean mentally) as England. [...] We have seen the graces of poetry, painting, and sculpture, rising to unperishable fame from the pen, the pencil, and the chisel of our women.

In Chapter 1, I argued that Robinson works in her *Letter to the Women of England* to create a performative space in which passionate sensibility is united to a radical concept of universal virtue in order to reclaim both as a powerful site of female genius. In so

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430 Lokke, *Tracing Women’s Romanticism*, 13. As I will show in Chapter 5, Robinson would go on to tackle the subsuming presence of the patriarch in her final novel, *The Natural Daughter* (1799).

431 Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, (London: 1799), 69-70. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
doing, I asserted, she conceived of the possibilities through which women could finally transcend the limiting categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender to ‘delight in the pleasure of sensibility and the passions.’\textsuperscript{432} In this Chapter, I turn to the literary concerns of the Letter, to demonstrate how, in this area too, Robinson develops a theatrical feminism that would allow her to transcend the limits of cultural femininity to draw modern women into a powerful relationship with the transcendent foremothers that Gertrude had so fatally lacked in The False Friend.

In her quest to carve out a space for female genius in late eighteenth-century Britain, Robinson continues the project begun in the ‘Preface’ of Sappho and Phaon to raise up women to their rightful position of ‘mental pre-eminence.’\textsuperscript{433} With this in mind, she works in her text to construct an account of female intellectual history that could provide an alternative to the canon of strictly masculine achievement upheld by dominant cultural ideology. In so doing, she carves a space for women in the chronicles of British literary achievement through which she could begin to guide her contemporaries back to the transcendental inspiration of their foremothers.

At the same time, the creation of this female literary history allows Robinson to defend her own place in literary history. In installing herself in this newly-created female canon, Robinson can be seen to connect her own literary writings to a renowned past of illustrious women, and to a future in which she, too, could be admired and emulated for posterity. At the centre of all this lies the performative figure of Sappho. Indeed, like the Sappho of her sonnet sequence, Robinson wished her legacy would be such that ‘all of [her] would perish, but her name!’\textsuperscript{434} In A Letter to the Women of England she works to achieve this goal in a delineation of the achievements of female literary genius that begins with the work of the sublime genius, Sappho, and ends with her literary daughter, the ‘English Sappho,’ Mary Robinson.

\textsuperscript{432} See Chapter 1, 102.
\textsuperscript{433} Robinson, Sappho and Phaon, 149.
\textsuperscript{434} Robinson, ‘Sonnet XLI,’ Sappho and Phaon, 179, l. 8.
In seeking to create a female literary history, Robinson was setting out on a quest to delineate evidence of women’s claim to historical genius and, in so doing, to establish their rightful place in the predominantly masculine canon endorsed by British literary culture. Critics are in dispute as to when Britain began developing its national literary tradition. Greg Kucich, for example, places it in the mid-eighteenth century, while Richard Terry locates it somewhat earlier, tracing it to the publication of Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774) in the mid-seventeenth century. However, on at least one point they are agreed. While, during the early to mid-eighteenth century, the inclusion of women in British literary anthologies was relatively widespread, towards the end of the century women began to be written out of the canon, as the British literary tradition was increasingly equated with masculinist nationalism, and women were redrawn as passive domestic beings, incapable of the type of poetry that was deserving of preservation. In writing her exclusively female history, then, Robinson was seeking to redress the balance, and restore women to their rightful place as the equals, if not the superiors, of men.

Robinson lays the groundwork for her female canon in the *Letter* when she introduces Wollstonecraft, Catherine Macaulay and the Marquise de Sévigné as women who ‘embellish the sphere of literary splendour, with genius of the first order’ (12). In

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436 Richard Terry writes that this ‘exclusion of women poets from the “great Collections,” the more so for these having been a phenomenon of the closing decades of the 1700s, has helped propagate the notion that such, in totality, was the eighteenth-century’s verdict on women’s poetry.’ Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past*, 253.

437 Other women of Robinson’s era were also interested in this project. See, for example, Mary Hays’s *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries*, 6 vols (London: 1803). For more information on women and the eighteenth-century canon, see Margaret Ezell, *Writing Women’s Literary History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Elizabeth Eger, ‘Fashioning a Female Canon: Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and the Politics of the Anthology,’ in *Women’s Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1820* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 201-215.
selecting women who were highly regarded for writings which were not purely literary but also philosophical and, importantly, educational to begin her canon, Robinson privileges those women who move beyond the traditional ‘feminine’ sphere in their intellectual achievements, and in so doing reveals this sphere to be culturally constructed rather than natural in origin.\textsuperscript{438}

Robinson makes use of the canon that she delineates to draw comparisons between the present situation of women and that of women in previous ages. Echoing the ‘Preface’ to \textit{Sappho and Phaon}, Robinson highlights the perception of women by ‘the ancients,’ who ‘were emulous of patronising, and even of cultivating the friendship of enlightened women’ (14). In so doing, she subtly repeats the argument of the ‘Preface’ that modern Britain is lacking in civilisation due to its mistreatment of genius. However, whereas in the ‘Preface’ she focuses on poets in general, here the neglected genius in question is specifically the genius of women.

Throughout the \textit{Letter}, Robinson makes use of philosophy, history, literature, theatre and art to argue her case, mirroring her multi-faceted career with this infusion of genres, and providing many different avenues of defence for her argument. By interspersing the tract with poems, quotations, examples and vignettes, she demonstrates the multitude of women throughout history who have overcome mental subordination to achieve literary genius, and reveals the texts that support her assertions of the ‘\textit{increasing [sic]} consequence of women, in the great scale of human intellect’ (26). Indeed, she claims that the greater portion of her delineation of the female canon is taken from Vossius’ 1605 work \textit{de philologia}.\textsuperscript{439} By using Vossius’ text as her

\textsuperscript{438} Mary Wollstonecraft published \textit{Thoughts on the Education of Daughters} in 1787, Catherine Macaulay published the seminal \textit{Letters on Education} in 1790, and Mme. Sévigné was known for her posthumously published letters to her daughter, \textit{Letters of Madame de Rabutin Chantal, Marchioness de Sévigné, to the Comtess de Grignan, her daughter} (1727).

\textsuperscript{439} According to Sharon Setzer’s editorial notes on the modern edition of the text, Gerardus Joannes Vossius was a ‘distinguished Dutch scholar and author of many works, including the posthumously published \textit{De quatuor artibus popularibus, de philologia et scientiis mathematicis litteri tres} (1605). The passages that Robinson quotes appear in the second chapter of the second book.’ Sharon Setzer, note to
mouthpiece in her explication of female literary history in this way, Robinson is thus able to perform the part of a distinguished ally for her cause, and so to strengthen her argument for the mental equality of women.

Within this extended quotation (it continues for six pages of the essay) is a list of women that extends from the classical era to the end of the sixteenth century and is interspersed throughout with footnotes by Robinson. These footnotes continue Robinson’s tactic of contrasting modern Britons unfavourably with their classical predecessors in their treatment of women in order to bolster the connection between the celebration of women’s talents and civilisation (for example, ‘Cornisica, happily, did not live in Britain, where learning, and even moderate mental expansion, are not thought necessary to female education; at least in the eighteenth century!’ [32n]). In their irreverent tone, they work to render modern prejudice against women ridiculous in their comparison to the great philosophers of classical history.

Robinson also repeatedly labels these women as geniuses throughout the footnotes, writing of ‘female genius,’ ‘WOMAN of genius,’ and ‘the genius […] of […] women’ in order to reinforce her argument that women are most naturally the geniuses of intellect (34-36n). Declaring (without evidence) that Vossius positions women as ‘equally capable of fine literature with the other sex’ (42), Robinson thus finally presents her reasons for quoting his text at such length. Her list of illustrious women from Vossius’ *de philologia*, stemming from all intellectual backgrounds, has enabled her to settle on the topic of ‘fine literature’ with integrity, and it is, of course, in the genre of ‘fine literature,’ that she herself seeks a place in the literary canon.

Indeed, Robinson has been working up to this point throughout her canonical list. Briefly bringing her canon into the eighteenth century with a short list of illustrious women from England and France, Robinson at last alights on the figure of Sappho. It

would, perhaps, seem odd to a reader that after tracing a list of women chronologically through the ages Robinson chooses to end with the earliest women named in the text. Her choice to close the canon with Sappho, however, is anything but arbitrary, as a glance at the concluding paragraph will demonstrate:

The name of the Grecian poetess, Sappho, is probably known to almost every reader. Some anecdotes of this celebrated woman may be found in the Abbé Barthelimi’s Travels of Anarcharsis the Younger: and in the account of this poetess, preceding Mrs. Robinson’s legitimate sonnets. (43)

In this bold move, the Greek genius Sappho and the modern ‘English Sappho’ are brought together in name and art. Setting herself up as a contemporary and equal to Barthelemy, Robinson here works to position her account of Sappho over and above the male-authored ‘anecdotes’ that had overwhelmed Gertrude in The False Friend, and in their place installs herself as an inspirational historian of and guide to the illustrious category of transcendent female genius.

The fact that Robinson’s tract was published under the signature of ‘Anne Frances Randall’ further cements this connection between the Greek and the British Sappho. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Robinson is able to construct a theatrical persona through the signature of Anne Frances Randall that would allow her to perform as the ideal spokeswoman for female rights and literary genius, and embody the criteria for female genius that she had laid out in her tract. In contrast to Robinson herself, whose history was known to the general public, the only facts to be learned about Anne Frances Randall come from within the body of the text. Enacting the role of an unknown but highly knowledgeable woman, Robinson is thus able to recreate herself for the reading public as a woman of undoubted genius, with the wisdom necessary to delve into the ‘masculine’ realms of history, philosophy and politics, in order to argue the case for the mental equality, and possible superiority, of women.

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440 This has also been noted by Jane Hodson, ‘The strongest but most undecorated language’: Mary Robinson’s Rhetorical Strategy in Letter to the Women of England,’ Women’s Writing, 9.2 (2002): 87-110 (98).
As well as thus protecting the text from the scandal of Robinson’s infamous past, this theatrical performance of an unknown authorial voice also allowed Robinson the ability to use the text to enhance the prestige of her name. Safe from the shadow of her sexualised public image, Robinson was able to create in Anne Frances Randall an alternative persona for ‘Mrs. Mary Robinson,’ one that celebrated her literary prowess and installed her into the canon.

This creation (or re-creation) of herself as a ‘natural genius’ would have been impossible, however, had it not been for the second character that Robinson invokes in the text, that of Sappho. Although she does not name herself as such explicitly in the text as she is writing from the perspective of the observer Anne Frances Randall, Robinson’s repeated allusions to the greatness of the classical age, and her celebration of the classical institutions of philosophy, learning, and literature, all work to align her with the transcendent Greek poet. The emphasised connection that ‘Anne Frances Randall’ makes between Sappho and Robinson at the end of her female canon consolidates this relationship between the Greek and the English Sappho.

In a clever twist that demonstrates her skill in radical performance, Robinson thus uses the performative persona of Anne Frances Randall to install ‘Mrs. Mary Robinson’ into the illustrious space of the figure of Sappho. As Anne Frances Randall reads Robinson through the figure of Sappho, so the reader watches the playing out of the characters of, first Anne Frances Randall, then Sappho, and, finally, Mary Robinson. The combined power of these performative roles – the modern feminist Anne Randall and the classical genius Sappho – thus allow Robinson the flexibility to inscribe her name in the literary canon, and to ensure a place for herself in the annals of British literary genius.

In Robinson’s Letter to the Women of England, then, the transcendental space of passionate female genius is finally released from beneath the weight of the male-
authored fatal femininity that had led inevitably to the death of Gertrude in *the False Friend*. Performing the part of the historian of an explicitly female expression of genius that has its roots in history reaching back all the way to Sappho, Robinson here repairs the links between modern British women and their lost literary foremothers, encouraging them to celebrate their gender as a powerful performance through which they could access the transcendent path to passionate genius, and, finally, to abandon the injustice of mental subordination and ‘assert [their] proper sphere’ (2) as women of literary genius.

In so doing, Robinson installs herself in the privileged position of ‘agent[t] of inspiration for social change’ that Lokke has identified in *Tracing Women’s Romanticism*. Calling on the ‘Women of England’ to ‘sublimate [the] forces [of ‘passion’] into art and ideals that will survive the death of the female body,’ Robinson works in this text to construct a body of inspirational lineage that could at last lead women away from the fatality of Gertrude’s patriarchal performance of femininity and bring them instead to the brink from which they could emulate the transcendent passion of Sappho’s leap. In so doing, she works to relocate woman’s primary identificatory relationship away from the subsuming patriarchal father to the fostering inspirational mother, so that women could never again be trapped in the oppressive constraints of culturally-ordained passive femininity.

At the same time, Robinson performs the sublime voice of the transcendent foremother, Sappho, in order to display *herself* as a natural genius of the highest order. Performing the part of Anne Frances Randall to promote and justify this vision, Robinson unites her name with Sappho’s at the culmination of female literary genius in the *Letter* in order finally to establish in the British cultural consciousness that she, like

Sappho, is a writer of timeless magnificence: a woman of transcendent genius who ‘knew she was writing for future ages.’

Having thus reclaimed a space for the desiring woman of sensibility and genius beyond the limiting confines of incommensurable sexual difference, Robinson would next go on to address the place of men in eighteenth century society. Men too, she believed, were damaged by the crippling categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender, and in the following year she would expand her understanding of man’s ‘crisis of masculinity’ in the 1790s in her 1797 novel, *Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature.*

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Chapter Four

Speaking Of/As Man: The Masquerade of Masculinity in
Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature

‘Tis easy to preach, my good fellow, but one is sometimes apt to forget the text, and become a twaddler.

Mary Robinson, Walsingham (1797) ⁴⁴³

In warning the eponymous protagonist at the opening of the final volume of Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature against the dangers of becoming a ‘twaddler,’ Lord Kencarth makes a pertinent comment on the treacherous business of acting as a good man in modern society. A ‘twaddler’ in this instance refers to a libertine, as well as to a man who doesn’t consider others when he acts. ⁴⁴⁴ The ‘text’ that one is ‘apt to forget,’ I argue, is the complex and ever-shifting discourse of eighteenth-century masculinity. Throughout the novel, Walsingham finds himself repeatedly confronted by the question of what sort of man he wants to be. Faced with multiple models of masculinity represented by characters as disparate as Lord Linbourne and Colonel Aubrey, Walsingham is forced again and again to make choices that will affect not only his own future, but the futures of those around him. Although he claims to know the script, officiously preaching it to others, time after time he teeters on the brink of ‘becom[ing] a twaddler.’

Published in 1797, Mary Robinson’s Walsingham is a fascinating tale of masquerade and gender play. The novel traces the misfortunes of the young and dispossessed orphan, Walsingham, as he grows to manhood in the shadow of his dazzling and brilliant cousin, Sir Sidney Aubrey. After seemingly losing out to Sidney both in his inheritance and his love object, the beautiful Isabella Hanbury, Walsingham

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⁴⁴³ Mary Robinson, Walsingham; or, the Pupil of Nature (1797), ed. Julie A. Shaffer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 372. All further quotations refer to this edition and will be referenced parenthetically in the body of the text. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.

⁴⁴⁴ One can also ‘twaddle’ with words (i.e. talk nonsense), but in this instance the ‘twaddling’ denotes toying with the feelings of others, as is shown on the previous page, in which Lord Kencarth states, ‘I hate twaddling with other people’s happiness, […] and he that can’t find fun without making hearts ache, why, dash me, but he is an ass, and deserves to bear the burden of a bad conscience’ (371).
is cast out on the world to try to make his fortune independent both of his family and of societal expectations. Pursued in his quest to win Isabella by the inexorable Sidney through circles of high-class gamblers, elite salons and masquerade balls, the novel concludes with the astonishing revelation that Sidney is not, after all, the lover of Isabella. He is, in fact, a she: the daughter of a mother desperate to hold on to the inheritance that Sidney would have acquired had she been born male, and a woman hopelessly in love with Walsingham himself.

Reviewing the novel’s fascinating and unusual plot, most critics have chosen, unsurprisingly, to focus on the feminist implications of the gender-play of the cross-dressed female protagonist, Sir Sidney. In ‘Mrs. Robinson and the Masquerade of Womanliness’ (1994), Chris Cullens reads *Walsingham* through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory to explore the way in which Sidney as a cross-dressed female represents the threat to the dominant order of the idea that gender is, in fact, ‘a theatrical performance or masquerade.’

Despite this blurring of the lines of gender, however, Cullens concludes that, through the trope of the ‘unmasking’ of Sidney and her subsequent marriage to Walsingham, in the end Robinson reaffirms ‘an epistemological order based, in the first instance, on binary sexual difference.’

In Sharon Setzer’s ‘The Dying Game’ (2000), Setzer argues that Sidney represents Robinson’s ‘conflicted position’ on theatricality and gender performance, as Amelia Woodford’s mimicking (or ‘hyperbolic citation’) of another woman’s femininity, through her imitation of Isabella’s masquerade costume, leads to her death. For Setzer, Sidney’s cross-dressing is not ‘a willed strategy of empowerment,’ but yet another symptom of entrapment in a system of arbitrary gender distinctions.

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446 Cullens, ‘Mrs. Robinson and the Masquerade of Womanliness,’ 268.
hand, Julie Shaffer contends that Sidney’s close relationships with other women demonstrates Robinson’s faith in an advanced ‘power of perception, or epistemology held by women,’ who value Sidney as a whole person rather than reducing her to her sex and gender components, as the men in the novel repeatedly appear to do. 448 Finally, in ‘Female Homosociality and the Exchange of Men’ (2006), Katherine Binhammer contends that Sidney’s presence as a cross-dressed woman who appears as a love-rival to Walsingham exposes homosexual undertones in the way in which ‘desire for women’ in the novel is ‘mediated through desire for men.’ 449 At the same time, Binhammer argues, the novel also reveals the ways in which ‘women’s homosocial bonds’ are ‘produced by, not simply opposed to, a patriarchal sexual economy,’ and that within these bonds can also be detected the potential for latent homosexual desire. 450

In this chapter, I seek to move away from the usual reading of the female cross-dresser in Walsingham to incorporate Sidney’s intriguing character within a wider reading of masculinity in the novel. 451 I argue that Walsingham – Robinson’s only completed work with a male narrator/protagonist – presents a fascinating demonstration of her articulation and complex understanding of eighteenth-century masculinity. 452 Indeed, it would be more appropriate to say masculinities, for in this novel many types of masculinity are made manifest. In the characters of the philosopher-tutor Mr. Hanbury, the foppish Lord Linbourne, the unreconstructed Duke of Heartwing, the benevolent Mr. Optic, and the true manly citizen Colonel Aubrey, Walsingham meets

450 Binhammer, ‘Female Homosociality and the Exchange of Men,’ 227; original emphasis.
451 Although Shaffer also considers masculinity in Walsingham, she does not position this consideration within the wider context of masculinity studies, and so cannot be said to provide a thorough reading of masculinity in the novel.
452 As the recently published Works of Mary Robinson shows, at the time of her death Robinson was working on another novel with a male protagonist, ‘Jasper.’ However, unlike Walsingham, this novelistic fragment is not extensive enough to afford a coherent academic reading. William D. Brewer and Sharon M. Setzer, ed., ‘Jasper,’ The Works of Mary Robinson, VIII (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010).
characters who all simultaneously and incongruously represent facets of eighteenth-century manhood.

In Walsingham, I argue, Robinson explores the way in which masculinity is understood in eighteenth-century discourse to have three distinct aspects: the biological (being born a man); the social (performing masculine behaviour; acting like a man); and, to a lesser but growing respect, the psychic (having the interiorised subjectivity of masculinity; feeling like a man). As I discussed in Chapter 1, while the biological aspect of masculinity is vaunted by the discourse of the two-sex model, Robinson works in her theatrical feminism to reject the equation of male biology and masculinity, just as she does the equation of female biology and femininity. Instead, Robinson is interested in the ways in which masculinity can securely be expressed through a combination of outward performance and inner subjectivity. As I will demonstrate, in the novel Walsingham struggles to assimilate the performance of masculinity with a secure interiorised masculine subjectivity. This struggle comes to crisis point in the liminal, disorienting world of the masquerade, where, as Terry Castle has shown, ‘the alienation of inner from outer’ is enacted, and the disjuncture between Walsingham’s masculine performance and his anxious interior subjectivity is exposed.

Walsingham comes to maturity outside the influence of society, educated in the Rousseauvian mould of the child of nature and confident in his own extensive capacity for manliness expressed through abstract philosophical benevolence. However, following his expulsion from the idyll of Glenowen, Walsingham’s abrupt entrance to the fashionable world marks the jarring realisation that his carefully constructed expression of idealised masculinity is impossible to maintain in a society so highly charged with social expectation, gossip and dissipation. Repeatedly confronted with

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453 For an exploration of masculinity as performance in the context of the cross-dressed actress and the one-sex model, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

performances of masculinity that threaten to emasculate him in his otherness from them, Walsingham tries to make sense of eighteenth-century fashionable culture by turning to an external performance of the masculine types that he sees around him. Trying on various suits of masculinity in turn, Walsingham finds himself slipping further and further away from the subjectivity he had developed through the ‘natural’ ‘text’ of his youthful education, until his performance of benevolent masculinity becomes completely detached from any real inner sense of self.

Indeed, despite his repeated insistence on his own innate goodness, Walsingham increasingly treats the women of the novel with disdain, disrespect, and ultimately as sexual objects over whom he desires to exercise control. This foul treatment of women is exposed in the masquerade. In this disorienting space, Walsingham’s mask of performative masculinity slips entirely, culminating in his abduction and rape of the innocent Amelia Woodford. In the face of advice from the novel’s truly benevolent men, Mr. Optic and Colonel Aubrey, Walsingham abandons Amelia to die from shame and sorrow: the classic death of the ‘fallen woman.’ Read alongside Walsingham’s quest in the novel to become the ideal man of universal benevolence, this shocking event serves to raise serious questions in the novel about the efficacy of growing from a ‘pupil of nature’ to the possession of a truly positive and coherent masculinity – in both performed behaviour and inner subjectivity – as an adult in late-eighteenth-century British society.

In contrast with Walsingham’s flawed representation of eighteenth-century masculinity stands Sir Sidney, who, despite her biological inability to be a man, is repeatedly held up as the most truly masculine character in the novel. Throughout the novel, Sidney outpaces Walsingham in the trials of budding manhood. Whether loving, fighting or socialising, Sidney is consistently proven to be the better ‘man.’ Moreover, Sidney succeeds where Walsingham had failed, uniting her performance of masculinity
with a secure subjectivity which is able to move beyond the limiting categories of
biological incommensurability. When we learn that Sidney is, in fact, a woman, this
truth exposes to the reader a thrilling glimpse of an alternative universe: one in which
biology does not equal destiny, and a radically benevolent masculinity is a goal toward
which all people, no matter what their sex, may strive.

‘EDUCATED IN MASCULINE HABITS’ \textsuperscript{455}: DECODING EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY MASCULINITY

In his seminal essay, ‘What Should Historians do with Masculinity?’ (1994), John Tosh
argues for the pressing need for scholars of feminist and gender history to take account
of the history of men and of masculinity:

\begin{quote}
[U]nless the field of power in which women have lived is studied, the reality of
their historical situation will always be obscured. On those grounds alone, the
gendered study of men must be indispensible to any serious feminist historical
project.\textsuperscript{456}
\end{quote}

Despite the ‘relative invisibility’ of masculinity in the historical record, Tosh insists
that, nonetheless, it is an important arena of study, exposing mechanisms of power that
are crucial to our understanding of inter- and intra- gender relations: ‘masculinity
carries a heavy ideological freight, and […] makes socially crippling distinctions not
only between men and women, but between different categories of men – distinctions
which have to be maintained by force, as well as validated through cultural means.’\textsuperscript{457}

Tosh explains that masculinity is a construction that is not only social and
cultural (experienced through outward behaviour) but also psychic (experienced as an
interior subjectivity). As such, men’s possession of masculinity is inherently ‘insecure,’
threatened by the impositions both of other men, and of women. At certain moments in
history this insecurity is manifested as a ‘crisis in masculinity’: a situation in which ‘the
traditionally dominant forms of masculinity have become so blurred that men no longer

\textsuperscript{455} Robinson, \textit{Walsingham}, 492.
\textsuperscript{457} Tosh, ‘What Should Historians do with Masculinity?’, 180, 192.
know what is required to be a “real man”.458 As an identity that is both psychic and social, masculinity is thus uniquely positioned as a powerful force to shape experience and action. ‘That,’ Tosh concludes, ‘is what patriarchy means.’459

In the almost twenty years since the publication of this essay, the exploration of the history of masculinity has become a flourishing field of study. This field has been enhanced by the delineation of ‘hegemonic masculinity.’ Mike Donaldson explains that hegemony denotes the power to describe events, formulate ideals and define morality. Hegemonic masculinity thus manifests as ‘the control of men and the representation of this as “universal social advancement”’ through the careful maintenance and policing of heterosexuality and homophobia.460 R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt have expanded this concept, arguing for a multiplicity of hegemonic masculinities grounded in specific social, historical and geographical contexts. For them, hegemonic masculinities work in several different but overlapping ways: they ‘express widespread ideals, fantasies and desires’; ‘provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations’; and ‘articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances.’ In this way, they ‘contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole.’461 For Connell and Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinities are dominant forms that exist in tension with ‘subordinate,’ ‘marginalised’ and ‘complicit’ forms of masculinity.462 As Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard qualify in ‘What Have Historians Done with Masculinity?’ (2005), these hegemonic codes are not straightforward, but rather are

458 Ibid., 193.
459 Ibid., 198.
462 Connell and Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’ 832.
‘highly complex, fluid, and full of contradictions.’ This model of hegemonic masculinity thus helps us to distinguish the complex and contradictory ways in which masculinity mediates power relations between different types of men.

Within the broad arena of masculinity studies there has developed a burgeoning field of scholarship concerning the complex and often contradictory definition of masculinity in the eighteenth century. Drawing on social, cultural and psychological historical sources, as well as on modern theories of masculinity and hegemony, these academics have sought to develop a comprehensive model of eighteenth-century masculinity. In the main, two narrative strands have emerged.

The first narrative – drawn by Philip Carter, Robert Shoemaker and Michèle Cohen, among others – traces a gradual shift from the coarse brashness of the seventeenth-century domestic patriarch to the refined manners and sensibility of the polite gentleman, identified by his ability in the ‘art of pleasing.’ These critics argue that over the course of the eighteenth century the developing industry of commerce, together with the increasing influence of Evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, gradually led men to abandon roughness and violence in favour of a new, more diplomatic set of behaviours.

Carter asserts that the new experience of ‘luxury’ that commerce brought with it ‘urged men to display a capacity for social refinement.’ Shoemaker supports this argument in his delineation of the decline of public violence in the eighteenth century, tracing its gradual shift from the public to the private sphere, and arguing that ‘new standards of conduct’ for men ‘placed a high value on restraint, civility and refined

public conversation.466 Finally, Cohen locates the development of politeness in the concurrent development of the associative – or what she names the social – public sphere, modelled partly on the French salon, in which men and women engaged in polite conversation, and ‘the presence of women was pivotal for men to achieve politeness.’467

This narrative is not, however, one of straightforward linear change. All three critics identify anxieties in the development of the polite gentleman centred on a fear of effeminacy. As Cohen phrases it, ‘the anxiety was that in desiring to please women, men might become like them.’468 Indeed, Cohen traces a ‘complete reversal’ in the values of the polite gentleman later in the century, arguing that during the 1780s politeness was redefined as ‘Frenchified’ inauthenticity. In its place, a very British model of ‘sincerity’ and civic manhood was lauded, culminating in the early nineteenth century with the establishment of chivalry, a ‘fusion of notions of an ancient liberty with modern manners and civilisation’ which rejected the ‘effeminate’ qualities of politeness and instead reaffirmed the manly virtues of patriotism, heroic love and martial education at the heart of masculinity.469

Despite the many qualifications and complications in these readings, what defines this narrative is the depiction of masculinity as an ever-changing category, influenced by cultural forces and adapting to material changes in the lives of men. However, there also exists a second narrative of eighteenth-century masculinity, one – heralded by John Tosh, Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, among others – that

468 Ibid., 50.
insists on the importance of recognising continuities in the eighteenth-century conception of masculinity.

Tosh argues that, while certain aspects of masculinity may have altered during the eighteenth century, ‘our historical understanding might be better served by recognising the relative impermeability and endurance of many structures of gender, instead of expecting (or hoping) to bring to light dramatic trajectories of social transformation.’ Although he acknowledges that both class and the developing discourse of sexual difference affected the way in which masculinity was manifested during the eighteenth century, he expresses a ‘fundamental unease’ about relying too heavily on these models of change. The problem lies in the fact that they depict gender as ‘superstructural and epiphenomenal,’ or, in other words, as a construct that is determined by structures beyond gender itself – in economics, politics, religion, or class. Instead, Tosh argues that we should look for the aspects of masculinity that persist over the course of the century: ‘allowing gender a deeper anchorage in the social fabric opens the way to understanding the ways in which gender transcends class.’

Similarly, Harvey and Shepard assert the need to discern longer-term narratives within the history of masculinity, and to investigate whether this would ‘challenge existing periodisation.’ In the place of the standard narrative of change they propose a more complex model combining ‘processes that follow a tidal or cyclical pattern, as in the shifting balance between hard and soft features of masculinity’ with a broader ‘pattern of continuity’ of masculinity (or at the very least, of hegemonic masculinity) as a dominant, patriarchal force. In this elucidation, then, although on the surface changes in masculinity do occur over the course of the eighteenth century, they are in

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471 Tosh, ‘The Old Adam,’ 223.
472 Ibid., 237.
473 Ibid., 279.
474 Harvey and Shepard, ‘What Have Historians Done with Masculinity?,’ 275.
fact part of a much broader pattern of continuity. What is important to acknowledge in this model is that although masculinity may be seen to become ‘softer’ over time, as in the development of the polite gentleman, this does not equate to any lessening of patriarchal power, and is inevitably followed by a later re-hardening of masculine values.475

These, then, are the two significant critical models tracing the trajectory of masculinity in the eighteenth century. One argues for continual and progressive change in the model of masculinity over the century; the other argues for the importance of bearing in mind a longer-term model of continuity, in which, although certain aspects of masculinity may change, the deeper components of patriarchal power and dominance of men over women, as well as of hegemonic masculinity over non-hegemonic masculinities, stays constant. When we turn to Robinson’s novel, Walsingham, these theories of masculinity can lead us to a greater understanding of her feminist project, which was as much about the position of men in patriarchal culture, I argue, as about the position of women.

Indeed, in Eighteenth-Century Women Writers and the Gentleman’s Liberation Movement (2011), Megan Woodworth argues that ‘[b]ecause masculinity is inescapably political in this period, male characters provide a locus for women writers to explore potential solutions to the plight of women.’476 In her reading of the male characters depicted in women’s fiction between 1778 and 1818, Woodworth asserts that women writers use their male characters to further their ‘radical quest for equality,’ imagining new men for a new, less oppressive world: ‘the men women create in their fictions constitute powerful political statements that must be unlocked in order to truly

475 Indeed, this fits very well with Cohen’s tracing of a shift from the domestic patriarch (hard masculinity) to the polite gentleman (soft masculinity), to the man of blunt sincerity (hard masculinity), and finally to the man of chivalry (becoming softer once more).
understand the political ideals of the writers in question, as well as the advancement of feminist consciousness.477

In my reading of Mary Robinson’s Walsingham, I seek similarly to demonstrate the ways in which Robinson’s depiction of male characters in the novel constitutes a ‘powerful political statement’ about masculinity in eighteenth-century society, as she imagines a new expression of masculinity that could further her ‘radical quest for equality.’ Moreover, in reading the complex depiction of masculinity in Walsingham, I argue, we are able to complicate and give further nuance to the modern field of eighteenth-century masculinity studies and its conflicting interpretations.

THE ANXIOUS 1790S: THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN WALSINGHAM

When reading Walsingham it is impossible not to notice the one feature of the novel that distinguishes it from the rest of Robinson’s œuvre: it is replete with men of all political and social classes. The novel positively teems with them – men of fashion, men of letters, men of ideas and men of action. As the Bildungsroman of a man who is politically and socially dispossessed from birth, the novel provides a fascinating insight into the nature of non-hegemonic eighteenth-century masculinity: how it works both as a social identity made up of social codes and performed behaviours that lies in hierarchal tension with other masculinities and with women; and, even more fascinatingly, how it works as an interiorised subjectivity that is, in Tosh’s words, ‘understood to be an expression of the self, and up to a point a matter of individual choice, tormenting or liberating as that may be.’478 As Tosh has argued, this ‘uneasy and complex relation’ between the performative and the interior is the very thing that makes masculinity as a construct so complex and so compelling.479

478 Tosh, ‘The Old Adam,’ 232.
479 Tosh, ‘What Should Historians do with Masculinity?,’ 198.
As George Mosse explains, ‘between the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth,’ the ideal of ‘modern masculinity’ was in the process of being reified. Manly qualities had of course existed before this time, but it was during this period that they were systemised, and formed into a ‘stereotype.’ Mosse argues that this stereotype first became significant during the period of the French Revolution, when (as I have explained in Chapter 2) the republicans ushered in a ‘visually centred age’ replete with public symbols that could begin to define a national identity. This new masculine stereotype was focussed in the manly virtues of power, chivalry, honour, and courage, united to the new middle-class virtues of order, progress, self-control, and moderation.

With this in mind, I argue that the 1790s was a period during which masculinity underwent significant conflict, as debate ensued as to what exactly the ideal man should look like. As Shawn Lisa Maurer explains, during the 1790s radical writers were actively involved in a ‘radical rethinking of relations between men.’ In Walsingham, I argue, we can see just such a radical rethinking in action. Indeed, this novel presents evidence to support Harvey and Shepard’s call for a revisioning of the ‘existing periodisation’ and uncomplicated narrative of change in the history of masculinity. In its depiction of many different kinds of men, displaying many different forms of masculinity commonly associated with different periods of the long eighteenth century, all of which Walsingham at some point experiments with, I assert, Robinson’s novel

481 Mosse, The Image of Man, 5.
482 Ibid., 5.
483 Ibid., 18-19.
484 Shawn Lisa Maurer, ‘The Politics of Masculinity in the 1790s Radical Novel: Hugh Trevor, Caleb Williams, and the Romance of Sentimental Friendship,’ in Enlightenment Romanticism, Romancing the Enlightenment: British Novels From 1750-1832, ed, Miriam L. Wallace (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 87-110 (93). Maurer discusses Godwin’s Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794) and Thomas Holcroft’s The Adventures of Hugh Trevor (1794-1797). Other prominent novels on men and masculinity by 1790s radical writers include Robert Bage’s Hermspring; or, Man As He Is Not (1796) and Elizabeth Inchbald’s Nature and Art (1796).
485 Harvey and Shepard, ‘What Have Historians Done with Masculinity?’, 279.
complicates the narrative of the history of masculinity as one of progressive change. Instead, it reflects the instability of mid- to late-eighteenth-century masculinity detected by Mosse, and as such it allows for a much more complex and nuanced reading of the tensions between existing masculinities in the 1790s than the model laid out by Cohen and Shoemaker implies.

Moreover, the subjective nature of the novel’s epistolary form provides a further arena in which *Walsingham* can help us to rethink the existing periodisation of masculinity studies. In ‘The Old Adam and the New Man,’ Tosh argues that the interiorised aspect of masculinity is experienced as an ‘insecure’ identity, ‘one which is assailed by inner doubt (particularly about sexuality) rather than by threats and aspersions from other men.’ In Tosh’s view, ‘it is hard to see compelling evidence for a new sense of interiority’ developing prior to the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it is my contention that Robinson in fact demonstrates just such an understanding of masculinity as an experience of interiorised anxiety in *Walsingham*. Indeed, I argue that Robinson’s novel in fact offers evidence for a ‘crisis of masculinity’ occurring in the 1790s, influenced by the cataclysmic fallout of the French Revolution and the subsequent pamphlet war that produced so many radical writings on the ‘rights of man,’ in which, as Tosh has described, ‘the traditionally dominant forms of masculinity have become so blurred that men no longer know what is required to be a “real man.”’

I am not the first critic to argue the case for a crisis of masculinity in the 1790s. In *Equivocal Beings*, Claudia Johnson argues for just such a ‘crisis of gender’ occurring in 1790s Britain, precipitated by the ‘the calamity of revolution in France,’ which was understood by British writers to represent ‘a world riven with crisis.’ For Johnson, this crisis is most clearly seen in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

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486 Tosh, ‘The Old Adam,’ 231.
487 Ibid., 236.
(1790), which ushered in a ‘war of sentiments about sex,’ and especially about masculinity. While Burke defended the ‘sentimentalised manhood’ of the ‘age of chivalry’ as best suited to the defence of the political system against attacks from republican France, radical writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft argued conversely that ‘society is being undermined by feminised, sentimental men,’ preferring ‘an older standard of rational masculinity’ based on classical republican discourse. While Wollstonecraft condemned the sentimental man of feeling for his ‘hothouse sexuality,’ however, Burke rejected the republican masculinity lauded by British radicals as ‘wild and denatured monsters, ‘destitute of “austere and masculine morality.”’ For Johnson, these debates indicate that, for British writers of the 1790s, ‘gender codes […] have been fundamentally disrupted,’ leaving men of the decade with an ‘anxiety’ about masculinity that leads them to search for ‘a new way of asserting [their] masculine superiority over the women [they] come close to.’ As I will go on to argue in my discussion of Walsingham, it is this very anxiety that leads Walsingham to a violent assertion of his masculinity over Amelia when he abducts and rapes her at the masquerade.

Similarly, Tim Fulford also traces a ‘crisis’ of gender in the 1790s, as ‘both masculinity and chivalry became unstable and contested.’ For Fulford, as for Johnson, this crisis is constituted by Britain’s anxious relation to the events of the French Revolution. Desirous of marking themselves as opposed to the French, Fulford explains, British conservatives ‘depicted the man of sensibility as weak and effeminate.’ Meanwhile, ‘chivalric manhood’ was ‘relocated to the middle classes,’ defined as ‘duty, honour and paternalism,’ as represented by the British naval hero,
Fulford argues that this relocation of chivalric manhood was not straightforward. Rather, it was ‘a long and complex process – a matter of conflicts, scandals and arguments,’ as ‘traditional models of authority and gender had been discredited without being successfully replaced.’ For the Romantics, Fulford explains, this crisis in masculinity led them to search for ‘an alternative image of manliness.’ This was not a straightforward plan, however, but rather it entailed an anxious conflict, as these writers failed to agree ‘on what the true image [of masculinity] looked like.’

It is in this anxious conversation, I assert, that Robinson was participating in Walsingham. Indeed, as I will go on to demonstrate, in tracing Walsingham’s equivocal identification and experiments with masculinity we can see this very interiorised anxiety and crisis of masculinity in action.

‘THE PUPIL OF NATURE’: WALSINGHAM’S ROUSSEAUVIAN EDUCATION

In giving her novel the subtitle, *The Pupil of Nature*, Robinson boldly announces her intention to position Walsingham in direct dialogue with the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a seminal figure in the circles of late-eighteenth-century radical philosophy. This connection was certainly made by conservative commentators at the time. In his famous satirical cartoon, ‘The New Morality’ (1798) [see figure 7], James Gillray depicts the conservative view of the most terrible excesses of the 1790s radical movement. A mob rages in the background, while in the foreground men of all classes wear the liberty caps of the French Revolutionary Jacobin faction. On pillars to the right

Figure 7: James Gillray, 'The New Morality' (1798)

of the picture stand the three female figures of Justice, Philanthropy and Sensibility. While Justice holds a poised dagger and Philanthropy clutches the globe with a maniacal grimace, Sensibility holds the works of Rousseau, while standing with one foot on the head of the executed king of France, Louis XVI. Tumbling out of the ‘Cornucopia of Ignorance’ in the centre of the picture are the most seminal texts of the 1790s radical movement. Among works by Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Holcroft, and Paine, lies *Walsingham*.

Similarly, in reviews of the novel in conservative periodicals, the link between Robinson’s depiction of Walsingham’s education and the writings of Rousseau is repeatedly made. The reviewer of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, for example, writes that Robinson’s ‘judgement is frequently distorted by false notions of politics,’ relying heavily on ‘the wisdom of the French philosophers’\(^{501}\):

Thus, according to Mrs. Robinson, Britain is the seat of ignorance, superstition, and tyranny, while other nations are enlightened; and the means of dispensing our ignorance, and delivering ourselves from superstition and tyranny, is the devotion of the principles of Voltaire and Rousseau!!\(^{502}\)

The *British Critic* likewise condemns this interest in ‘the services of Rousseau,’ depicting Robinson’s educational precepts as ‘disgusting and depraved absurdities’ that would pervert the fabric of the British nation.\(^{503}\)

Robinson’s determination to engage with the writings of Rousseau is made clear within the first pages of the novel, where she echoes the opening of his groundbreaking work of autobiography, *The Confessions* (1781). As J.M. Cohen explains, *The Confessions* is a fascinating document because it is possibly the first instance of modern psychological autobiography, in which Rousseau’s intent ‘was not so much to tell of his history and achievements, as to prove himself a man who, with all his imperfections,


\(^{503}\) [Review of *Walsingham*], *British Critic*, 12 (1798): 610-612 (611).
was nevertheless fundamentally honest and good.504 Fascinatingly, this leads Rousseau to focus in *The Confessions* on his most ‘disgraceful actions.’ ‘This,’ argues Cohen, ‘is perhaps the one feature of the *Confessions* that has found few imitators. For even in the hope of winning applause by their frankness, few men care to display themselves as even more miserable sinners than the rest of mankind.’505

In *Walsingham*, however, we see this very desire to prove oneself good while remaining honest about one’s flaws displayed in the ‘confessions’ of the narrator, Walsingham. Where Rousseau proclaims, ‘I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behaviour was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so’506, Walsingham likewise writes in his opening letter:

> Truth! divine and immutable Truth! thou hast been my guide, my monitor, when the lucid moment of reason triumphed over the dark and gloomy passions: thou hast wrung my soul to agony, when I beheld the horrid retrospect; where hatred, pride, revenge, and madness moved on in terrible succession! Yet I have studied thy precepts; I have practised them. (41-42)

In this way, then, *Walsingham* can be read as a fictional response to Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Looking back over his life from early childhood to the present, Walsingham engages in a very Rousseauvian enterprise. As Rousseau explains, ‘My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray shall be myself.’507 In *Walsingham*, Robinson was also embarking on a project that would seek to display an honest portrait of eighteenth-century man. With his many flaws and disgraceful actions, *Walsingham*’s eponymous narrator allows Robinson to explore, as Rousseau did, the psychic, interiorised nature of man.

It was not only with Rousseau’s *Confessions*, however, that Robinson chose to engage in *Walsingham*, for her novel also works in a complex dialogue with Rousseau’s seminal educational treatise, *Émile; or On Education* (1762). This intention is made

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507 Ibid., 17.
clear in the novel’s subtitle. In Émile, Rousseau refers directly to his young protégé as ‘the pupil of nature,’ writing that ‘my pupil, or rather nature’s’ (‘Pour mon élève, ou plutôt celui de la nature’508) ought to be educated outside of society and outside of the interference and authority of mankind:

As for my pupil, or rather nature’s, trained early to be as self-sufficient as possible, he is not accustomed to turning constantly to others; still less is he accustomed to displaying his great learning for them. On the other hand, he judges, he foresees, he reasons in everything immediately related to him. He does not chatter; he acts. He does not know a word of what is going on in society, but he knows very well how to do whatever suits him. Since he is constantly in motion, he is forced to observe many things, to know many effects. He acquires a large experience early. He gets his lessons from nature and not from men.509

For Rousseau, it is mankind’s interference in the education of children that is responsible for the degeneration of modern society, due to mankind’s determination to pervert the course of nature:

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man. [...] He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; for him, man must be trained like a school horse; man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in his garden.510

In place of the ‘unnatural’ restraint usually placed upon children in modern education, Rousseau instead advocates ‘well-regulated freedom.’511 Any limits that the child encounters must appear to come from nature, rather than from mankind’s authority, in order that the child’s will might not be stunted and his passions might not be directed towards temptations to vice: ‘He is made supple and docile by the force of things alone, without any vice having the occasion to germinate in him, for the passions never become animated so long as they are of no effect.’512 It is only thus, argues Rousseau, that man may ‘one day’ develop ‘what are believed incompatible and what

508 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Émile, ou de l’éducation, 4 vols (Francfort: 1762), 1, 147.
510 Rousseau, Émile; or, On Education, 37.
511 Ibid., 92.
512 Ibid., 92.
are united in almost all great men: strength of body and strength of soul.\textsuperscript{513} In a Rousseauvian education, then, man must first experience seemingly total freedom and independence in childhood in order later to become ‘patient, steady, resigned, calm’ – the rational traits of masculine self-restraint which would enable him fully to engage as a true citizen in modern society.\textsuperscript{514}

The similarity between Rousseau’s proposed education of Émile and the education of Walsingham is striking. Both boys are raised in a wild environment outside the influence of modern society, where they are free to roam the mountains and the woods and develop an affinity with nature, and both are left by and large to their own devices. While Walsingham is largely ignored following Lady Aubrey’s move to the continent with the infant Sidney, telling us that ‘[m]y education was entirely neglected, and I wandered about like a wild inhabitant of the mountains’ (64), Rousseau likewise advocates that the young Émile should be left to discover the world alone, through the tutor’s art ‘of governing without precepts and doing everything by doing nothing.’\textsuperscript{515}

Furthermore, the introduction of Mr. Hanbury (employed as Walsingham’s chaperone on a journey to visit Lady Aubrey in Nice) as Walsingham’s self-styled ‘tutor’ (69) provides us with another hint that Robinson’s intention is to display to us a very Rousseauvian education. In Émile, Rousseau advocates that a tutor’s primary task is to inculcate humanity in his pupil, and so prepare him for a life of benevolence: ‘be humane. This is your first duty.’\textsuperscript{516} In line with this, Mr. Hanbury encourages Walsingham to develop ‘the divine impulse of humanity’ (75), and, as Walsingham informs us, he ‘hourly enlightened my dawning reason by the mildest precepts of philanthropy, while the love of human kind was pourtrayed [sic] in colours so bewitching that I felt my bosom grow even to enthusiasm’ (69). In thus echoing

\textsuperscript{513} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{514} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{515} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{516} Ibid., 79.
Rousseau’s educational project in her novel, Robinson emphasises her intent to use *Walsingham* as a vehicle through which to explore the influence of education on the development of man.

While Walsingham can be seen to experience a very Rousseauvian education, however, Robinson’s use of these precepts is not entirely uncritical. Rather, tracing the Rousseauvian education of her dispossessed protagonist, Robinson seeks to explore whether Rousseau’s educational ideals really could help to form the ideal manly citizen. In so doing, she demonstrates the early assertion of a theory that would come to be central to the modern study of masculinity: the importance of early childhood and education to the development of the masculine self.

On the centrality of early impressions in the development of a coherent and secure masculinity, John Tosh has asserted that: ‘What men seek to validate through recognition of their peers has been shaped in infancy and childhood in relations of nurture, desire and authority.’ In a strikingly similar passage, Robinson writes in *Walsingham* that ‘nothing can be more certain, than that the general tenor of the mind through life fashions its bent from the impressions of that period, when reason begins to dawn, and memory takes root in the young and opening fancy’ (64). In following Walsingham through these early impressions of life, then, we can begin to trace the origins of the interiorised psychic masculinity that he would seek to develop and to identify with as an adult.

In this way, the novel works as both a reaction to and a comment on the works of Rousseau, as Robinson uses the medium of the subjective and brutally honest *Confessions* to explore the implications of an *Émile*-style education for the future life of a young British man born without the privileges of rank and property. Furthermore, in reading these implications through the lens of modern masculinity studies, we can use

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517 Tosh, ‘What Should Historians do with Masculinity?’, 194.
Robinson’s depiction of Walsingham’s Rousseauvian experiences in the novel to draw conclusions about the complex and contradictory nature of masculinity in late eighteenth-century society. Indeed, I argue that this engagement with Rousseau reveals a radical undertaking lying beneath the surface of Robinson’s sentimental novel. Inspired by the writings of Rousseau on the development and interiorised subjectivity of man, Robinson’s project in *Walsingham* is nothing less than to depict the anxieties inherent in the development of a coherent interiorised masculinity (especially non-hegemonic masculinity) in the specific context of the 1790s: anxieties that, later in the novel, would come to expose a very real crisis in 1790s masculinity.

**ENCOUNTERING OPPRESSION: GODWIN COMPLICATES ROUSSEAU**

The crippling presence of authoritative, dominating masculinity is present in Walsingham’s life from almost the very dawn of his existence. Born to the poorer of two sisters, orphaned as an infant and living at the mercy of his wealthy uncle and cruel aunt on the vast estate of Glenowen, Walsingham first experiences the yoke of patriarchy and of hegemonic masculinity not through a personal encounter, but through the injustice of the manmade laws of property and inheritance, which, on the birth of his cousin Sidney, wipe away the comfort and security of his future. Here, immediately, Rousseau’s educational plan is called into doubt.

In *Émile*, Rousseau makes it clear that the pupil must perceive all compulsion and suffering to come from nature, rather than from the whims of man: ‘Let him see this necessity in things, never in the caprice of men. Let the bridle that restrains him be force and not authority.’ For Walsingham, however, as an orphaned child without an avowed protector, this shielding from the unjust authority of men cannot be maintained. Indeed, even as a child, Walsingham is very aware of the illegitimate domination of

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Rousseau, *Émile*, 91.
some men over others in modern society, as is demonstrated in a conversation with his pregnant aunt:

‘Shall I never be able to provide for myself?’ said I. ‘Sir Edward wants nobody to provide for him.’
‘Because Sir Edward is rich’; answered Lady Aubrey with increased coldness.
‘And why am I not rich? […]’
‘All are not born to prosperous fortune, […] some are wealthy, and others are poor.’
‘Am I one of the poor ones?’ was my next question. (61)

This early experience of the unjust oppression of hegemonic over non-hegemonic masculinity leads young Walsingham to vow ‘to resist, to vanquish my oppressor’ (62). This urge remains with Walsingham as he grows, and, as Rousseau warns in Émile, its result is to animate Walsingham’s passions so they veer dangerously close to vice in later life.⁵¹⁹

The first significant occurrence of this animation of the passions occurs in an episode that echoes the work of another radical theorist on modern 1790s masculinity, William Godwin. When Walsingham is fourteen (now returned to Wales from the continent and educated alongside his tutor’s niece, Isabella Hanbury), a fire breaks out at Glenowen. During the rescue of furniture from the blaze, Walsingham finds himself alone with a locked ivory cabinet, the very same cabinet that years earlier he had overheard his aunt and her maid, Mrs. Blagden, discussing as containing a mysterious paper relating to an important secret about his circumstances that would brand Lady Aubrey with ‘villainy’ (100) if known. Faced with the chance to discover ‘the fiat of my destiny’ (121), Walsingham is gripped with the reckless desire to break open the cabinet, despite the fact that he knows it to be an immoral act.

This episode closely mirrors a similar scene in Godwin’s most famous political novel, Things As They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794). The significance of Godwin’s novel to the literary fabric of the 1790s cannot be overstated.

⁵¹⁹ ‘He is made supple and docile by the force of things alone, without any vice having the occasion to germinate in him, for the passions never become animated so long as they are of no effect.’ Rousseau Émile, 92.
Seen by British radicals as (what we would now term) the quintessential Jacobin novel, it works as an accompaniment to his seminal political tome, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), the original anarchist tract that insisted on the inherently ‘evil’ nature of all political institutions, and argued instead for an individualistic liberalism tempered by the doctrines of moral necessity.⁵²⁰

Godwin’s novel traces the life of a young man of impulsive passions, Caleb Williams, who comes to suspect his seemingly benevolent patron, Mr. Falkland, of murder, obtains a confession from him, and is persecuted mercilessly for his knowledge. The purpose of the novel, as stated in Godwin’s preface, is to question ‘THINGS AS THEY ARE,’ and his depiction of a world ruled by arbitrary power and tyranny, in which non-hegemonic men are merely pawns in the games of the rich and powerful, is a bleak view indeed.⁵²¹

In the novel, Caleb, like Walsingham, is driven by the injustices of eighteenth-century society to actions that his rational philosophy condemns, causing an anxious disjuncture between his interior subjectivity – his ‘most deep-rooted principles’ – and his outward behaviour – the ‘acts of unknown horror’ that ‘confound’ these principles:

O poverty! thou art indeed omnipotent! Thou grindest us into desperation; thou confoundest all our boasted and most deep-rooted principles; thou fillest us to the very brim with malice and revenge, and render us capable of acts of unknown horror.⁵²²

Central to the novel is a scene in which, during a fire at Falkland’s manor house, Caleb finds himself alone with a mysterious trunk that he suspects to contain evidence

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⁵²⁰ ‘Government is, in all cases, an evil; it ought to be introduced as sparingly as possible. Man is a species of being whose excellence depends on his individuality; and who can be neither great nor wise, but in proportion as he is independent.’ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, 3rd edn (1798), ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). 556.

The term ‘jacobin novel’ was coined by Gary Kelly, in his important work on 1790s radical fiction, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). This term has since come under question, as ‘jacobin’ was not a term embraced by radical 1790s writers and thinkers, but rather one that was used disparagingly by conservative commentators of the period. Despite this, it remains the most helpful shorthand to refer to the very specific model of radical political fiction, written by Godwin, Holcroft and Inchbald, among others, that is unique to the 1790s.


of Falkland’s guilt. Consumed by ‘the state of [his] passions’ and ‘hurried along by an uncontrollable destiny,’ Caleb is in the process of breaking open the lock on the chest when he is discovered by Falkland.\textsuperscript{523} It is this event that precipitates Caleb’s pursuit and torment throughout the rest of the novel.

In echoing Godwin’s famous scene in \textit{Walsingham}, then, Robinson was making a bold statement about the political intent in her novel, inserting it squarely within the radical circles of Jacobin fiction. Like Caleb, who writes, ‘I know not what infatuation instantaneously seized me. […] I should have done the same, if the flames […] had reached this very apartment,’\textsuperscript{524} Walsingham makes much of the irrepressible impulse of his passions:

\begin{quote}
I would have given worlds, had worlds been at my disposal, to have boasted that resisting quality, which imposes self-denial, even where our passions and our interests impel us on to mischief. But I was the pupil of nature: my mind was permitted to form its bent, before I had judgement to discriminate the paths which led to reputation or dishonour. I rushed forward, blind and impetuous: the present impulse guided me; the future pang of compunction was neither feared nor anticipated. (123-124)
\end{quote}

As ‘the pupil of nature,’ taught through the precepts of Rousseau not to ‘chatter’ but to ‘act,’ Walsingham, like Caleb, is overwhelmed by the psychological torment of his situation, in which his passions are urging him to deeds that his rational mind would abhor.\textsuperscript{525} But unlike Caleb, Walsingham in the end chooses not to break open the cabinet, exclaiming, ‘Thank Heaven! my better genius has prevailed!’ (124), placing it instead in the safekeeping of his tutor, who eventually returns it to Lady Aubrey.

This act of self-restraint is significant for Walsingham. Meditating on the deed he was about to commit, he asks himself, ‘Can I, like a dastardly villain, a caitiff felon, break open the sacred repository of another’s secrets? Impossible!’ (124). In thus demonstrating his newfound understanding that ‘conscience’ cannot be ‘rendered subservient to self-interest’ (125), Walsingham appears to be the ideal Rousseauvian

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{523} \textit{Ibid.}, 130.
\textsuperscript{524} \textit{Ibid.}, 132.
\textsuperscript{525} Rousseau, \textit{Émile}, 119.
\end{footnotes}
student. Having been permitted to run free as a child of nature and experiment with his passions in youth, it seems that Walsingham has, after all, learned independently the difference between right and wrong, and his internal principles are matched to his external actions as he demonstrates the ability to exert his reason to take control over the passions in a display of that ultimate masculine quality, self-control. In so doing, it appears, he has begun to develop an interiorised masculine sensibility that could one day enable him to become a truly good man and a benevolent citizen in society.

‘EXPERT AT ALL MANLY EXERCISES’: WALSINGHAM AMONG MEN

During his youth, Walsingham had lived as the reclusive ‘child of nature,’ with only his tutor and his companion (and, increasingly, his love object), Isabella Hanbury, for company. However, on his return from a cloistered life at Cambridge at the age of twenty, Walsingham’s world – and his newly developing sense of a secure interiorised masculinity – is thrown into turmoil by the arrival of Sir Sidney Aubrey.

Sidney is everything that Walsingham is not. Educated on the continent, experienced in the ways of the world and of society, at ease in the company of men and women alike, Sidney is the perfect example of the fully developed polite gentleman, as described by Carter, Shoemaker and Cohen. In the words of Isabella, Sidney is a ‘celestial being’ (128), in whose shadow Walsingham’s dour manners would ‘form a melancholy contrast’ (127). When Walsingham meets Sidney face-to-face, Isabella’s description is confirmed:

Sir Sidney was exactly the being whom Isabella had described – handsome, polite, accomplished, engaging, and unaffected. He sung, he danced, he played on the mandolin, and spoke the Italian and French languages with the fluency of a native. Yet these were not his only acquirements; he fenced like a professor of the science; painted with the correctness of an artist; was expert at all manly exercises; a delightful poet; and a fascinating companion. (129)

‘[E]xpert at all manly exercises’ (129) and ‘fashioned by a studious desire to please’ (128), Sidney is the dazzling ‘constellation’ (128) alongside whom Walsingham’s dry intellectual accomplishments pale into insignificance.
This encounter marks an important moment in the text, as it demonstrates the first time in which Walsingham’s own expression of masculinity comes under threat. Regarding Sidney both through his own eyes and through the admiring gaze of Isabella, Walsingham struggles to relate his own masculine self – the scholarly hermit, who ‘does not know a word of what is going on in society’ and ‘gets his lessons from nature and not from men’\(^5^{26}\) – to this very different representation of vibrant young masculinity, as charming and confident ebullience expressed in ‘[t]he spontaneous effusions of the heart’ (129).

Coupled with his youthful determination to resent Sidney as the illegitimate possessor of hegemonic masculinity – ‘one who was born to tyrannize over me and to rob me of every thing I value’ (115) – this confrontation with Sidney’s more ‘expert’ masculine performance drives Walsingham to suffer the first pangs of anxiety about the comparable inferiority of his own masculinity. Reading Isabella’s glowing description of Sidney’s masculine talents, Walsingham experiences the ‘torture’ of ‘the jealous heart’ (128). This is not merely a jealousy for the affections of Isabella, however. Rather, it is a resentment born of the injustice of the comparable situations of the two cousins, which are entirely a result of birth, and which render Walsingham’s masculinity subordinate to Sidney’s: ‘All the potent mischiefs of early prejudice now burst forth in a mighty and ungovernable phalanx; while every gasping wound in my agonised bosom panted for revenge’ (128).

Walsingham’s anxiety about the inferiority of his non-hegemonic masculinity in comparison with Sidney’s thus threatens to overwhelm his Rousseauvian principles with the desire to ‘annihilat[e] Sir Sidney, myself’ (128). However, his resentment towards Sidney is put into conflict by the realisation that he actually finds Sidney’s more playful expression of masculinity so attractive: ‘Sir Sidney’s vivacity pleased, at

\(^5^{26}\) Rousseau, Émile, 119.
the same moment that it stung me to the heart’ (132). Indeed, Sidney and Walsingham can be seen to share many of the same values. We are informed that Sidney has been educated by ‘one of the most learned and enlightened men in Switzerland’ (128). Knowing Rousseau’s close connections to that country, it is hard not to read this as a hint that Sidney, like Walsingham, has been given an enlightened, perhaps Rousseauvian, education.

Sidney’s enlightened outlook is demonstrated in the arrival of his uncle, Colonel Aubrey, a man, we are told, of ‘distinguished reputation’ and ‘generosity’ (138). When the Colonel appeals to Sidney’s generosity in the request of a loan to fulfil his ‘debts of honour’ (139), Sidney is given the opportunity to express the radical ideals of liberty and ‘the very essence of philanthropy’ (139). While Lady Aubrey callously rejects Colonel Aubrey’s request, stating that ‘I have made an oath, […] never while I live, to do what is absurdly called a good natured action’ (142), Sidney, by contrast, gladly wishes to indulge his uncle’s loan, seeing it as a ‘duty’ (139) to the honour of Colonel Aubrey’s reputation as an honourable man of civic virtue, which itself is enough to demand ‘the right, by which virtue claims the participation of Fortune’s favours’ (140).

While Walsingham is ‘struck with electric force’ by ‘admiration of [Sidney’s] conduct’ (140), however, his instinctive desire to celebrate Sidney’s virtues is arrested by Isabella’s equally warm admiration for his values:

I could have idolized the mind, which, spurning the base trammels of self-interest, dared act so nobly! But I could not bear to hear such an eulogium from the mouth of Isabella. (140)

Here, then, once more, we see Walsingham’s experience of masculinity as one of deep-rooted anxiety. Walsingham’s jealousy of Sidney’s masculine accomplishments – here refracted through his desire for Isabella, which serves to magnify his feelings of inferiority in comparison with Sidney’s more impressive display of masculinity – far overshadows his regard for Sidney’s virtues, driving him to assert that he could ‘[n]ever
be the associate, the friend of Sir Sidney Aubrey’ (144). Thus, for Walsingham, masculinity is experienced as an ‘insecure’ identity, one that, as Tosh describes, ‘is assailed by inner doubt (particularly about sexuality) rather than by threats and aspersions from other men.’ In this way, Walsingham’s encounter with Sidney reflects Robinson’s understanding of masculinity as an identity that is interiorised as well as performed. Walsingham cannot simply change his behaviour to correspond more closely with Sidney’s more impressive and hegemonic masculinity, because his experience of masculinity is interior as well as exterior, having psychological elements that as Tosh explains it, ‘lie beyond [his] conscious grasp,’ and guide him into ‘unacknowledged fantasies’ – here, of revenge against his cousin – that are ‘designed to defend the [masculine] psyche.’

These fantasies of masculine revenge erupt when Walsingham becomes convinced that Sidney is the libertine seducer of Isabella. Overcome by anxiety about the inferiority of his masculinity, Walsingham experiences for a second time the irresistible impulse of his passions: ‘I was fit for any desperate deed of honour – I could have “drunk hot blood!” […] I shivered with conscious horror, while my hand grasped my pistol, and my tortured soul meditated murder!’ (160-161). However, unlike the incident with the cabinet, this time Walsingham is unable to overcome his passions with the power of reason. Instead, confronting Sidney and Isabella in the woods beside Glenowen, Walsingham challenges Sidney to a duel in demand of ‘that honourable retribution which the laws of society have long since sanctioned’ (164).

Here again, Walsingham and Sidney display very different examples of eighteenth-century masculinity. While Walsingham believes in the right to violent retribution for injured honour, Sidney rejects his challenge, with the observation, ‘What law can sanction murder?’ (164). In so doing, Sidney displays a more contemporary,

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527 Tosh, ‘The Old Adam,’ 231.
528 Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do With Masculinity,’ 198.
peacistic understanding of honour. Rejecting what Donna Andrew identifies as the ‘code of false/modern honour’ epitomised in the duel, which (as I have discussed in Chapter 1) was fast becoming outmoded in the later years of the eighteenth century, Sidney instead echoes the more rationalist masculine philosophy of thinkers such as Godwin, who writes in *Political Justice* that duelling is a ‘despicable practice […] originally invented by barbarians for the gratification of revenge.’

In this way, we can begin to uncover Robinson’s understanding of eighteenth-century masculinity as something that is complex, contradictory, and cannot be reduced to a simple monolithic narrative. In this moment, both Walsingham and Sidney are asserting their masculinity with regards to the duel, but their assertion leads them in very different, indeed opposite, directions. While Walsingham’s masculinity propels him towards passionate violence, Sidney’s is directed toward rational conversation and a rejection of rash violence. Confronted with yet another affront to his insecure masculinity, Walsingham fires at Sidney, misses, and, ‘bewildered by contending agonies’ (164), subsequently flees the sheltered idyll of Glenowen to make his way in the world of men.

**THE MANY SUITS OF MASCULINITY: MALE TYPES IN WALSHINGHAM**

Thus exiled from his sheltered home in the Welsh mountains, Walsingham finds himself, at the age of twenty and with no life experience, finally drawn into the world of men and modern society. Taking us with him through the salons, ballrooms and gambling parties of eighteenth-century high society, this allows Robinson to introduce to the reader the many different classes and types of men in society, and in this way to demonstrate the many varied ways for a man to exhibit masculinity in the late eighteenth century. The next hundred pages or so read like a catalogue of male types, personified through the male characters that Walsingham meets.

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While Sidney represents the modern polite gentleman as described by Cohen, and Mr. Hanbury is the radical Rousseauvian philosophe, Colonel Aubrey is presented as the ideal citizen of martial masculinity and civic virtue, embodying the republican manhood of the French Revolution, and the subsequent Anglo-French wars. George Mosse explains how ‘[t]he new citizen army of the French Revolution was in itself a school for manliness. […] Heroism, death, and sacrifice on behalf of a higher purpose in life became set attributes of manliness.’ As Tim Fulford relates, this martial masculinity also became significant in Britain, as exhibited by the selfless heroism of Lord Nelson. Like Nelson, Colonel Aubrey’s physical bravery has been proven on the battlefield, and his mental virtues are demonstrated through his espousal of enlightened beliefs. He is ‘kind and liberal’ (177), and his sense of honour is determined by the good deeds of benevolence. We are early informed that ‘his generosity had long since set fortune at defiance’ (138), and following Walsingham’s departure from Glenowen, Colonel Aubrey is the first to extend to him the hand of friendship. Indeed, as I will discuss, his manly virtues would go on to be demonstrated to an even greater extent in his noble treatment of the fallen Amelia Woodford.

By contrast to Colonel Aubrey, Lord Linbourne is the foppish libertine – a vain and unfeeling man of fashion who is first introduced to the novel when Walsingham visits the continent as a child and finds him in a secret tryst with Lady Aubrey. As Michele Cohen explains, the fop was the epitome of effeminacy, and symbolised the eighteenth-century anxiety ‘that in desiring to please women, men might become like them.’ On Walsingham’s entrance to society Lord Linbourne reappears as the deceitful proprietor of a faro (gambling) bank, who, in an attempt to con Walsingham out of his winnings, challenges him to a duel. As his valet de chambre explains:

530 For more on republican manhood, see Lynn Hunt, The Family Romance of the French Revolution (London: Routledge, 1992). See also Chapter 2 of this thesis.
531 Mosse, The Image of Man, 51.
532 Fulford, Romanticism and Masculinity, 6-7.
‘Gentlemen who play, apply the sword as a certain specific where the purse strings are tardy; and if they won’t pull easily, a trifle of a scratch settles the dispute without bloodshed’ (186). Coming just after Walsingham’s own attempted duel with Sidney, this episode serves to emphasise Robinson’s perspective on such duels as a part of a code of false/modern honour - here, designed more to elicit a cowardly capitulation of one’s rival than to be truly carried out as a fight to the death.534

The Duke of Heartwing presents the masculinity of the classical seventeenth-century domestic patriarch as described by Anthony Fletcher and Alexandra Shepard.535 As Fletcher explains, his masculinity lies in a ‘largely unconstrained sexual and physical dominance.’536 This dominance is manifested, socially, in a proud sense of entitlement and valuing of rank: ‘I detest every thing that the multitude can partake of’ (230); and, sexually, in his abduction and attempted seduction of Amelia Woodford. Heartwing views women as interchangeable sexual objects whom he can command at will, and his presence in the novel culminates with a bet that he can find and marry a woman in ten days, in which he succeeds by (unknowingly) marrying a fallen woman of no rank, stating that ‘the “Old School” is no bad thing’ (427), and caring not who his wife might be, as long as she be beautiful.

Finally, Mr. Optic is the novel’s Mackenzian man of feeling.537 This is not the passive conservative sentimentality of Burke, however. This impotent sensibility is represented in the character of Mr. Doleful, who responds to Walsingham’s request for aid after he is wrongly imprisoned with the declaration that ‘his excessive sensibility and enthusiastic love of freedom could not bear to witness my captivity’ (244). In

534 This rejection of the duel as part of the code of false honour is something quite different from Robinson’s promotion of it for women in her Letter to the Women of England, where it is adopted as an expression of the rightful honour of female self-defence. See Chapter 1 of this thesis.


536 Fletcher, ‘Manhood, the Male Body, Courtship and the Household,’ 427.

537 Henry Mackenzie was the author of the seminal eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, The Man of Feeling (1771), depicting a protagonist, Harley, who expresses sensibility and benevolence through encounters with men and women who portray vignettes of their suffering.
contrast to Mr. Doleful, Mr. Optic is a man of radical sensibility, an active impulse that drives him to aid those less fortunate than himself.\textsuperscript{538} Educated and intellectual like Mr. Hanbury, Optic nevertheless prefers society to retirement, and cuts a more Godwinian figure as a man of letters, spending his free time in doing good deeds and helping those less fortunate than himself. As Amelia Woodford describes him, Optic is:

the worthiest of mortals; a man, who, with the shield of gaiety, covers a heart perpetually throbbing for the woes of his fellow-creatures: a man, who, with all the rattling loquacity of a mere mad-cap, is never truly happy, but in performing acts of humanity; who, while he makes fools and knaves his enemies, secures the esteem and admiration of every discerning mind. (226)

Repeatedly seen in the novel to rescue men and women in need, Optic is truly the preceptor of universal benevolence, that greatest of virtues celebrated in Godwin’s \textit{Political Justice}.\textsuperscript{539}

In thus demonstrating the many complex and contradictory ways in which to be a man in eighteenth-century society, Robinson’s novel works to contradict the simplistic narrative of progression in the history of masculinity. Indeed, in this novel, masculinities can be experimented with, exchanged, and tried on for size. Walsingham is seen to experiment with each type of masculinity on display in the novel: good-naturedly flirting with women in the salon as Sidney, the polite gentleman, might do; philosophising on the ills of society in the style of Hanbury; plotting his future career in the army alongside Colonel Aubrey; and eventually demonstrating the more libertine and misogynistic qualities of Linbourne and Heartwing. Most significantly, it is Mr. Optic who Walsingham most desires to emulate. Arriving in London and lingering over the misfortunes of those he meets there, Walsingham, too, attempts to present himself as the Mackensian man of feeling weeping over vignettes of human suffering. Ultimately, though, Walsingham’s feeling is shown to be as impotent as Doleful’s, as time and again he fails in his attempts to ease the suffering of those he meets.

\textsuperscript{538} For an explanation of radical sensibility, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.
As we shall see, however, Walsingham’s experimentation with different masculine performances is not a ‘liberating’ experience. Rather, it is ‘tormenting.’ Indeed, it causes him to suffer a deep and dangerous anxiety, symbolising the ‘crisis of masculinity’ occurring in the 1790s in which, as Tosh describes, ‘the traditionally dominant forms of masculinity have become so blurred that men no longer know what is required to be a “real man”’. Having been separated from the Rousseauvian masculine identity of his youth through his exile from Glenowen, Walsingham is lost in a sea of disparate masculine performances that have no relation to his delicate interiorised subjectivity, and as a result his behaviour moves increasingly further away from the morals and values that he claims to hold. Ultimately, unlike the natural and productive benevolence of Mr. Optic, Walsingham is too caught up in his own interiorised crisis of masculinity to truly devote himself to the betterment of others, and it is his inability to assimilate his masculine performance to a coherent interiorised identity that causes his failure. As Walsingham moves through the fabric of the novel, this anxious experience of unstable masculine identity manifests itself in some very destructive behaviour indeed.

‘I WAS A VILLAIN’: WALSINGHAM’S MASCULINITY UNMASKED

That Walsingham’s experimentation with different masculinities is the symptom of a wider crisis in 1790s masculinity can be seen through the medium of the masquerade. As Terry Castle has observed, the eighteenth-century masquerade was a liminal space in which men and women could push against the boundaries of social expectation and experiment with different ways of being, and ‘the pleasures (and dangers) of the masquerade were of a particularly revelatory kind.’ It was a space in which

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540 As I have explained above, Tosh explains masculinity as an interiorised subjectivity that is ‘understood to be an expression of the self, and up to a point a matter of individual choice, tormenting or liberating as that may be.’ Tosh, ‘The Old Adam,’ 232.
541 Tosh, ‘What Should Historians do with Masculinity?’, 193.
542 Castle, Masquerade and Civilisation, 4.
theatricality reigned, as ‘theatrical selves displaced supposedly essential ones,’ resulting in ‘the alienation of inner from outer’ selves as performance broke off entirely from its connection to interior subjectivity:

If, psychologically speaking, the masquerade was a meditation on self and other, in the larger social sense it was a meditation on cultural classification and the organising dialectical schema of eighteenth-century life. It served as a kind of exemplary disorder. Its hallucinatory reversals were both a voluptuous release from ordinary cultural prescriptions and a stylised comment upon them.543

As Castle’s mention of ‘danger’ above hints, however, this was not simply a space for the pleasurable escape from the rituals of everyday life. Instead, as she explains, ‘the masquerade itself masquerades. Ostensibly the scene of pleasure, it is actually the scene of snares – a region of manipulation, disequilibrium, and sexual threat.’544 Indeed, tracing the use of the masquerade in eighteenth-century fiction, Castle finds it to be ‘a master trope of destabilisation,’ one in which ‘patterns of characterological or moral reversal’ take place.545

This reading of the eighteenth-century masquerade can help us to uncover the intention behind Robinson’s use of the masquerade in Walsingham. The heady atmosphere of the masquerade provides the perfect space in which Robinson could examine the complex contradictions that lay within the ‘cultural classifications’ of masculinity at this time. Moreover, as a performative space of ‘hallucinatory reversals’ in which the division of ‘inner from outer’ self is enacted in its most extreme form, the masquerade provides the ‘revelatory’ moment in which Walsingham’s own anxious performance of Optic-style benevolent masculinity is itself revealed as a masquerade.

When Walsingham dons the domino of disguise and enters the voluptuous world of the masquerade, his attempt at a secure performance of benevolent masculinity begins to unravel. Becoming intoxicated with the dissipated atmosphere of this libidinal space – a space in which ‘only pleasure reigns’ (270) – Walsingham begins to lose his

543 Ibid., 4, 6.
544 Ibid., 119.
545 Ibid., 117, 125.
grip on his manufactured performance of stable masculinity. Indeed, here, his
performance of a Mr. Optic-style Godwinian masculinity of active sensibility and
universal benevolence is revealed to be just as much a mask as any of the other
disguises at the ball. Letting this mask of benevolent masculinity slip, Walsingham
comes to personify the paradoxical nature of the masquerade.

While in one breath Walsingham condemns Sidney and Isabella for their
‘capricious conduct which any being less devoted than myself would execrate’ (288), a
moment later he becomes the ‘execrate[d]’ libertine himself. Seeing Amelia Woodford
– an innocent woman who desires his love – at the masquerade in a costume that
mimics one that Isabella had worn on a previous night, Walsingham mistakes her for his
lost love object. Furious with Sidney for challenging his masculinity by ridiculing his
attempts to woo Isabella – ‘never while you breathe, Walsingham, shall you be the
husband of Miss Hanbury’ (289) – and filled with rage by Isabella’s rejection of him –
‘She has sworn to me, she has engaged herself by every sacred solemn oath, never to
become your wife’ (289) –, Walsingham is possessed with the same rash impulse that
had led him to steal the cabinet and challenge Sidney to a duel. Pursuing Amelia-as-
Isabella through the masquerade, he gives over to his violent desire, abducting and
raping her in his apartment:

I caught her in my arms, and, placing her by my side, ordered the coachman to
drive on: he instantly obeyed. Overwhelmed with terror, […] she sunk on my
breast, and fainted. […] I knew not where I was; the image of Isabella still
predominated, while indignation and revenge occupied the throne of reason!
[…] all the claims of unprotected innocence, all the laws of honour were
violated – and – I was a villain! (290)

This is the defining moment of the novel’s exploration of late-eighteenth-
century masculinity. Through this highly unorthodox depiction of rape from the
‘villain’s perspective, Robinson exposes the catastrophic consequences of the 1790s
crisis in masculinity that leaves men – especially non-hegemonic men such as the
economically and familially dispossessed Walsingham – without a secure interiorised masculine identity on which to anchor their behaviour.

Following the rape, Walsingham’s subsequent blame and abandonment of Amelia reveal his carefully constructed masculine performance of universal benevolence to be a sham. He immediately shifts the blame for the rape onto Amelia, stating that she was ‘the victim of her own susceptibility’ (291), and that ‘she became almost a voluntary sacrifice’ (296). There is no sense of culpability here. Walsingham is concerned for Amelia only insofar as the situation affects his status in the world: ‘Fatal was the result of her curiosity! – not only the ruin of her own reputation, but the eternal misery of a being fondly attached to her, and, by the most inestimable qualities of mind, deserving of a prouder destiny’ (292).

It is unclear here whether Walsingham is referring to Amelia, or to himself – the ‘being fondly attached’ – when he writes of ‘deserving a prouder destiny.’ I suspect this ambiguity is intentional. Walsingham is not only playing the role of libertine to Amelia, here, but also to the reader. While he is careful to give Amelia false ‘hope of honourable retribution’ (292) that he has no intention to fulfil, he likewise leaves the reader with false hope that he might yet live up to his professed principles, and give Amelia the ‘prouder destiny’ she deserves through marriage. This is not to be, however, for the ‘prouder destiny’ that preoccupies him is in fact Walsingham’s own imagined union with Isabella, and the benevolent masculinity that he had striven to present over the first half of the novel is entirely forgotten in this pursuit.

This abandonment of benevolent ideals becomes quickly apparent in his encounter with Mr. Optic, against whose ‘genuine sensibility’ (293) Walsingham’s self-interested libertinism stands in stark contrast. Upon hearing Walsingham state that to marry Amelia would be ‘Impossible!,’ Optic informs him that ‘you will find no generous, manly heart, that will not condemn your conduct’ (293). Damning
Walsingham as possessing ‘the passion of a libertine’ (293), Optic thus becomes Robinson’s mouthpiece, signposting to the reader that, despite Walsingham’s many protestations about his honour and goodness and his condemnation of the supposed libertinism of Sir Sidney, he is in fact a hypocrite and a liar. The apparently liberal man of radical sensibility is exposed as merely another performance, like the costumes of the masquerade.

Indeed, much greater than Walsingham’s stated desire to be a ‘convert to the cause of honour’ is his desire to realise ‘all my hopes and all my affections’ (301). He is revealed to be driven by selfish passion rather than benevolent reason, and is willing to make specious accusations about Amelia – for example, ‘the frailty which had rendered her my victim, made me suspect that she would scarcely fulfil, with honour, the duties of a wife’ (300) – to justify his cruelty. In all this, Walsingham really does, it seems, lack what Robinson understands to be a ‘generous, manly heart.’ Throughout the novel, those characters shown to be the most successfully masculine men – Mr. Optic, Colonel Aubrey and Sir Sidney – all demonstrate the active sensibility of universal benevolence. In his acts of selfishness, cruelty, passion and dishonour, on the other hand, Walsingham betrays characteristics that are diametrically opposed to this active benevolence, demonstrating only the passive and impotent sentimentality that Wollstonecraft had ridiculed in Burke’s Reflections.

In this way, Walsingham displays another facet of Robinson’s radical gender theory outlined in Chapter 1 of this thesis: that, for Robinson, the best men and women are those who are able to combine rational virtue with the active sensibility of benevolence. While rational virtue was commonly seen as masculine in the eighteenth century, and sensibility was usually understood as feminine, for Robinson, both of these aspects are required to form a secure interiorised identity in either sex, and without these qualities men and women could not hope for utopian transcendence from the
Oppressive limitations of eighteenth-century sex and gender categories. To outwardly perform masculine behaviours is not enough for Robinson. Indeed, it has potentially destructive consequences in its lack of anchor in any deeper sense of interior identity or virtue. Instead, for Robinson, a positive, fulfilling masculinity (and the same is true of femininity) could only be achieved through an assimilation of outward behaviour to inward subjectivity, and that subjectivity must be rooted in an active, benevolent connection with the world that had aspects both of rationality and sensibility.

Despite his repeated attempts to mimic the actively benevolent masculinity of Mr. Optic, in the end Walsingham’s masculinity is merely a performance. His interiorised masculine subjectivity, meanwhile, lacking in any solid universal guidance on how to truly develop the interiorised identity of a good man, remains fractured and insecure, and as such falls down in the face of his ‘ungovernable’ – and un-masculine – ‘passions’ (291). In the crisis of masculinity that occurred during the 1790s, Walsingham has no way of knowing how to be a good man in the society outside of the sheltered idyll of Glenowen. His ensuing anxiety leads him to try on many different suits of masculinity in turn in a bid to maintain a stable performance of coherent masculinity. However, without a secure interior basis, his masculine performance is doomed to failure. Instead, Walsingham stands as a stark warning about the crisis of masculinity that Robinson saw in the 1790s. Through the destabilising space of the masquerade, Robinson displays the insidious misogyny that could lurk beneath the mask of seemingly benevolent masculine self-presentation when there was no coherent interior identity on which to base that performance, a misogyny that here explodes through Walsingham’s vengeful rape of Amelia-as-Isabella.\(^{546}\)

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\(^{546}\) Interestingly, this depiction of insincerity in seemingly benevolent 1790s manhood is echoed in the closing statement of Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799). At the close of this powerful feminist essay, Robinson writes a note regarding ‘the MALE disciples of MODERN PHILOSOPHY’ that, ‘[a]lthough they have liberally patronised the works of British women,’ in reality, they ‘condemn that doctrine which inculcates mental equality.’ Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (London: 1799), 97.
As well as generally criticising the eighteenth-century culture that had led to a crisis in masculinity in the 1790s, more specifically, Walsingham’s failure to develop an authentic masculine subjectivity also works as a critique on the popularity in the 1790s of Rousseau’s theories of education and manhood. Educated in the style of Émile and constantly espousing the platitudes of liberal ideology, Walsingham nevertheless fails to live up to the idealised image of Émile, becoming instead the hypocritical ‘twaddler’ of the epigraph to this chapter. For Robinson, it seems, the self-admiration of Rousseauvian masculinity, with its inherent misogyny and misanthropy (both Hanbury and Walsingham express misanthropic views, desiring the hermetic lifestyle that Rousseau himself adopted) are an insufficient guarantee of goodness.547

From the very beginning, Rousseau’s ideas on masculine education are challenged by Walsingham’s marginalised position in society, and the oppression he experiences at the hands of his aunt, Lady Aubrey. Although Walsingham is able to display a positive Rousseauvian masculinity in the incident of the ivory cabinet, once he is exiled from the sheltered idyll of Glenowen and faced with the trials and constraints of modern society, his Rousseauvian education fails to provide him with the secure interiorised identity needed to maintain a benevolent masculinity, seen devastatingly in the rape and subsequent death of Amelia Woodford.

Having said this, Robinson’s intention in Walsingham is not merely to show the failures and crisis in modern 1790s masculinity. She also seeks to look beyond this failure to envision a more secure and coherent masculinity: a utopian vision of gender theory that would allow its possessor to engage with men and women alike as equals, 547

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and to become, at last, a truly good man – as Robinson understood it – of rational virtue and active benevolence.

There is one male character in the novel whose masculinity already gestures towards this. In contrast with Walsingham’s inauthentic and insecure masculinity stands the active civic manhood of Colonel Aubrey. Unlike Walsingham and his Rousseauvian and Godwinian models, Hanbury and Optic, Colonel Aubrey does not claim to be a philosopher. Instead, his sense of virtue is the active virtue of intellect, honour, and self-defence. While Walsingham adopts the passive sentimentality of Mr. Doleful, bemoaning the fate of Amelia without seeking to ease her pain, Colonel Aubrey’s sensibility is of the most noble and active kind, as demonstrated in his stated intention to rescue Amelia from the cruelty of Walsingham:

The world may condemn me; but I shall feel a more delightful gratification in snatching an amiable object from the insults of the world, than ever the libertine experienced in seducing innocence from the paths of virtue. (306)

In this way, then, Colonel Aubrey begins to offer a preferential model of masculinity towards which young men such as Walsingham ought to ascribe. The civic virtue of republican masculinity is here blended with a benevolent sensibility in a gesture towards Robinson’s desire for the union of rational virtue and active sensibility in her utopian vision of the future. This is not the whole story, however, because a much more radical alternative to the crisis in 1790s masculinity can be detected in the form of the transcendent masculine woman, Sir Sidney Aubrey.

‘This transcendent, this unequalled Sidney’: The Manliness of (Sir) Sidney Aubrey

When, at the end of the novel, Sidney is revealed to be a woman, our understanding of masculinity in the world of the text is transformed. Sidney, we have been told, is ‘expert at all manly exercises’ (129). (S)he is educated, polite, liberal, and charms men and women alike. As we have already seen, at every stage of the novel Sidney’s masculinity

548 See Chapter 1 of this thesis for an elucidation of these terms.
is demonstrated to be more dominant, and more coherent, than that of her anxious and insecure cousin, Walsingham. Although previous critics such as Chris Cullens have made much of the fact that Sidney’s masculinity is a performance to be ‘unmask[ed]’ in order that the standard gender hierarchy might be restored, I argue that something rather more fascinating is going on here.\textsuperscript{549}

Seen next to the fraudulent masculinity of Walsingham, who pretends to possess a masculine benevolence and honour while indulging in selfish and un-masculine passions, Sidney’s fraud in changing her dress seems comparatively less significant. While Sidney may have performed her outside, her interiorised subjectivity is genuine, coherent and secure. She is confident in her own self, in who she is and in what she values, as demonstrated in her honourable behaviour to her uncle, Colonel Aubrey, and her gentle teasing of Walsingham’s unending insecurities. Indeed, her only anxieties come from other people’s misreadings of her identity, due to the secret of her birth imposed on her by Lady Aubrey.

Walsingham, on the other hand, may have physically been male, but, as we have seen, his interiorised masculinity is much more circumspect than Sidney’s. ‘[C]an you exemplify the doctrines you inculcate?’ (151-125), Sidney asks Walsingham early in the novel. While both men outwardly ‘inculcate’ masculine virtues, it is only Sidney who ‘exemplifies’ them inwardly, while Walsingham’s passions fly in the face of his reason, driving him to the destructive acts, culminating in the rape of Amelia. Seen side-by-side, the masculine identities displayed by these two very different characters at last reveal Robinson’s radical gender project: not only to define a new vision of masculinity as one of both rational virtue and active sensibility in the face of the crisis of masculinity in the 1790s, but also to argue that this new utopian masculinity would not

\textsuperscript{549} Cullens, ‘The Masquerade of Womanliness,’ 268.
be delimited by material sex and gender, but rather by an interiorised subjectivity that Sidney possesses while Walsingham, at least up until this point, does not.

As if to emphasise this point, when Walsingham learns the truth of Sidney’s sex his reaction is not one of horror but of enlightenment and joy. Informed by Mr. Hanbury that ‘[t]he amiable Sidney has been educated in masculine habits; but every affection of her heart is beautifully feminine; heroic though tender’ (492), Sidney’s physical and mental cross-dressing is immediately marked as a quality to celebrate rather than to condemn. Indeed, Walsingham’s reaction to the news is to declare that ‘[a]ll the trifling crowds of women appear as shadows of the sex, when compared with this transcendent, this unequalled Sidney’ (493). Reviewing the novel as a whole, it would be just as fair to repeat the sentence with the substitution of ‘men’ for ‘women,’ for Sidney transcends the limiting categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender in a culmination of Robinson’s utopian vision for the future.

Chris Cullens has argued that the marital union between Walsingham and Sidney at the end of the novel represents a final recapitulation to the reified categories of incommensurable sex and gender that betrays the novel’s radical potential: ‘So, by the end of the novel, the hasty unveiling and reveiling of Sidney as the absent but systematically crucial Key Signifier of sexual difference have epistemologically stabilised the universe of misrecognition in which the novel’s characters have wandered.’\textsuperscript{550} This is an understandable criticism. As Wollstonecraft had made very clear in her novel of the same year, \textit{The Wrongs of Woman} (1797), marriage laws were not sympathetic to women who strove for equality with their husbands. With the imperfect Walsingham as her narrator, Robinson is not in a position to critique the state of eighteenth-century marriage laws in the closing pages of \textit{Walsingham}, and instead glosses over this difficulty in a celebration of ‘the felicity of present moments’ (495).

\textsuperscript{550} Cullens, ‘The Masquerade of Womanliness,’ 287.
Despite this, however, I am hesitant to agree with Cullens’s pessimistic reading of the novel’s ending. Rather than capitulating to the confines of incommensurable sexual difference, I argue, Sidney transcends these limiting categories. Uniting the best traits of masculinity and femininity, she implodes the binary structures of sex and gender to create an image of a new and better citizen. While Walsingham is trapped in the Rousseauvian ideologies of biological incommensurability, his ultimate misogyny demonstrated in his cruel treatment of Amelia, Sidney escapes these repressive categories. Drawing on older models of gender experimentation and performance that most characters in the novel have access to only through the destabilising and carnivalesque world of the masquerade, Sidney casts aside the limiting categories of incommensurable gender difference to unite the best of both the masculine and the feminine in one transcendent form.

As Sidney herself states early on in the novel, ‘existence will not be worth preserving when woman is forgotten’ (131). Admired by every character in the novel, Sidney is only able to be the most successful man because she is also already a woman, a physical representation of Robinson’s vision of transcendent genius as the union of ‘masculine’ rational virtue and ‘feminine’ active sensibility. In his recognition and acceptance of Sidney’s transcendence, Robinson suggests that perhaps Walsingham, too, could with Sidney’s help move beyond the warped and tormenting categories of incommensurability that have led to such a catastrophic crisis of masculinity: ‘The prejudices of early infancy, originating in the most barbarous deception, are completely counteracted by the virtues, the heroic virtues of my transcendent Sidney!’ (495).

Looking to the future in the closing lines of the novel, Walsingham is at last able to denounce the ‘trifling, vicious reptiles’ of insecure masculinity that had previously ‘triumph[ed] over the children of worth and genius’ (496). No longer attempting to adapt the ‘demons of art’ to his quest for a performed mask of benevolent masculinity,
Walsingham is instead inspired by Sidney’s transcendent example to cast aside the constraints of incommensurable sexual difference, and to move beyond the anxiety-ridden crisis of 1790s masculinity, to become instead an ‘illustrious pupi[l],’ not of masculine performance, but of ‘GENIUS, TRUTH, AND NATURE!’ (496): a truly utopian quest for a world beyond limiting categories of sex and gender, with the radical masculine woman, Sir Sidney, as its figurehead.

Thus, as I have shown in Chapters 3 and 4, in the middle years of the 1790s Robinson concentrated her radical gender theory on envisioning new ways of being for women (through her Sappho writings) and men (through her exploration of masculinity in Walsingham) in a future revolutionary society beyond the limiting categories of incommensurable sex and gender in eighteenth-century society and culture. While in Walsingham Robinson had glossed over the difficulties of equality inherent in the marriage state, in her final novel she would go on to radically reimagine marriage as a truly egalitarian union. As I will discuss in the following chapter, in The Natural Daughter (1799), Robinson’s utopian vision would be completed in an image of the new man and the new woman brought together in a thrilling vision of a new and radical revolutionary family, as she fully establishes herself in the British national consciousness as the Natural Daughter of the Wrongs of Woman, rightful inheritor of the School of Wollstonecraft.
The Natural Daughter of the Wrongs of Woman: Staging the Revolutionary Family

In the name of God, assist me to snatch her from destruction! Let me but give her an education – let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex, and I will teach her to consider you as her second mother.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1797)\(^{551}\)

[The trembling child crept close to the bosom which sheltered it; accustomed to see no woman but Mrs. Sedgley, it knew no accent but that of nature; and with a trembling voice it addressed Mrs. Morley by the name of mother. ‘Accursed bastard!’ exclaimed the frantic Morley, ‘she is thy mother!’]

Mary Robinson, *The Natural Daughter* (1799)\(^{552}\)

The final novels of Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft both have at their centre the painful trials of mothers estranged from their infant daughters. While in Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1797) Maria loses her child through the cruel machinations of her avaricious husband, in Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* (1799) Mrs. Sedgley is driven to abandon her illegitimate infant daughter to the care of the heroine Martha Morley by the punishing demands of an unfeeling society that would condemn her for raising a child alone. In both novels, the pressures of society conspire against the women in their desire to be mothers to their daughters. In both, too, their ultimate reunion with their lost offspring is a moment of empowerment for the mothers, realised at the hands of a female friend and confidante who acts as a ‘second mother’ to the child.

\(^{551}\) Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798); repr. in *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 121. All further quotations refer to this edition and will be referenced parenthetically in the body of the text. Where the provenance is unclear, I will add the initials WW. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.

\(^{552}\) Mary Robinson, *The Natural Daughter, with Portraits of the Leadenhead Family* (1799); repr. in *A Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter*, ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 293. All further quotations refer to this edition and will be referenced parenthetically in the body of the text. Where the provenance is unclear, I will add the initials ND. All spellings and textual emphases have been retained.
In my final chapter, I will argue that this similarity between the two final novels of these important 1790s feminist writers is not simply coincidental. Rather, it is my assertion that in her final novel Robinson enacts an intentional rewriting of Wollstonecraft’s unfinished work. Taking on the contradictions and complexities of Wollstonecraft’s plot, Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* envisions a radical egalitarian future that would free women from the seemingly desolate fate left to them in Wollstonecraft’s final fragments. At the same time, Robinson’s novel also works to rehabilitate men from the position of deceptive libertine in which *The Wrongs of Woman* positions them, rescuing them alongside women to form a radical vision of a utopian revolutionary family.

In so doing, I argue, in her final novel Robinson boldly positions herself in political terms as the ‘Natural Daughter’ of the author of *The Wrongs of Woman*. Not content with merely imitating Wollstonecraft’s work in the style of a disciple, Robinson here works actively to regenerate Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideas; to push beyond the pitfalls that she found in Wollstonecraft’s thinking in an attempt to overcome the pessimism suggested by the fragmentary ending of her final novel; and, with the loss of her feminist foremother two years before, to establish herself as the rightful inheritor of the ‘Wollstonecraft school’ of 1790s radical feminism.\(^{553}\)

At first glance the final novels of Wollstonecraft and Robinson seem wholly different. Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*, is explicitly a political – what we would now term Jacobin\(^{554}\) – novel in the style of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, and works as a fictional counterpart to her political tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The novel asserts an overt radical stance framed mainly through conversations between three characters wrongly imprisoned in a madhouse: Maria,

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\(^{553}\) For a detailed discussion of Robinson’s differences from Wollstonecraft’s feminist thinking in their political writings, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

\(^{554}\) This term was coined by Gary Kelly, in *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
Jemima, and Darnford. Through these conversations the injustices of society towards women are examined and condemned, and the novel’s fragmentary ending – of which there are several scenarios – closes with the two women retreating from society to raise Maria’s daughter together.

Robinson’s novel, on the other hand, reads like a sentimental gothic romance, following its heroine, Martha, through trials and tribulations across Europe. Martha is married early in the novel to the patriarchal Mr. Morley. While Morley is away on business, Martha meets Mrs. Sedgley, a frightened woman who has just given birth to an illegitimate daughter, Fanny. Finding that Mrs. Sedgley has fled, Martha adopts the infant, and subsequently struggles to maintain her innocence in the face of accusations that the abandoned ‘natural daughter’ is her own. Cast out from her home by her tyrannical husband, Martha seeks her independence as an actress, writer and teacher under the false name of Mrs. Denison. However, she finds her ambitions foiled repeatedly by the malicious gossip of British fashionable society. Accompanying her in her tribulations is lord Francis Sherville, who Martha believes to be the natural father of Fanny. Despite suspecting him of dishonourable conduct towards Mrs. Sedgley, she finds herself falling in love with him.555

Meanwhile, Martha’s sister Julia, ironically described at the beginning of the novel as ‘a model of feminine excellence’ (93), becomes increasingly embroiled in the licentious lifestyle of fashionable society. In the course of the novel, Julia destroys her sister’s reputation, tricks a young man of wealth into marriage, gives birth to an illegitimate son, divorces her husband, seduces Mr. Morley, kills her infant son, and finally flees to France to become the mistress of the cruel leader of the National Convention, Robespierre. Despite repeated attempts to rehabilitate her sister, Martha

555 Interestingly, Robinson does not capitalise the titles of any of the lords or ladies of her final novel, perhaps in a subtle rejection of the aristocracy of wealth that she had so often written against.
can only look on in horror, perpetually shunned by a sister who, despite her own vices, is too ashamed to own a travelling actress as her sibling.

In a last attempt to clear her name, Martha travels to Switzerland with Mr. Morley in order to introduce him to Fanny’s real mother. On their journey they become incarcerated in the Abbaye prison in Paris during the height of the Great Terror, and witness the execution of Robespierre and the suicide of Julia. In the closing pages of the novel, Martha finally sees her despotic husband exposed as the true father of Fanny, watches him plummet to his death from the precipice of a Swiss mountain, and is at last united to lord Francis, who is revealed to be the brother of lady Susan Sherville, the true identity of Fanny’s mother, Mrs. Sedgley.

In modern criticism, Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* has often been set apart from the novels of other 1790s radical women writers for this apparent capitulation to the status quo in its closing pages. Eleanor Ty, for example, dismisses Robinson’s engagement in the radical politics of the 1790s as ‘timorous,’ and concludes her chapter on *The Natural Daughter* by writing:

> Despite the fact that the novel presents many tantalising alternatives to courtship and love as the main interests for women of intelligence and sensibility, *The Natural Daughter* nevertheless ends with the heroine’s marriage or, in her case, remarriage, to a man who has admired her all along.\(^{556}\)

Similarly, Julie Shaffer argues that the novel ‘does not finally carve out an alternative to retired domesticity for women,’\(^{557}\) and Morgan Rooney sees Robinson’s position in the novel as ‘moderate,’ being ‘still compatible with many of the traditional narratives allotted to women,’ and as such ‘typical of Robinson’s moderate feminism.’\(^{558}\) In the same vein, Mark Zumac goes so far as to argue that Robinson’s depiction of the French

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Revolution under Marat and Robespierre allows her to ‘denounce [the Revolution’s] inherent radicalism.’

In my reading of Robinson’s novel, however, a very different, very radical, Robinson emerges. Sharon Setzer has already countered arguments that Robinson’s denunciation of Robespierre corresponds with an overall rejection of the French Revolution in the novel. In her essay, Setzer explains that in *The Natural Daughter* Robinson in fact rejects only the perverted course of the Revolution under the Jacobins in favour of its more truly radical and egalitarian beginnings:

To assume that Robinson’s denunciation of Jacobin monsters announces her retreat to a conservative or even reactionary position is, in effect, to ignore the way that it responds to the Jacobin backlash against the threat of “monstrous,” or politically active, women. It is also to ignore the possibility that some women could perceive a fearful symmetry between Jacobin terrorism in France and domestic terrorism in England.

In this chapter, I wish to push this argument for Robinson’s political radicalism still further, repositioning her revolutionary fervour at the end of the decade as a radical response to Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman*. Indeed, I argue that Robinson in fact deliberately plots her novel within the timeframe of the French revolutionary Terror in order to enact a symbolic cleansing of the Revolution through the sacrificial death of Robespierre in its closing pages. In this way, I assert, Robinson is able to reclaim the Revolution’s radical roots from the corruptions of the Jacobins, and to depict her revolutionary family grouping – with the infant Frances, who is the ‘natural daughter’ of France’s original utopian ideals, at its centre – as looking forward to a radical future unburdened by the domineering presence of its tyrannical patriarchal fathers.

Furthermore, in this chapter I also propose a similar radical argument for the social and familial outcomes of the novel. Where previous critics have read a recapitulation to conservative values in the marriage between Martha and lord Francis, I

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argue conversely that their union in fact constitutes a radical revisioning of the sex and
gender categories of eighteenth-century British society, rejecting the patriarchal
marriage market that reduces women to the position of objects of exchange between
men in favour of a utopian vision of an egalitarian heterosexual union beyond the
limitations of the two-sex model of biological incommensurability.

In the closing pages of *The Natural Daughter*, I assert, the father/husband
patriarch that haunts the pages of both novels – the oppressive figure that ultimately
drives Wollstonecraft’s Maria and Jemima out of society entirely – is literally killed off
in the symbolic death of the tyrannical Mr. Morley, who is husband to both Martha and
Mrs. Sedgley and father to their shared daughter, Fanny. In the place of this subsuming
patriarchy, I contend, Robinson constructs an alternative vision of the future: one in
which the concept of what constitutes a ‘family’ could be reimagined; in which men and
women of enlightened genius could finally transcend the constraining categories of
incommensurable gender difference; and in which the utopian possibilities of a society
beyond gender oppression – only hinted at in Wollstonecraft’s novel – can finally be
engendered.

It may seem contradictory to argue that the marriage at the end of a novel could
be radical when so many conservative novels of the period end in the same way. Indeed,
to our modern feminist sensibilities, the notion that our noble heroine would elect to
rush straight from the power of her domineering husband into the arms of a second
husband must at first appear to be so. In this vein, Morgan Rooney concludes her essay
on Robinson by stating that, for this reason, *The Natural Daughter* will ‘fail to satisfy
the demands of modern feminism.’ However, it was never the aim of 1790s feminists
such as Wollstonecraft and Robinson to reject marriage and heterosexuality altogether.

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561 Rooney, ‘Belonging to No/Body,’ 372.
To argue otherwise is to project an anachronistic feminist reading onto the texts of the period.

Explaining the position of these 1790s radical writers, Anne Mellor writes in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) that for these women political progress was concentrated on the ‘family unit’ and ‘the “domestic affections” as the model for all political action.’ Thus, marriage did not have the same implications for these women as it does today. Indeed, in practically all feminist literature published in the 1790s, including in Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, the solution to the debilitating patriarchal structures that oppress women is not a wholehearted rejection of marriage; rather, it consists in a *revisioning* of marriage as a union of intellectual and social equals: a partnership in which both participants are seen equally as active citizens in public life and as active caregivers as parents of their children.

As Wollstonecraft argued in *Rights of Woman*, egalitarian marriage, based on principles of ‘virtue,’ ‘reason,’ ‘enlightenment’ and mutual ‘independence’ and ‘affections,’ was essential in order that ‘virtues’ might ‘prevail in society’:

> If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, [...] Nay, marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses [...]. So convinced am I of this truth, that I will venture to predict that virtue will never prevail in society till the virtues of both sexes are founded on reason; and, till the affections common to both are allowed to gain their due strength by the discharge of mutual duties.

For Wollstonecraft, then, the goal of enlightenment and independence for women is not predicated on abandonment of the marriage state. In fact, it is dependent on a re-envisioned notion of marriage itself. Heterosexual union is thus not, here, a prison to be escaped, and marriage is not, in and of itself, a debilitating state for women. It is the perverted nature of marriage as it is presently constituted that 1790s feminists protest,

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and men and women must seek to correct the social prejudices that cause this perversion in order that marriage can be restored to its proper ‘sacred’ state.

Indeed, it is my contention that it was towards this utopian vision of egalitarian heterosexual union that Wollstonecraft yearned, but was ultimately unable to articulate in the fragmentary ending of her final novel. In *The Natural Daughter*, on the other hand, Robinson works to enact what Adriana Craciun has called an ‘overtly feminist demystification of marriage as oppressive to women’.\(^{564}\) In her story of Martha’s determined struggles for freedom, I contend, Robinson works to think through solutions to Wollstonecraft’s struggles in new and different ways, enacting a radical response to Wollstonecraft’s pessimistic ending in *Wrongs of Woman* that offers a hopeful image of egalitarian marriage as a corrective to Wollstonecraft’s dire conclusion: a conclusion in which heterosexual union must be unwillingly abandoned as irreparable, and the only escape for Maria and Jemima from the sufferings of womanhood in contemporary society is to retreat from society and sexuality altogether, with the comforts of maternity as their only solace.

It is important to bear in mind when writing a comparative account of these novels that Wollstonecraft’s text is unfinished. The manuscript was edited by her husband, William Godwin, who may have changed or omitted aspects of the plot. It is therefore impossible to know Wollstonecraft’s final intentions for the novel’s conclusion. We do, however, have hints in the form of the fragments at the end of the published text. It is telling that of the four possible plotlines, not one of them allows for a happy union between Maria and her lover, Darnford. The only optimism in the closing passage comes, not from heterosexual love, but from maternal love, in the friendship between Maria and Jemima and the final reunion with their shared daughter.

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This ending is especially surprising given the unrelenting optimism of Maria throughout the novel, who overcomes her battles with her unfeeling husband and enters a relationship with Darnford built on what she believes to be mutual and enlightened respect. Indeed, optimism is present throughout the memoirs that Maria composes for her daughter. Even as she warns against the dangers of corrupt relationships with men, Maria wishes her daughter to maintain a faith that positive relationships between the sexes can exist:

[L]et not this example, or the frigid caution of cold-blooded moralists, make you endeavour to stifle hopes, which are the buds that naturally unfold themselves during the spring of life! Whilst your own heart is sincere, always expect to meet one glowing with the same sentiments; for to fly from pleasure, is not to avoid pain! (127)

This textual optimism culminates in the trial scene, which Elaine Jordan has called ‘the most fantastic element of the text.’ Openly and defiantly defending her sexual relationship with Darnford, Maria transgresses the laws of British society that reduce women to the state of marital chattel by asserting her right to speak and act as a woman in the public sphere, and thus opposes the oppression which denies woman the right to, as Jordan writes, ‘active erotic feelings, her pride, warmth and passion’:

I claim then a divorce […] I believ[e] myself, in the sight of heaven, free – and no power on earth shall force me to renounce my resolution. (198)

In so doing, Maria boldly defends the rights of women who refuse to deny their sexual selves or be contained by the repressive laws of eighteenth-century British society.

Given Wollstonecraft’s determination throughout the novel to foreground Maria’s ‘active erotic feelings’ and ‘passion’ alongside her rational sensibility and political consciousness, it must have been disappointing for her feminist allies to find the text end in terms of such pessimistic despair on the subject of heterosexual equality. It is perhaps for this reason, then, that when Robinson embarked on her final novel, she

was determined radically to re-envision heterosexual union for her revolutionary utopia. In order fully to envision a new world order in *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson thus needed to reimagine relations between men and women in a way that did not require women either to capitulate to the patriarchal paradigm or to wholly detach from the fulfilment of their (hetero)sexual desires, and at the same time would rehabilitate man as woman’s egalitarian ally.

In the ensuing discussion, I will trace the connections between Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* and Robinson’s *Natural Daughter* in order to reveal the true extent of Robinson’s radicalism. Robinson achieves this, I argue, first through her radical feminist critique of modern British society, then in her negotiation with the politics of the French Revolution, and finally in her radical revisioning of the revolutionary family grouping. In *The Natural Daughter*, I will demonstrate, Robinson works to expose the debilitating situation of women in eighteenth-century society, to reclaim the Revolution from its British detractors, and finally to create an entirely new vision of the revolutionary family, one which includes maternal love, heterosexual love, and platonic love, and does not demand that her heroine choose between these paths in order to stay true to herself.

While Wollstonecraft’s Maria seems constantly in danger of falling into the corruptive influence of passive sensibility, in *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson creates a passive double for her heroine in her sister, Julia, allowing Martha fully to enter into the radical benevolence of active sensibility. Further, while Maria remains without power throughout *The Wrongs of Woman*, trapped within the confines of patriarchal marriage, Martha instead embarks on a path to independence, and through her experiences as an actress, discovers the inner powers of genius that would allow her to transcend the limitations of eighteenth-century gender roles, and to lay claim to a truly revolutionary and egalitarian family grouping.
In this way, I argue, Robinson rewrites the pessimistic ending of Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman* in order to create a utopian space in which she could envisage a radical, egalitarian society built on familial equality and community between women, in which men and women could transcend the limits of biological incommensurability that had driven Wollstonecraft’s heroines out of society, and instead go on to form the ideal image of a revolutionary family grouping. In so doing, I assert, Robinson’s final novel works as the platform from which she would seek finally to establish herself in the British national consciousness as a truly radical intellectual, and the natural inheritor of the Wollstonecraft school of 1790s radical feminism.

**GATHERING THE FRAGMENTS: ROBINSON REVISITS WOLLSTONECRAFT’S *THE WRONGS OF WOMAN***

These are the fatal effects of barbarous and prejudiced opinions! […] A female, thrown upon the unfeeling world, abandoned by the bosom which Nature has stored with nourishment to save it! (ND, 123)

In *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson sets out on a radical mission: to revisit the bold feminist narrative of *The Wrongs of Woman*, to echo its exposure of the oppressive treatment of women in eighteenth-century society, and to build out of the despondent strands of its fragmentary ending a utopian vision of female empowerment. Thus, as in *The Wrongs of Woman*, in *The Natural Daughter* Robinson works to expose ‘the fatal effects of barbarous and prejudiced opinions’ on the lives of women in 1790s Britain.

This intention is laid out clearly in the preface to Wollstonecraft’s novel, in which she writes that her ‘main object’ is ‘the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society’ (73). Since *The Natural Daughter* has no preface, and no known writings exist concerning Robinson’s intentions for this novel, her purpose cannot be stated with any such certainty.567 However, throughout Robinson’s novel both the heroine and narrator

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567 Unlike Wollstonecraft, Robinson was not in the habit of preserving her correspondence, and few of her personal writings remain in existence. Of those letters that have been preserved, the vast majority are
return repeatedly to the subject of the ‘wrongs of woman,’ and in all her interactions with the world, Martha is made to experience the ‘misery and oppression’ that the ‘barbarous and prejudiced opinions’ of society heap upon women who have no recourse to defend themselves.

The case to be made for Robinson’s *Natural Daughter* as an intentional revisioning of Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* does not end with the novels’ shared image of comaternity, or with the nominal connection between the two heroines in their sisterly biblical namesakes. Indeed, their plots are strikingly similar, as both novels work to combine radical politics with gothic and sentimental tropes to elucidate the problems of gendered inequalities. In both novels, the heroines are born into unfeeling homes ruled by tyrannical fathers who fail to recognise the enlightened minds of their daughters. Both women rush into marriage and find themselves trapped in a union with equally tyrannical husbands, and both are inspired to escape marital oppression by the powerful experience of maternity. Both women seek independence through employment only to suffer the persecution of society, and both are aided in their quest for independence by a disinterested male friend (for Maria, her uncle, and for Martha, an old friend of her father’s). Both women use writing in their attempt at independence, and through this they discover self-authorship, reinscribing their lives and experiences as rational individuals. Both share a bond with a close female friend that extends to comaternity of a shared daughter. Both women find themselves imprisoned in madhouses through the machinations of corrupt individuals. Both fall in love with men who espouse liberal opinions and seem to offer an escape from persecution. Finally, both women break free of their oppression and are reunited with their female friend and shared daughter, although under very different circumstances indeed.

dated from the year 1800, when Robinson was battling illness in a cottage retreat at Windsor. As such, they do not discuss her intentions in writing novels such as *The Natural Daughter*. See Hester Davenport, ed., ‘Letters,’ *The Works of Mary Robinson*, VII (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 295-332.
While these similarities between the novels are marked, there are also clear differences in the texts, and the most obvious of these differences is in their stylistic approach. While Wollstonecraft’s novel is explicitly political, the sensationalist tone of Robinson’s fast-paced narrative is less easily incorporated into the radical tradition of 1790s ‘Jacobin’ writings. It is this populist style, I argue, that has led critics to disregard the novel’s very real radicalism in favour of more shallow interpretations of Robinson’s intentions.

Indeed, many critics have read *The Natural Daughter* only for autobiographical references to Robinson herself. Paula Byrne, for example, calls it ‘Mary’s most autobiographical novel.’ Other critics, including Eleanor Ty, borrow their interpretation of the novel’s genesis from Robert Bass’s gloss on *The Natural Daughter*. Bass argues that the novel was written as a spiteful attack on Susan Bertie, the new bride of Robinson’s former lover Banastre Tarleton, to expose the scandal of her illegitimacy. However, as Sharon Setzer highlights, Bass produces no evidence to support his ‘dubious claims,’ and this reading of Robinson’s novel seems unlikely given the sympathetic portrayal of the ‘natural daughter’ in Robinson’s text, hardly suited to a scathing personal attack.

Moreover, Bass’s reading of Robinson’s novel seems all the more improbable on reading the satirical metacommentary on scandal fiction presented in its pages. During Martha’s quest for independence she writes a novel and approaches a publisher to offer it for sale. Dismissing her sentimental novel as trash – ‘We have our warehouses full of unsold sentimental novels already, […] they only sell for waste

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570 Setzer, ‘Romancing the Reign of Terror,’ 533.
paper’ (208) – the bookseller goes on to delineate the traits of the 1790s popular novel, many of which occur within the pages of The Natural Daughter itself:

If you have any talent for satire, you may write a work that would be worth purchasing: or if your fertile pen can make a story out of some recent popular event, such as a highly fashioned elopement, a deserted, distracted husband, an abandoned wife, an ungrateful runaway daughter […] or any thing from real life of equal celebrity or notoriety, your fortune is made; your works will sell. (209)

This passage thus reveals Robinson’s awareness in contributing to the sensationalist aspects of popular novel writing. However, the reaction of Martha to this advice – she sighs, protests, and ends the discussion with a wry smile (209-210) – indicates Robinson’s desire for a more noble purpose than the simple reproduction of these scandalous tropes in her writing, and this desire is revealed in the following passage.

Here, Mr. Index’s instruction to Martha to ‘write with a lancet’ (209), rather than a pen, provides an interesting perspective on Robinson’s stylistic intentions:

‘[Y]ou will never wield the keen-edged weapon in the field of ridicule, or scatter, amidst the flowers of Parnassus, the seeds of critical contention: you will write with a mere pen!’
‘What else should I write with?’ said Mrs. Morley.
‘A lancet, to be sure. You should cut your subject keenly; make your operations salutary; teach your patients to tremble, while you cure them of their most obstinate and contagious follies.’ (209)

Indeed, I argue, to ‘write with a lancet’ is Robinson’s primary aim in The Natural Daughter. In using the vehicle of the popular novel in which to expound her radical political and feminist viewpoint, Robinson employs cutting wit and satire, planting ‘the seeds of critical contention’ in her quest to ‘cure’ her audience ‘of their most obstinate and contagious follies,’ their prejudices.

In this sense, then, while Robinson’s style is very different from Wollstonecraft’s more overtly political fiction, the comedic satire mobilised in the pages of The Natural Daughter provides a very real opportunity for Robinson, like Wollstonecraft, to highlight the ‘fatal effects of barbarous and prejudiced opinions’ on the lives of women in eighteenth-century society. Indeed, in shrouding her feminist
critique in the veil of popular fiction, it may well have been the case that her radical sentiments were able to reach a wider female audience than Wollstonecraft’s ever could. As the bookseller observes, there were very real fears among the conservatives of 1790s British society about ‘the [political] infection which has been conveyed through the medium of novels’ (211). As such, the vehicle of the popular novel could be a very powerful one for ‘diffus[ing]’ radical and feminist ideas ‘through the mass of society’ (211). In *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson takes full advantage of this generally recognised truth to infuse her text with a bold critique of eighteenth-century society, and the oppression of women within it.

As had been the case in Wollstonecraft’s novel, this critique of the unjust treatment of women is made manifest in *The Natural Daughter* through the theme of entrapment. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had located the main action of the narrative within the confines of a madhouse in order to make real her heroine’s statement that ‘the world [is] a vast prison, and women born slaves’ (79). Repeatedly, the women of the novel are shown to be prisoners – slaves to male desire in a society that allows them no legal subjectivity. This theme is extended beyond the confines of the madhouse in the narratives of Jemima and Maria. Through the power of their stories, the imprisonment of women behind locked doors gives way to the imprisonment of women behind inheritance and marriage laws. These laws entrap them in the confines of the domestic sphere, wholly dependent on men, leading Maria to declare that ‘Marriage has bastilled me for life’ (155). Thus, through the echoing of the narratives in the tales and the surroundings of the heroines, the repression of women in society is emphasised.

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571 One example of this is in Dr. James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), a text condemned in Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* for its patriarchal attitudes to women but praised in conservative circles. Fordyce writes that ‘We [by which appellation he seems to mean men in general] consider the general run of novels as utterly unfit for you,’ as the dangerous freedom exhibited in novels cannot be ‘calculated to improve the principles, or preserve the Sobriety, of female minds.’ Dr. James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women; in Two Volumes* (1766), 5th ed. (London: 1770), 113, 119-120.
In The Natural Daughter, too, the theme of entrapment looms large in the narrative. Repeatedly, Martha and Mrs. Sedgley find themselves held captive, and their internment is made more terrifying by its connection to their identities as women. In the course of the novel, female characters find themselves locked in prisons (167), hotel rooms (224), and madhouses (242), as they seek to break free of the constraints of patriarchal society. Whilst trapped in the infamous Abbaye prison in Paris, Mrs. Sedgley is forced to choose between loss of chastity or death: ‘Songez Citoyenne; ou Marat, ou la guillotine!’\(^{572}\) (167). She is saved only by Marat’s murder at the hands of Charlotte Corday on the following morning. Similarly, Martha’s imprisonment in the madhouse comes about when she seeks to protect her pupil, Sophia, from the machinations of her cruel stepmother, who desires to commit Sophia in order to claim inheritance of her late father’s estate. In both instances, the women are targeted for their vulnerability and lack of protection by a society that only values women in relation to their male possessors: fathers and husbands. Without this protection, it seems, they become fair game in the avaricious pursuit of social and sexual satisfaction.

However, as in Wollstonecraft’s novel, entrapment in The Natural Daughter is not limited to literal imprisonment behind solid walls. In her quest for liberation, Martha repeatedly finds herself trapped behind the partial laws and customs of eighteenth-century society. For Martha, like Maria, her first experience of marriage is one of enslavement. In Wrongs of Woman, Maria had expressed bitter resentment against the laws of society which ordain that ‘a wife being as much a man’s property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own […] and the laws of her country […] afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor’ (158-159). In The Natural Daughter, Martha, too, is loath to bow under the yoke of oppression.

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\(^{572}\) ‘Consider [your options] Citizen: Marat or the guillotine!’
When Julia advises Martha that ‘it was the duty of a wife to consider her husband’s will as the foundation of felicity’ (130), Martha responds in boldly radical terms: ‘Marriage, in that case, is little better than slavery. I detest the thought of enforced subordination!’ (130). This statement of Martha’s radical egalitarian beliefs is extended in the following passage, where her determined defiance horrifies her tyrannical husband as it reveals the crippling realities of marital life for women of little fortune and enlightened ideals:

‘I acknowledge no distinction but that which originates in virtue.’
Mr. Morley grew uneasy.
‘When I married you, Martha, I did not suppose that those were your opinions.’
‘If it was your intention to present me a new set, my dear Mr. Morley, it was of little importance what were the old ones.’ […]
‘I released you from parental authority—’
‘To teach me that of an husband.’ (130-131)

Here, Martha exposes the true cost of marital subordination. In marriage, women are forced to give up not only their physical, but also their mental freedom, as social pressures require them to sacrifice their beliefs and values in favour of those of their husbands.

However, as Robinson demonstrates, one method for women to escape this marital subordination in late-eighteenth-century fashionable society was by the sacrifice of their chastity. As Martha learns in her encounters with the corrupt morals of high society, if she would be willing to give up her morals and take a fashionable lover, a woman could gain much freedom even within the most tyrannical marriage, while at the same time retaining her status within society. It is in this role that Julia ascends in fashionable popularity as she gains in vice: ‘she now rouged highly, talked boldly, gazed steadfastly, laughed sarcastically, and sighed significantly. […] she could smile like Lais, and make love like Sappho’ (124). With this ‘powerful artillery of arts,’ Julia is able to ‘wast[e] many months in unbounded dissipation’ and ‘indulg[e] in the
capricious feelings of her heart, even at the expense \textit{sic} of every moral virtue’ (225) while remaining ‘an object of universal envy’ (276) in society.

At her most desperate, Martha, too, considers this path, when she is approached by a ‘wealthy libertine’ (221) and offered social and financial protection in exchange for becoming his mistress. Martha’s quandary at this juncture serves to highlight the great difficulties that a young and unprotected woman underwent in attempting to remain virtuous in a society that assumes her to have ‘already “sacrificed her reputation”’ (222). The passage echoes Jemima’s experience of becoming mistress to a dissipated libertine in \textit{The Wrongs of Woman}:

\begin{quote}
Fate dragged me through the very kennels of society; I was still a slave, a bastard, a common property. [...] I was therefore prevailed upon, thought I felt a horror of men, to accept the offer of a gentleman [...] [of] being his mistress. (109-111)
\end{quote}

Like Jemima, Martha’s vulnerable situation and compromised reputation leads her to consider the ‘sacrifice’ of her ‘virtue’ to ‘necessity’:

\begin{quote}
Mrs. Morley’s indignation was strong, but her necessities were powerful. She shuddered at the idea of a sordid sacrifice; but she had been convinced that worldly importance depends on wealth and not on virtue. The trial was a severe one; she was trembling, fearful, perplexed, distressed, and wounded by the insults of unfeeling persecutors. The man of wealth was selfish, ignorant, and ostentatious: she was oppressed and humbled. (221)
\end{quote}

Martha’s distress here exposes the powerful temptation of many suffering women to give in to vice out of ‘necessity.’ In a world where ‘importance depends on wealth and not on virtue,’ Robinson shows, women who have been ‘oppressed and humbled’ by the ‘unfeeling persecut[i]on’ of modern society have little to gain from remaining virtuous.

However, in the end, Martha refuses to capitulate to this base method of comparative freedom. Instead, she echoes Wollstonecraft’s Maria in condemning the social misogyny that drives women to make such devastating choices. ‘By allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering of libertinism in men,’ laments Maria, ‘society makes monsters of them, and then their ignoble vices are brought
forward as a proof of inferiority of intellect’ (*WW*, 137). ‘If none will feel for those that err,’ cries Martha, ‘where are we to hope for reformation?’ (*ND*, 202). In this way, Robinson follows Wollstonecraft in exposing the very real cost that the culture of corrupt libertinism imparts on desperate women. While many feel driven to a loss of chastity, limited to that ‘one way of rising in the world,’ society at the same time refuses to ‘feel for those that err,’ instead condemning them to an irreparable loss of reputation. As Julia goes on to discover, there is little hope for women in eighteenth-century society for ‘reformation’ (*ND*, 202) once they embark on the road to ‘ignoble vices’ (*WW*, 137).

In both *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Natural Daughter*, then, the injustice of society in its treatment of women is exposed. For both Maria and Martha, it seems, to be ‘born a woman’ is to be ‘born to suffer’ (*WW*, 181). Notwithstanding this sad truth, in her struggles against the ‘barbarous and prejudiced opinions’ (*ND*, 123) that would enchain her in the domestic sphere, Martha, like Maria, continues incessantly to strive to seek out alternative ways of living. While Maria’s romantic reliance on Darnford leaves her trapped within patriarchal structures that she can only escape by abandoning society – and relations with men – altogether, however, Martha is able to avoid this fate.

She does so by seeking to become actively independent, both as a writer, and, more importantly, as an actress. For Martha, this experience of her own creative genius encourages her to begin to seek transcendence from the limitations of eighteenth-century gender norms. In so doing, I argue, in *The Natural Daughter*, Martha is able to imagine new possibilities – political, social and familial – that would allow her finally to break free of the oppression that had driven Wollstonecraft’s heroines out of society, and instead to carve out a space in which to envision an egalitarian utopia in which she would not have to abandon society, or relationships with men, to be happy.
In writing *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson was not prepared to allow her heroine to capitulate to the social oppression that had driven Wollstonecraft’s Maria out of society. In order to escape this fate, she imbues Martha with the mental powers necessary to seek social, financial, and, above all, intellectual independence from the men who surround her. This powerful independent spirit is signalled early on in the novel through Martha’s experience and expression of active sensibility. Through her keen sense of universal benevolence and justice, Martha is able to identify and condemn the injustices of eighteenth-century society. When Martha later seeks independence as an actress, this sense of active sensibility is transformed through her experience of her own creative genius into a powerful feminist determination to reject the machinations of patriarchal society. This determination in turn allows Martha to transcend the constraining influence of eighteenth-century sex and gender categories, and to seize control of her own destiny.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, in the 1790s sensibility was not a homogenous concept. Rather, it was divided broadly into a conservative sensibility of passive sentimentality concentrated in odes to custom and tradition, and a radical sensibility that promoted rational thought and the active impulses of universal benevolence. The significance of active sensibility to Robinson’s feminist vision is central in all her works. For Robinson, as I have argued, it was only through a union of active sensibility and rational virtue that men and women could transcend the limitations of eighteenth-century categories of incommensurable sex and gender, to form revolutionary egalitarian relationships that could in turn transform society.

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573 See Chapter 1 of this thesis. See also Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993).
For Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, sensibility was not such an uncomplicatedly positive force. In her *Rights of Woman*, as I have shown,574 Wollstonecraft had expressed a wariness about the dangers of a heightened sensibility for women, warning of its potentially corrupting influence on reason. In its place she advocated a more unemotional, rational feminism of ‘modesty, temperance and self-denial.’575 By 1796, in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had moderated her condemnation of sensibility. Here, she draws a distinction, like Robinson, between the positive qualities of active, radical sensibility and the corrupting effects of passive, conservative sensibility. At the same time, however, her earlier wariness of sensibility remains to haunt the pages of the novel.

Thus, while Maria is praised for her ‘active sensibility and positive virtue’ (153), and while ‘true sensibility’ is lauded as ‘the auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius’ (176), sensibility is also shown to have a more dangerous side. For Wollstonecraft, although ‘active sensibility’ offers a potential source of power for women, it is always at the same time threatening to fall back into the corruptive influence of passive sensibility, a state in which feeling overpowers reason, and in so doing forces women back into a state of helpless dependence on men:

[B]ut if these reveries are cherished, as is too frequently the case with women, when experience ought to have taught them in what human happiness consists, they become as useless as they are wretched. (99)

This passive sensibility haunts Maria throughout the plot of *The Wrongs of Woman*, always threatening to destabilise her quest for independence and enlightenment through her relationships with men. The narrator is all too aware of this danger, warning the reader that ‘the heart […] fostering a sickly sensibility, grows callous to the soft touches of humanity’ (193). In the end, the narrator’s fears are proved well founded. At the close of the novel, Maria finds herself once more betrayed by the man she loves,

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574 See Chapter 1 of this thesis.
abandoned by Darnford to confront the (literal) trial of condemnatory society alone, and, in several of the fragmentary endings, to face further suffering in the miscarriage of their future child.

In *The Natural Daughter*, on the other hand, Robinson is also careful to make a distinction between positive active sensibility and negative passive sensibility. However, here she refuses to allow the dangers of passive sensibility to corrupt her heroine. Instead, she is able to overcome Wollstonecraft’s anxiety about sensibility by introducing a double for Martha in her sister Julia. The differences between the sisters are immediately apparent:

Julia was small in stature; fair, delicately formed, humble, obedient, complacent, and accommodating. [...] The romantic tendency of her mind seemed to influence it even in the choice of her habiliments [...] and she seemed, like the snow-drop, to droop at every breeze that the soft breath of April wafted through the carriage. [...] Martha was giddy, wild, buxom, good-natured, and bluntly sincere in the tenor of her conversation. (92-93)

Here it is Julia who appears to represent the virtuous innocence of the Rousseauvian heroine of the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility. While ‘the gentle Julia’ is ‘admired’ by fashionable society as ‘a model of feminine excellence,’ the ‘unsophisticated’ Martha is dismissed as ‘a mere masculine hoyden’ (93). However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that it is not Julia, but Martha, who is held up by Robinson for emulation as the true model of female excellence, made all the more admirable for her ability to unite ‘masculine’ reason to the ‘feminine’ expression of active sensibility.

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576 The fashion for sentimental heroines was started by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his famous *Julie, or The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* (1761). Rousseau’s swooning, romantic heroine would become the model for many British novels of sensibility in the late eighteenth century, and in *The Natural Daughter* Robinson uses the character of Julia directly to satirise Rousseau’s model of passive sentimental womanhood. For more information on the reception of Rousseau’s *Julie* by British female novelists, see Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997). For more information of Robinson’s satiric treatment of Rousseau, see Chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis.

Indeed, while Martha embodies the radical, active sensibility of universal benevolence, Julia can express only the selfish and inward-looking sentimentalty of passive, conservative sensibility. Repeatedly, Martha and Julia are confronted with scenes of unjust suffering, and on each occasion the pattern is the same: ‘Julia’s sensibility dissolved in tears; and Martha sincerely felt for the pain’ (94) of the sufferer, and takes steps to rectify that suffering. This is seen most clearly in the family’s encounter with a destitute and wounded solider on their road to Bath. While Julia makes much of her own troubled emotions – ‘at supper, she could not eat for thinking of the soldier’s wounded arm’ – Martha takes her sensibility as the impetus to action, and gives a ‘private order’ for the soldier to be housed and fed (103). In this way, Robinson exposes the distorted beliefs about female delicacy that are pushed onto women by eighteenth-century society, and the debilitating implications that these ‘feminine’ behaviours have on young women’s intellectual and emotional development. Despite her overt demonstration of sentimentality on witnessing the plight of the soldier, Julia nonetheless remains of the callous belief that the poor are content in their station ‘because they have no feelings’ (101). Robinson thus reveals that, in the end, Julia’s passive sensibility consists only of a shallow imitation of the ‘opinions and customs of society’ (103). In contrast to Julia’s self-centred sentimentality, on the other hand, Martha expresses the radical and rational sensibility of ‘individual judgement,’ condemning the heartless attitude of her family as ‘a stigma on humanity’ (103) and instead advocating the egalitarian values of universal benevolence. In so doing, Martha, and not Julia, embodies Robinson’s ideal of what ‘a model of female excellence’ would look like if women were able to escape the confines of eighteenth-century gender roles, to become new and better citizens of a utopian revolutionary society.

Despite Martha’s more active and positive expression of sensibility, however, in the society of the novel she is repeatedly criticised for the impropriety of her conduct.
Indeed, while Julia is lavished with praise for her feminine graces, Martha is condemned for her ‘masculine’ behaviour, despite the fact that her feelings are more sincere, and her actions more moral, than those of her swooning sibling. Martha is censured because ‘she did not, like Julia sigh or weep with ostentatious sensibility’ (140). However, as Robinson is keen to demonstrate, it is Martha who is the possessor of true active and radical sensibility: ‘Her feelings were not the effects of habit; they were the energies of nature’ (140). Throughout the text, this natural and ‘exquisite sensibility’ (268) manifests itself through Martha’s actions and speech in a bold and unapologetic denunciation of the warped values and customs that had led to the production of young women like Julia. When Martha enters the theatrical profession, this expression of active sensibility is transformed through her experience of her own creative genius into a determination actively to resist the oppression of society that would seek to strip her of her radical egalitarian values.

For Martha, acting is an ‘honourable’ (178) profession in which ‘the children of Genius and Misfortune’ (179) could earn independence through ‘the labour of talents’ (179). The theatre is linked with the cause of benevolence early in the novel when Martha attends a benefit (a play in which the proceeds are collected for charity or for an individual) on behalf of ‘an amiable but unfortunate lady’ (111) who later turns out to be Mrs. Sedgley. Martha is moved by the power of the performance to give generously to the woman’s cause.578 Later in the novel, when she is reunited with Mrs. Sedgley

578 Interestingly, this is a performance of Nicholas Rowe’s Tragedy of Jane Shore (1714), the story of a woman who is condemned by society for consenting to become mistress to the king while her absent husband is still living. Like Rowe’s The Fair Penitant (see Chapter 1) the play contains passages that were celebrated by eighteenth-century feminists for their objection to society’s treatment of women. Part of the passage below is quoted in Robinson’s Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination (London: 1799), 6:

Such is the fate unhappy women find,
And such the curse entail’d upon our kind,
That man, the lawless libertine, may rove,
Free and unquestion’d through the wilds of love;
While woman,—sense and nature’s easy fool,
If poor, weak, woman swerve from virtue’s rule;
If, strongly charm’d, she leave the thorny way,
after her expulsion from Morley House and discovers that she has become an actress to support herself, Martha expresses an ‘irresistible’ desire to join her, imagining the theatre as a powerful space in which to explore the full extent of her intellectual and emotional talents: ‘Mrs. Morley had often meditated a dramatic trial [as] a profession which promised both fame and independence’ (159-160).

When she enters the theatre, Martha experiences ‘the glow of innate dignity’ (178). For her, there is nothing degrading in the adoption of a profession. On the contrary, it inspires her with pride in her ability to rely on ‘the labour of [her] talents,’ rather than the corruptive ‘independence of indolence’ (178). The theatre is not only important to her because it allows her to seek her independence, however. It is also significant in the way that it inspires Martha to realise the extent of her intellectual and creative powers.

When Martha first walks the boards, we are told, ‘[t]he success which attended her first essay surpassed even her most sanguine expectations’ (179):

She was the pupil of Nature; her feelings were spontaneous, her ideas expanded, and her judgement correct. She scorned to avail herself of that factitious mummerm, that artificial, disgusting trick, which deludes the senses by exciting laughter at the expense [sic] of the understanding. [...] [S]he was the thing she seemed, while even the perfection of her art was Nature. (179)

For Martha, theatricality and nature are not mutually exclusive. Rather, rejecting the exaggerated and artificial performance of the pantomime as a ‘disgusting trick,’ Martha demonstrates her emotional and intellectual genius in a union of sensibility – ‘her feelings were spontaneous’ – and rationality – ‘her ideas expanded and her judgement correct’ – by truly embodying the emotions of her character and becoming ‘the thing

And in the softer paths of pleasure stray;  
Ruin ensues, reproach and endless shame;  
And one false step entirely damns her fame;  
In vain, with tears the loss she may deplore,  
In vain, look back on what she was before;  
She sets, like stars that fall, to rise no more.

she seemed.’ In so doing, Martha, on her first attempt, displays ‘the perfection of her art,’ and is celebrated ‘with boundless adoration’ as ‘the idol of the day’ (180).

Rewarded with the ‘celebrity of genius,’ (179), Martha becomes, for the first time, fully aware of her ‘innate worth’ (181), and this inspires her to a radical meditation on the nature of society: ‘She knew that […] the aristocracy of wealth had little to do with the aristocracy of genius’ (181), and refusing to acknowledge the first, Martha is punished for possessing the latter.579 When Martha rejects the attentions of an ignorant suitor of wealth and connections because she knows that ‘worth and talents have a right to soar beyond the track of vulgar association’ (183), he exercises his power ‘in every subordinate circle of society’ (194) to have her hounded off the stage. Despite this cruel turn of events, however, Martha remains conscious of her merit: ‘her pride was still more powerful than her misfortunes,’ and ‘the inborn spirit of her soul,’ awakened by her experiences of creative genius on the stage, ‘armed her with courage to resist oppression’ (198).

This courage is tested when Martha is confronted by her estranged husband. In his horror at her chosen profession, Mr. Morley represents the prejudice and oppression of fashionable society, who condemn actresses for the supposed vice of their profession and refuse to recognise the genius of the players, even as they enjoy the performance: ‘A strolling actress! God forbid! […] You talk of her virtues – her misfortunes! Ridiculous!’ (201, 203). In the face of this aggression, however, Martha refuses to crumble. Instead, she turns from a defence of her profession – ‘the exercise of those talents which heaven bestows as the substitutes for fortune’ (201) – to a defence of all women who are calumniated by society:

‘If none will feel for those that err, where are we to hope for reformation?’ said Mrs. Morley. ‘Oh! if the first fault were but more frequently forgiven, how few would commit a second! But it is the chilling breath of reproof that chases the

579 See Chapter 2 of this thesis for a discussion of Robinson’s idea of the ‘aristocracy of genius’ in relation to her Marie Antoinette writings.
The Natural Daughter of The Wrongs of Woman

With these words, Martha overthrows the power of her tyrannical husband. During the conversation, Mr. Morley’s ‘high-bearing severity’ is ‘humbled to the very extent of humiliation’ (201). Martha, by contrast, grows bolder as the exchange continues, culminating in a refusal to return to a life of subordination under the rule of her husband: ‘I must be received acquitted, or not received at all’ (203) she demands of Mr. Morley, and in this way, emboldened by a consciousness of her ‘innate worth’ (181) and creative genius, she transcends the subordination of patriarchal authority to claim at last the right to control her own destiny.

Thus, through the possession of active, radical sensibility, refined through her experience as an actress into the creative powers of the ‘aristocracy of genius’ (181), Martha is imbued with the courage and the capability at last to transcend the suffocating constraints of eighteenth-century gender categories. Refusing to capitulate to the ‘chilling breath of reproof’ (202) that condemned her for rescuing Fanny, for sheltering Mrs. Sedgley from persecution, and for seeking independence through the exercise of her talents, Martha takes the creative powers that she had discovered in her theatrical performances and employs them in a radical feminist critique on the relations between men and women; a critique that, as the novel progresses, would transform into the creation of a wholly new and boldly revolutionary family grouping.

‘An Idolator of Rational Liberty’: Reclaiming the Revolution in a Time of Doubt

The French Revolution haunts the pages of both novels. In The Wrongs of Woman, Maria is repeatedly connected to the ideals of the Revolution in her adoption of the language of natural rights in her defence of women, to the extent that she is condemned for her ‘French principles’ (199) by the judge who refuses her divorce. In The Natural Daughter, however, Robinson goes much further than this. Here, the French Revolution
forcibly intrudes into the plot, as both Martha and Mrs. Sedgley find themselves at various points imprisoned in mid-1790s France, and have their lives threatened by the succeeding tyrants of the Jacobin Terror, Marat and Robespierre. In their experiences in France, Robinson’s heroines stand in for the anxious predicament of the British radical movement, as they are confronted with the difficulty of remaining faithful to the original ideals of the Revolution in the face of the terrible violence and destruction wielded by the Jacobins.

I have already demonstrated how modern critics have a tendency to dismiss Robinson’s politics in *The Natural Daughter* as ‘timorous’ or ‘moderate.’\(^{580}\) When we turn to Robinson’s contemporaries, however, the position is reversed, and it becomes clear that they found much to suspect about the dangerous extent of the novel’s radicalism. In the *British Critic*, for example, the reviewer condemns *The Natural Daughter* for its overt sympathy with the precepts of the French Revolution, lamenting that ‘the morals and manners which tended to produce it [the French Revolution], are inculcated and held up for imitation.’\(^{581}\)

In order to understand the significance of this criticism, it is important to look at the immediate political context. The sedition and treason trials of the mid-1790s had shaken the British radical movement to its core. In 1792, the famous republican Thomas Paine was found guilty of sedition (inciting rebellion) for the publication and distribution of *Rights of Man* (1791). In a sign of the changing public mood, on 22 November 1792 a patriotic mob under the influence of the government burned Paine’s effigy. Paine fled to Paris. In his absence, he was found guilty and outlawed from Britain.\(^{582}\) In 1794, John Thelwall (a radical speaker and poet), Thomas Hardy (secretary of the radical London Corresponding Society), John Horne Tooke (a public

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580 Ty, *Empowering the Feminine*, 73; Shaffer, ‘Ruined Women and Illegitimate Daughters,’ 310.
radical thinker), and Thomas Holcroft (a radical writer and member of the LCS) were all arrested for high treason, along with 30 other radicals. In the famous trials of Thelwall, Hardy, and Tooke, the government accused the men of conspiracy to set up a rival government of the people. All three were acquitted, after which all others were set free.\footnote{For more information on the treason trials, see John Barrell, \textit{Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Chapter 5 of Gregory Claeys, \textit{The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Roger Wells, ‘English Society and Revolutionary Politics in the 1790s: The Case for Insurrection,’ \textit{The French Revolution and British Popular Politics}, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 188-226.}

This was not the end of the political clampdown, however. In 1795, the government passed the Treasonable Practices Act and the Seditious Meetings Act. Jointly known as the Gagging Acts, they were designed to smother the British radical movement, making it illegal to meet publically in large groups, and high treason to speak or write against the government, even if the intention was not to incite revolution. Together with the suspension of Habeas Corpus the previous year, these acts succeeded, by the end of the 1790s, in all but silencing the radical movement, which would not recover until the rise of socialism in the 1820s.\footnote{For more information on the gagging acts, see the references above. For more information on early British socialism, see the Conclusion to Claeys, \textit{The French Revolution Debate in Britain} (2007).} In 1799 then, in the climate of fear that had followed the sedition and treason trials of 1792-1794, and the ‘Gagging Acts’ of 1795, for Robinson to be seen to ‘inculcate’ the ‘morals and manners’ of the French Revolution, as the \textit{British Critic} deemed her to do, was a mark of a truly radical text.\footnote{In both \textit{Walsingham} (1797) and \textit{The False Friend} (1799), Robinson portrays the paranoia that followed these Acts, as characters are revealed as spies, double agents and informers who pass information back to the government. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of these passages.}

More recently, Sharon Setzer has pointed out the revolutionary significance in the novel of the infant, Frances: ‘Conceived not only out of legal wedlock, but in a Paris prison, Frances […] embodies the threat of a revolutionary ideology that fed the paranoia’ of British conservatives such as Edmund Burke.\footnote{Setzer, ‘Romancing the Reign of Terror,’ 539.} While this is certainly the case, I argue that the presence of the infant Fanny once more connects the novel not...
only to revolutionary France but also to Wollstonecraft herself. Like Mrs. Sedgley, Wollstonecraft lived in France during the early months of the Terror in 1793, and entered a revolutionary (secular) ‘marriage’ with the American Gilbert Imlay in order to protect herself from the decree against English citizens in Paris. Not long afterwards, she, like Mrs. Sedgley, gave birth to her daughter, Frances, affectionately known as Fanny. Compounding this similarity, Wollstonecraft, like Mrs. Sedgley, found herself deserted by the father of her child and left to face the condemnation of a judgemental society in Britain. In this way, Robinson once more marks her novel’s close connection to Wollstonecraft in order to emphasise her determination to take up the helm of 1790s feminism.

While the situation in France only hovers at the edges of Wollstonecraft’s final novel, however, infusing Maria’s language with spirited calls for equality and freedom from oppression, in The Natural Daughter, I argue, the French Revolution emerges as a central character in the plot. As such, the presence of the Revolution in the novel allows Robinson seek a radical reclamation of the utopian values of the early Revolution, marking the Jacobin rule of Terror as a perversion to be overcome on the path to liberation. This is first seen in Mrs. Sedgley’s narration of her ordeal in revolutionary France. Arriving in Paris in the winter of 1792, Mrs. Sedgley enters France at the beginning of the Great Terror, initiated by the September Massacres in which thousands of prisoners were murdered at the hands of a mob of sans-culottes (citizens mainly of the lower classes who encouraged the most radical excesses of the Jacobins). Mrs. Sedgley’s account of Paris is a scene of the most chaotic and terrifying lawlessness:

587 These details about Wollstonecraft’s life in Paris can be found in William Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author of ‘The Rights of Woman’ (1798); repr. in A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark; and, Memoirs of the Author of ‘The Rights of Woman’, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1987). This similarity between the daughters of Mrs. Sedgley and Mary Wollstonecraft has also been noted by Setzer, ‘Romancing the Reign of Terror, 538.

On our arrival at Paris, we found everything wild and licentious. Order and subordination were trampled beneath the footsteps of anarchy: [...] the people seemed nearly frantic with the plentitude of dominion; while the excess of horror was strongly and strikingly contrasted by the vaunted display of boundless sensuality. (163)

For Mrs. Sedgley, the horror of the scene is made all the more shocking by her recollection that ‘I passed a few days in Paris, two years before [...]': the change was awful and impressive. I sighed when I recollected the causes of the metamorphosis, and I shuddered while I contemplated the effects’ (163). Reminiscing nostalgically about the early years of the Revolution in 1790, this is not an all-out condemnation of the Revolution’s values, but rather a condemnation of the turn the Revolution had taken away from its original utopian course under the Jacobins.

This distinction is emphasised when Mrs. Sedgley is released from imprisonment after the death of Marat, and contemplates the British reaction to the events of France:

[...]hough an idolator of Rational Liberty, I most decidedly execrated the cruelty and licentiousness which blacken the page of Time, while History traces the annals of this momentous era. But alas! the impetuosity of political partisans, will not permit them to draw conclusions with candour, or to judge opinions by the fair rule of reason. Every individual who shrinks from oppression, every friend to the superior claims of worth and genius, is, in these suspecting times, condemned without even an examination; though were truth and impartiality to influence their judges, they would be found the first to venerate the sacred rights of social order, and the last to uphold the atrocities of anarchy. (167)

With this statement, Mrs. Sedgley makes a clear division between the true ‘idolator[s] of Rational Liberty,’ who are ‘friend[s] to the superior claims of worth and genius,’ and the Jacobins under the rule of Marat and Robespierre, whose actions of ‘cruelty and licentiousness’ will ‘blacken the page of Time.’ Moreover, the speech also works directly to criticise the British government and its oppression of British radicals as ‘the impetuosity of political partisans.’ Writing that ‘in these suspecting times,’ enlightened men and women are ‘condemned without even an examination,’ Robinson uses the speech of Mrs. Sedgley boldly to condemn the actions of the British – as well as the
French – government of the mid-1790s. In this way, Robinson is able to rescue the original ideals of the French Revolution from beneath the ravages of the Jacobin Terror, and at the same time to make those ideals appear more noble even than the ‘political partisans’ of the British government, who would condemn them as ‘anarchy.’ As I have shown, given the ‘suspecting times’ in which she wrote, this was an incredibly radical position to take.

Robinson was not the only British female radical of the 1790s to distinguish the Terror from the true course of the Revolution. In Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Scenes which passed in Various Departments of France during the Tyranny of Robespierre* (1795), Williams, like Robinson, traces the rise and fall of Robespierre as a perverted interruption to, rather than the natural development of, the French Revolution. As Neil Fraistat and Susan Lanser write in their edited edition of Williams’ *Letters Written in France*:

> While vividly representing the terror as a ‘savage’ scene ‘where all is wildly horrible, and every figure on the canvas is a murderer,’ Williams also portrays this phase of the Revolution as an aberration in which a few men become ‘monsters’ through ‘the possession of power, or the grovelling passion of fear.’ Above all, she attributes the grim events to the hypocrisy and cunning of Robespierre. […] Williams thus sets up the end of the Terror as the rebirth of sympathy, plenty, and joy.\(^{589}\)

It is very likely that Robinson had read Williams’s *Letters* and used them as inspiration for her novel. Indeed, Fraistat and Lanser write that ‘[a] considerable segment of English society was gaining its knowledge and understanding of the Revolution from her pen,’ and several of the events that occur in *The Natural Daughter* while Martha is in France seem to echo the sentiments and events expressed in Williams’s text.\(^ {590}\)

\(^{590}\) Fraistat and Lanser go on to explain that ‘her volumes were so widely distributed that they became one of the chief sources for creating English opinion about events in Revolutionary France’ (39). Gary Kelly similarly writes that Williams’s *Letters* provided a ‘picture of the times,’ being ‘widely read, influential, and even plagiarised by others.’ Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, Revolution: 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 78.
Note, for example, the way the two women detail the emotions of the French people on the overthrow of Robespierre. Here is Williams’s account:

The frantic joy which the Parisians discovered on this occasion was equal to the pusillanimous stupor into which they had been hitherto plunged. The maledictions that accompanied the tyrants on their way to execution were not, as usual, the clamour of hireling furies; they proceeded with honest indignation from the lips of an oppressed people, and burst involuntarily from the heart of the fatherless and the widow. These monsters were made to drink the cup of bitterness to the very dregs.⁵⁹¹

Here is Robinson’s:

[O]n a scaffold, pale, ghastly, lacerated, trembling at his approaching destiny, and shuddering while he anticipated the just vengeance of an offended Creator, they beheld the homicide Robespierre. […] Every wretch whose heart had palpitated under the tyranny of the remorseless despot, now dealt its groans and exercised its vengeance. (290)

Like Williams, Robinson is careful here to draw the French people in stark opposition to the tyranny of Robespierre. Their violence against these ‘monsters,’ she insists, is not the ‘pusillanimous stupor’ brought on by the ‘remorseless […] tyranny’ of the Terror. Rather, the ‘vengeance’ of the people is driven by ‘honest indignation,’ and mirrors the ‘just vengeance of an offended Creator,’ who punishes Robespierre for his ‘despot[ic]’ degradation of the Revolution’s original values. In this way, Robinson aligns her novel with the writings of a famous British female Republican in order boldly to emphasise her own political radicalism. In portraying the death of the tyrant Robespierre in the pages of her final novel, she establishes her political project: to reclaim the Revolution’s original values from beneath the corruption of the Jacobin Terror.⁵⁹²

⁵⁹¹ Helen Maria Williams, Letters Containing a Sketch of the Scenes which passed in Various Departments of France during the Tyranny of Robespierre, and of the Events which took place in Paris on the 28th of July 1794 (London, 1795), 174-175.

⁵⁹² Robinson and Williams were not the only radical British writers to depict the reign and celebrate the fall of Robespierre. Others who did so include Coleridge and Southey in their poetic play, The Fall of Robespierre (London: 1794), 24, 30; Helen Craik in Adelaide de Narbonne, with Memoirs of Charlotte de Cordet (London: 1800), iv, 36; Wordsworth in his book-length poem, The Prelude (1805), x, ll. 537-637; and Frances Burney in her novel The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties (1814), i, 11. Of these, however, only Coleridge and Southey’s play predates Robinson’s novel, and The Natural Daughter is the only radical popular novel that deals with the event in the dangerous years of the late 1790s. Indeed, as Adriana Craciun explains, while most radical novelists of the 1790s – including Godwin, Bage and Inchbald – set their revolutionary novels in Britain, Robinson, along with Charlotte Smith and Helen Craik, ‘were the first in Britain to write novels set in revolutionary France.’ While Smith’s Desmond (1792) is set in the early years of the Revolution, Robinson was the first novelist to portray the horror of
Further cementing the significance of the French Terror to the plot of *The Natural Daughter* is Robinson’s unusually precise dating of the novel. *The Natural Daughter* is unique among Robinson’s novels for its careful detailing of specific dates. Although several of her novels are situated within a particular year, not one of them traces dates and contemporary events to such an extent.\(^593\) Sharon Setzer has observed this adherence to dates in Robinson’s final novel, and uses the point to criticise her for ‘chronological inconsistencies’ between the given dates and events of the plot.\(^594\) Considering that the infant Fanny is not born until November 1793 she argues, the action of the novel cannot possibly begin nearly two years earlier in April 1792, as Robinson frames it. However, it is my contention this argument rather misses the point. Indeed, if the timescale used in the novel is compared closely to the timescale of the Revolution, it is possible to detect something quite fascinating at work in Robinson’s careful selection of dates.

Beginning in April 1792 and ending just after 28 July 1794, the novel traces, almost exactly, the timescale of the French Revolutionary Terror. It was on 25 April 1792 that the guillotine was first used as a method of execution by the revolutionary government.\(^595\) Thus, in locating the start of the novel in April 1792, Robinson immediately situates *The Natural Daughter* in relation to the first executions that were to become the hallmark of the Jacobin Terror.


\(^592\) Although *The False Friend* (1799) is dated in keeping with its epistolary form, these dates are not made to correspond with any specific real-life events in the way that *The Natural Daughter* does, beyond the general atmosphere of anxiety that followed the passing of the Gagging Acts.

\(^593\) Sharon Setzer, footnote to *The Natural Daughter*, 167n.

\(^594\) ‘A guillotine was first used on 25 April 1792.’ Paul R. Hanson, *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 152.
Martha, both sexual and physical, comes under threat. In the next clearly dated moment in the novel, Mrs. Sedgley finds herself confronted by the tyrant Marat whilst interned in the Abbaye prison in Paris. ‘Laug[ing] at all laws, moral and divine’ (166), Marat forces her to choose between becoming his mistress and facing imminent death on the scaffold. Her execution is only prevented by his murder the following day at the hands of the republican Charlotte Corday, placing the date at 13 July 1793.

The death of Marat thus marks the liberation both of Mrs. Sedgley, and of the people of France. However, like the French populace, Mrs. Sedgley has many more trials to overcome before she can truly feel herself free of oppression. On her return to England, pregnant and alone, she is disowned by her family, who believe her to be ‘the avowed mistress of the abhorred Marat’ (172). Forced to survive without support or protection, she is eventually driven to abandon her infant daughter to the care of Martha. From the information given in the novel, Fanny is conceived five months previous to Marat’s death. We can therefore ascertain that the next month of importance in the novel is November 1793, the month in which Mrs. Sedgley gives birth.

This correlation of events and dates is especially significant when we look at contemporary events in revolutionary France. As Lynn Hunt tells us in her Family Romance of the French Revolution (1992),

[O]n 2 November 1793, the Convention enacted one of its most controversial laws: it granted illegitimate children equal rights of inheritance upon proof of paternity [...] The law authorised legal proceedings by illegitimate children for establishment of paternity or maternity against parents unwilling to admit the relationship.

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596 ‘On the same night we were married à la Revolution. [...] A week only had passed, when to my unutterable chagrin I was informed, that my husband had set out for England [...] Five months passed, and I was still in prison; when one day an unknown visitor entered my apartment. [...] I now discovered that the barbarian inquisitor was the despot Marat; whose death on the following day rescued me from misery or annihilation’ (166-167).
The birth of the novel’s ‘Natural Daughter’ in the month in which all natural (or illegitimate) daughters of France are legitimised by the revolutionary government thus allows Robinson intimately to connect the infant Frances with events in the country in which she was conceived, and that is her namesake. In having the illegitimate Fanny born at this historic moment, Robinson makes explicit the radical political intentions behind the novel with regards to parenthood and legitimacy. Returning to the issue of maternity that had caused Wollstonecraft’s Maria so much grief in the forced separation from her child, Robinson depicts the birth of the infant Frances at the moment in which both mothers and their children were given increased rights at the expense of patriarchal authority, as mothers were given ‘equal rights with fathers in control over children,’ and children in return were given the right to claim their family as their own. As such, Frances, the ‘Natural Daughter’ of Robinson’s final novel, really is France’s, and brings with her the promise of greater equality for women and children in Robinson’s revolutionary utopian future.

As well as promoting the feminist ideals that are common to all her novels, Robinson here employs her novel’s timescale to emphasise her affinity to the radical egalitarian politics of the early days of the French Revolution. Cementing this, the final date given in the novel is 28 July 1794, the day of the execution of Robespierre. On this date in the novel, Martha and Mr. Morley are released from their imprisonment in the Abbaye in Paris, the ‘soft, seducing fiend’ (281) Julia commits suicide, and the pair travel to Switzerland, the location of the novel’s final climactic ending. In this way, the liberation of France from the debilitating horrors of the Jacobin Terror is made to mirror the liberation of Martha, Mrs. Sedgley, and Fanny from the suffocating oppression of Mr. Morley, and, as we shall see, from the oppressive categories of incommensurable

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598 Hunt, Family Romance, 42.
sexual difference that forced them into submission before the tyrants of patriarchal authority.

Thus, Robinson’s *Natural Daughter*, more than any other novel of the late 1790s, locates its action within the dark days of the Jacobin Terror in order to free the Revolution’s original ideals from beneath the corruptions of the tyrants, Marat and Robespierre. In so doing, Robinson stakes her claim as a truly radical 1790s thinker, remaining faithful to the Revolution’s original aims even as it was becoming increasingly dangerous to do so. In the ensuing pages, the death of the patriarchal Mr. Morley marks the coming end to patriarchal oppression of women in Robinson’s revolutionary utopian society. Before this can be affected, however, Robinson must first tackle the spectre of debilitating sentimental femininity that had caused Wollstonecraft so much anxiety in *The Wrongs of Women*. She achieves this through the depiction of the dramatic death of Martha’s licentious double, Julia.

‘THE SOFT, SEDUCING FIEND’: JULIA’S SUICIDE AND THE DEATH OF SENTIMENTAL FEMININITY

While Martha had been pursuing her independence, Julia had descended further and further into licentiousness and vice, tricking a young man of wealth into marrying her to conceal her illegitimate child, running a dishonest faro (gambling) bank, and committing her mother to a madhouse – telling Martha that she was dead – in order to claim the family wealth for herself. When Martha and Mr. Morley are reunited prior to their journey to Paris and Switzerland, Martha discovers the truly horrifying depths of Julia’s depravity:

That sister was your rival. The child she bore was mine! She was the soft, seducing fiend that tempted me to the destruction of your happiness; and I should even to this hour have been the dupe of her artifice, had I not suspected that, to augment her catalogue of crimes, she neglected and destroyed it. (281)

With the crime of infanticide, Julia demonstrates the ultimate consequences, as Robinson understood them, of the eighteenth-century ‘model of feminine excellence’
Encouraged into the passive sentimentality that requires them to take no responsibility for their actions, and pushed onto the path of vice by the restrictions placed on virtuous women in the patriarchal economy, women such as Julia lack the rational virtue and active sensibility necessary to live as truly good citizens of society. Instead, they become devious mimics, aping the passive sensibility of heroines such as Rousseau’s Julie, while secretly indulging in the most appalling acts.

This, for Robinson, is the end result of the eighteenth-century discourse of biological incommensurability that deems all women passive. Like Walsingham in my previous chapter, Julia’s sentimental femininity is all performance. While Martha’s ‘art was Nature’ (179), a liberating performance always connected to her inner spirit of rational sensibility that imbues her with the radical power to transcend the cultural limits of incommensurable sexual difference, Julia’s nature is entirely subsumed by her ‘powerful artillery of arts’ (225), and without the guidance of an inner conscience she lacks the fortitude of rational virtue required to resist the temptations of vice. In order for Robinson to overcome this false ‘model of feminine excellence,’ and to encourage women instead to follow Martha on the road to utopian enlightenment, she must first kill off this corrupt paragon of passive sentimental femininity, and she does so in the moment of Julia’s suicide in the bed of her tyrannical lover, Robespierre.

When Martha and Mr. Morley are imprisoned in Paris, Julia appears as ‘the unnatural fiend’ (289) who threatens them with the statement: ‘Your life is in my hands. My lover is your judge; and he is all powerful, the daring Robespierre’ (289). Following the execution of Robespierre, the newly liberated Martha runs through the ransacked apartments of the executed tyrant to the bedchamber that houses Julia’s rotting corpse.

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599 Robinson was not the only radical 1790s writer to use the image of infanticide to criticise eighteenth-century sex and gender roles. In *Nature and Art* (1796), Elizabeth Inchbald likewise has a female character commit infanticide to conceal the shame of an illegitimate pregnancy. See Amy Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

600 See Chapter 4 of this thesis.

601 For my definition of ‘rational virtue,’ see Chapter 1 of this thesis.
As Sharon Setzer has shown, this scene bears a strong resemblance to Burke’s depiction of the raid of the Royal palace in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It is perhaps useful to reproduce Burke’s passage here:

A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with [...] blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment. [They] were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewn with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses.

Here, by comparison, is the passage from *The Natural Daughter*:

Mrs. Morley, whose sublimity of soul neither insult nor oppression could contaminate, flew to the hotel where she had last seen her abandoned sister. She found the gates all open; the populace had plundered the apartments; she entered the saloon, beyond the anti-chamber; the floor was deluged with blood! murder had been permitted to blur the face of noon-day, and the abode of guilty luxury now presented the mere wreck of desolation. Every wretch whose heart had palpitated under the tyranny of the remorseless despot, now dealt its groans and exercised its vengeance, on even those objects which, only by being inanimate, had escaped his cruelty.

[...] As soon as the first spell of horror began to subside, she rushed through the apartments wild and astonished; the hangings which were of velvet were torn from the walls and trampled by the multitude; the costly plates of looking-glass were shattered in every direction; the inlaid cabinets defaced and thrown upon the ground; the splendid lustres torn from their suspending chains, and strewn about in glittering fragments. She entered the chamber of the exterminated monster: the bed on which he had slumbered, but not reposed; the pillow on which he had, for many preceding months, pressed his guilt-fevered brain, now supported the head of the lifeless, self-murdered Julia. Her blackening form declared the potency of that poison, which freed her soul from mortal, conscious misery, to endure — Here let her memory rest. (290)

In Robinson’s final novel, Burke’s ‘band of cruel ruffians and assassins,’ set on the murder of the innocent queen, is replaced by ‘every wretch’ who had suffered ‘under the tyranny of the remorseless despot.’ While Burke’s palace is ‘polluted by massacre,’ in *The Natural Daughter* the ‘vengeance’ of the emancipated sufferers is reserved primarily for the ‘inanimate’ objects ‘of guilty luxury.’ These ‘glittering
fragments’ of the corrupt Jacobin regime work to expose the hypocrisy of Robespierre’s faction, who had condemned Marie Antoinette to death for the same crimes of ‘guilty luxury’ only a few months previously.\footnote{For more information on Robespierre’s part in the Terrors, see Colin Haydon and William Doyle, \textit{Robespierre} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially Norman Hampson’s chapter, ‘Robespierre and the Terror,’ 155-174.} In this way, Robinson is able to substitute the death of the tyrant Robespierre for the death of her idol Marie Antoinette. In this passage, Robinson intentionally references the language of Burke’s \textit{Reflections} in order to execute a reversal of the scene he depicts. In so doing, she enacts what Setzer has termed a ‘narrative revenge’ for the unjust execution of her favoured innocent queen.\footnote{Setzer, ‘Romancing the Reign of Terror,’ 544.}

However, this is not just a ‘narrative revenge’ against the excess of the Jacobins. Rather, I argue that in placing Julia’s corpse in the prominent position of the bed that had been so significant to Burke’s account – ‘[the ruffians] pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked’\footnote{Burke, \textit{Reflections}, 71.} – Robinson works also to connect Marie Antoinette with the dissipated Julia. In so doing, Robinson enacts a punishment, not only of the Jacobin men who condemned the French queen, but also of the symbol of passive sentimental womanhood truly guilty of the unsubstantiated crimes for which Marie Antoinette was executed. Indeed, the offences of which Marie Antoinette was accused – seizing power from men through insidious methods of seduction and committing horrendous acts on her infant son – are exactly those that Julia perpetrates in the course of the novel.

In her substitution of Julia’s blackened body for that of the naked Marie Antoinette, then, Robinson thus works to overwrite the Jacobin image of the voluptuous and vampiric Marie Antoinette with Julia – the masculinist symbol of feminine wickedness – who she can then proceed to destroy. In so doing, I argue, she seeks to exonerate the innocent queen, murdering this false image of her, so that her true virtue
can be redeemed. At the same time, Robinson turns the lens of criticism back on Britain, revealing the hypocrisy at work in a society that would condemn the ‘friend[s] to superior claims of worth and genius’ (167) as traitors, while corrupt women such as Julia are celebrated as ‘model[s] of feminine excellence’ (93). Thus, through the twin deaths of Robespierre and Julia, Robinson here enacts her own radical ‘vengeance’ (290): both against the Jacobin perversion of the original ideals of the French Revolution and their inhuman murder of the persecuted queen; and against the corruption of British society that maintains a patriarchal discourse of incommensurable sexual difference, and seeks to render all women, like Julia, in the dangerously irrational posture of passive sentimental femininity.

Julia’s death may at first seem shockingly violent, and even potentially misogynistic. Indeed, it evokes Virginia Woolf’s insistence on the need for women writers to kill the ‘Angel in the House’ in order to be able to write: ‘I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me.’ Just as with Woolf’s ‘Angel in the House,’ I argue, for Robinson, Julia’s character represents the patriarchal paragon of passive sentimental femininity imposed on women by men; a paragon that must be ‘killed’ before women could be able to find a new way of existing beyond the limiting categories of biological incommensurability that Robinson so desired.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that Julia’s violent death does make for uncomfortable reading from a feminist perspective, and it begs the question why Robinson could not seek instead to rehabilitate Julia under the influence of her enlightened sister. There is another aspect to the suicide that might explain this problematic decision on Robinson’s part, however, and this again leads us back to

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Wollstonecraft. Indeed, not only does Julia’s suicide recall the bed of Marie-Antoinette, I argue. It also recalls the attempted suicide of Maria at the end of Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*. In having Julia swallow poison Robinson echoes the fragmentary ending of Wollstonecraft’s final novel, in which Maria also swallows poison after suffering the persecutions of patriarchal society:

She swallowed the laudanum; her soul was calm – the tempest had subsided – and nothing remained but an eager longing to forget herself – to fly from the anguish she had endured to escape from thought – from this hell of disappointment. (*WW*, 202)

For Wollstonecraft’s Maria, suffering under the pressures of patriarchal society and struggling against the impulses of passive sensibility, suicide seems the only way to ‘fre[e] her soul from mortal, conscious misery’ (*ND*, 290). For Robinson, however, this pessimistic ending provided an inadequate resolution of ‘the wrongs of woman,’ and in her final novel she replaces Maria’s suicide with the death of the wholly corrupt patriarchal symbol of passive sentimental femininity in order to liberate eighteenth-century women from this desolate fate. For Robinson, it seems, as uncomfortable and problematic as it may be, this patriarchal ‘model of feminine excellence’ (93) must symbolically be destroyed before women can be free at last to transcend the confines of these limiting gender roles, and truly become the ‘Natural Daughters’ of her utopian new world order.

In this way, then, *The Natural Daughter* traces the path of the Terrors in the French Revolution, mirroring events in France with occurrences in the lives of Robinson’s British characters, in order to emphasise the link between the oppression of the French people and the oppression of women under British society. Exposing the horrors of the Terror as the corrupt machinations of the Jacobin faction, Robinson is able once more to reclaim the early radical potential of the French Revolution from its
perverted course under Robespierre. Exposing the depth of vice that Julia falls into over the course of the novel, Robinson is able to reveal the inadequacy for women of this patriarchal model of passive sentimental femininity, and to encourage them instead to follow Martha in her desire to transcend the limiting eighteenth-century categories of incommensurable sexual difference and search for a new and better way of life. In so doing, Robinson offers a ray of hope at the end of the novel. In the twin deaths of Robespierre and Julia lies the suggestion that, just as the French people were able to overcome the Terrors and return the Revolution to its rightful path, so British women could one day overcome the tyranny of incommensurable sexual difference to become utopian possessors of rational sensibility.

In the final part of this discussion, I turn to the familial relationships between Martha, Mrs. Sedgley, Mr. Morley, lord Francis and little Fanny, in order to explore this fascinating vision of true escape from patriarchal oppression in the closing pages of the novel. While Wollstonecraft’s heroines in The Wrongs of Woman are forced to seek seclusion from the unending persecutions of patriarchal society, in Robinson’s The Natural Daughter, Martha and Mrs. Sedgley successfully escape the clutches of the husband/father patriarch – both through their joint mothering of a shared natural daughter, and in their egalitarian relationships with lord Francis, who presents a radically alternative model of enlightened masculinity to counteract the oppressive power of the patriarchal tyrant, Mr. Morley. In so doing, I argue, in the closing pages of her final novel, Robinson is able finally to look forward to a revolutionary utopian society: one in which men and women could live and love on equal terms, and the ‘Natural Daughters’ of Britain could at last be reclaimed as citizens, just as they had been in the early halcyon days of revolutionary France.
A NEW KIND OF FAMILY: REVOLUTIONARY MATERNITY AND THE POWER
OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

While revolutionary concerns are central to both novels, I argue that the most fascinating elements in the texts are the moments in which Wollstonecraft and Robinson explore relationships: between men and women, between parents and children, and between women among themselves. In all of these relationships, I contend, Wollstonecraft and Robinson test the boundaries of what constitutes a family, and seek to create new possibilities for egalitarian relationships beyond the restraints of patriarchal society. While Wollstonecraft ultimately finds solace in friendships between women away from men, however, Robinson refuses to settle for this unsatisfactory compromise, wishing rather to rescue both intra- and inter-gender relations in her novel, and to re-envision the man, as well as the woman, for her future feminist utopia.

In the closing pages of her final novel, Robinson overcomes Wollstonecraft’s desolate image of retreat from society and from men by enacting a radical revisioning of the heterosexual union in the marriage between Martha and lord Francis. Through this utopian relationship, I argue, she is at last able to imagine the union that she had been searching for throughout her 1790s writings: a new vision of the revolutionary family that could finally transcend the limits of incommensurable sexual difference, and boldly resist the demands of patriarchal tyranny in a truly egalitarian network of relationships.

As we have seen, the heterosexual relationships in both novels are fraught with conflict. As Maria and Martha traverse the worlds of their novels, they fail to discover a single happy marriage that could present a model for emulation. Among their parents, Maria’s mother is ruled by the ‘absolute authority’ (125) of her father; Martha’s father is ‘despised’ by her mother, with the ‘half-subdued contempt’ of ‘Resignation’ (93); and Jemima is the result of a cruel seduction, following which her father ‘began to hate’ her mother, leaving her to die of sorrow during labour (102).
The marriages among the women of their own generation fare no better. For Maria, in *The Wrongs of Woman*, marriage is a desolate state: ‘Marriage, as at present constituted, she considered as leading to immorality’ (193). Her husband is revealed to be a dissipated libertine, who attempts to prostitute her in exchange for the non-payment of his debts: ‘He assured him [the man who propositions her], “that every woman had her price,” and, with the grossest indecency, hinted, that he should be glad to have the duty of a husband taken off his hands’ (161). During her period of independence from her husband, Maria encounters other married couples and finds that here, too, the women are beaten, robbed, and in every way debased by their husbands.

Likewise, in *The Natural Daughter*, Martha’s husband is a ‘prejudiced morta[l]’ who viewed his wife as a being ‘created for the conveniences of domestic life’ (118). He is a sanctimonious hypocrite, condemning Martha for a perceived loss of virtue while himself engaging in illicit sexual relations with Julia. Indeed, Mr. Morley is also – at least figuratively – the husband of Mrs. Sedgley, whom he had seduced into a revolutionary marriage and abandoned in Paris. When she appeals to him for protection, he responds by recoiling ‘at the immorality of avowing such a marriage’ (172), while revealing the true depths of his hypocrisy in offering to ‘ever be [her] friend and [her] protector’ if she would only ‘content [herself] to relinquish the name of wife’ and live as his mistress (172). Finally, in Julia’s brief union to the wealthy and dissipated Gregory Leadenhead, marriage is once more exposed as a sham, as she gives birth to Mr. Morley’s son four months after their marriage. Even then, it is not Julia’s promiscuity that precipitates their divorce. Rather, it is the Leadenheads’ horror at Martha’s ‘low’ profession as an actress that drives them to enforce a separation:

> [T]he bastard-bar, which was destined to darken the glow of armorial bearings, they considered as the misfortune of a fashionable life; but the vulgar necessities of an itinerant beggar were too degrading not to be felt. […] Julia and her heroic squire, by mutual consent, signed articles of separation. (193)
In this way, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson demonstrate the debased state of relationships between men and women in eighteenth-century society, and reveal the corrupt basis on which marital contracts are conducted. In these perverted times, they argue, marriage is no more than an economic contract, sought not out of love, but out of more base or mercenary desires. With only the models of their unhappy parents to look up to, and under the pressure of their oppressive patriarchal fathers, Maria and Martha both enter marriages from a desire ‘more of obtaining my freedom, than of my lover’ (WW, 138). In so doing, however, both women discover that ‘in my haste to escape from a temporary dependence, […] I had been caught in a trap and caged for life’ (WW, 144). In their attempts to break free from this ‘trap’ of patriarchal marriage, Maria and Martha seek out alternative relationships, rejecting the cyclical pattern of socially-sanctioned but woefully dysfunctional heterosexual relationships in favour of alternate sources of felicity, both in their experience of maternity, and in the solace of female companionship.

In seeking an alternative site for positive relationships, maternity becomes an important site of power for the women of the novels. In both The Wrongs of Woman and The Natural Daughter, Maria and Jemima, and Martha and Mrs. Sedgley, find a strength through their experience of the maternal relationship that leads ultimately to the development of a powerful and empowered relationship with each other as women.

In The Wrongs of Woman, Maria seeks solace in her maternal relationship with her daughter. Rejecting the patriarchal influences that seek to control her as a possession of her husband, Maria instead concentrates all her energies in her relationship with her child, envisioning a utopian space in which she could raise her daughter outside the subjection of the patriarchal marriage market. Indeed, throughout the novel, maternity is a site of battle between the strictures of patriarchal society and the subjectivity that women desire to assert. As a prostitute, Jemima’s narrative reveals
that the communality of women’s suffering crosses boundaries of class and ‘virtue.’ Oppressed by her experience of rape and prostitution at the hands of patriarchal society, and condemned as a ‘fallen’ woman, Jemima loses all sense of self-worth. As a result of the cruel messages of society that refuses to ‘feel for those that err’ (ND, 202) – to use Robinson’s language – Jemima is unable to derive power from her feelings of maternity as Maria had done, leading her to abort her illegitimate pregnancy. It is not until she learns the story of Maria’s determined struggle for the right to maternity that her own connection to her sense of self begins to re-emerge. Thus, for Jemima, too, maternity becomes a site of female power and liberation. Through Maria, Jemima is given a second chance at motherhood, and their experience of communality is sealed in the shared bond of comaternity.

In *The Natural Daughter*, Mrs. Sedgley experiences elements of both Maria and Jemima’s relationships with maternity. Due to the torturous treatment she has received by an unforgiving society, Mrs. Sedgley’s first experience of maternity is not one of celebration. Rather, the suppressive constraints of patriarchal society conspire to overwhelm her, as they had Jemima, leading her to cry out to Martha, ‘Advise me how to conceal my infant!’ (119). Without the shelter of a socially-designated male ‘protector,’ in the eyes of society Mrs. Sedgley becomes, like Jemima, divided from the power of maternity. In taking the choice of her husband into her own hands and, even more scandalously, in doing so in a republican country where the standard rules of patriarchal exchange did not apply, Mrs. Sedgley had perverted the course of the patriarchal marriage market, and for that reason she, like Jemima, becomes an outcast: ‘I had been compelled to form an union [*sic*] for the preservation of existence. But I *had* formed it, and that circumstance was sufficient to stigmatize me in [my family’s] opinion for ever’ (167).
It is only much later, through her friendship with Martha, that Mrs. Sedgley is able to reflect on her past actions, and once more begin to reconnect to her inner ‘maternal longings’ (274):

The sorrows which she had been doomed to suffer were less agonising than this moment of excessive sensibility. She pressed the unacknowledged innocent to her bosom: she blessed it, for the first time, with a mother’s kisses: she wished now, ardently wished, to steal that precious treasure which fear and a false pride had once induced her to abandon. [...] ‘Forgive me, innocent, deserted angel! forgive that wretch whose false delicacy could master her maternal fondness – who could expose thy helpless infancy to the perils of the world, whose scorn her timid sensibility had not courage to encounter!’ (274-275)

On her reunion with her daughter, Mrs. Sedgley’s ‘maternal fondness’ is finally able to emerge, as she comes to recognise that the ‘exquisite sensibility’ (268) of motherhood is a power far greater than the oppressive powers of the ‘false pride’ of social shame. Indeed, it is this power of maternity that at last gives Mrs. Sedgley the strength to declare Mr. Morley as ‘thou inhuman father!’ (294). In so doing, she is able finally to break free of the shackles of patriarchal society, denouncing Mr. Morley and reclaiming her identity as the liberated natural mother of a vindicated natural daughter.

For Martha, the case is slightly different. While Martha, like Maria, refuses to perform the role of patriarchal wifely femininity, neither does she fully retreat into the feminine sanctuary of maternity. Instead, Robinson allows her final heroine to envisage a new kind of heterosexual union: one that would not require her to sacrifice her claims to the ‘aristocracy of genius’ (181), or to subordinate herself to her husband. The basis of this alternative heterosexuality resides, for Martha, not in the sexual or the maternal body, but rather in the life of the mind. Throughout the novel, Martha is driven by a personal sense of morality that does not capitulate to society’s strictures and mores. It is with this determination to follow her own inclinations that she is first drawn to adopt Fanny.
Through this bold act of adoption, Martha, like Jemima, is able to experience the power of maternity without the physical act of giving birth. Unlike Jemima, however, this experience of the power of maternity does not mark a retreat from society. On the contrary, just as Maria’s daughter inspires her with a desire to escape the confines of patriarchal marriage in order to protect herself and her child, and allows her to experience her body as something productive and powerful, rather than a mere vessel for male desire, Martha’s adoption of Fanny inspires her with the power to leave the suppression of her marital home and to seek independence in the knowledge of ‘innate worth’ (169).

For Martha, then, the experience of maternity does not only give her a renewed understanding of familial relationships through her experience of maternity, it also empowers her with the strength to live out her desire for intellectual freedom and creative expression. Throughout the novel, Martha resists the societal pressures that would condemn her for mothering the daughter of another woman, and through her experience of the power of maternity she seeks to establish her own identity in opposition to the patriarchal society that would command her to remain a silent conduit to her husband. In the face of this pressure, her empowering experience of maternity instead inspires Martha to authorise herself (in both senses of the word) as a participant in the ‘aristocracy of genius’ (181), expanding her possession of rational virtue and active sensibility through her novels, her poems and, above all, her acting. Indeed, just as little Fanny is the ‘Natural Daughter’ of Mrs. Sedgley, Martha, too, is revealed to be a ‘Natural Daughter’ in the sense that ‘the perfection of her art was Nature’ (179), in opposition to the manufactured mores of society epitomised in Julia’s ‘powerful artillery of arts’ (225).

Thus, through their shared experiences of female friendship and the power of maternity, Wollstonecraft and Robinson depict their heroines as inspired with the ability
to overwrite the agonising experiences of patriarchal marriage with new and fulfilling familial relationships that would not require them to sacrifice their own sense of ‘innate worth’ (179) to those of their husbands or fathers. In the powerful maternal experience of Martha, Robinson demonstrates her radical belief that parenthood is not determined by biology, but rather by the impulses of rational virtue and active sensibility that encourage all men and women to care for the children of the next generation. In disentangling maternity from the limits of material sex and gender, then, Robinson inspires Martha with the power to transcend the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference. In the closing pages of the novel, I argue, this power of transcendence will lead Robinson to envision entirely new and revolutionary familial relationships, not only between mothers and children and in female companionship, but, as we shall see, in a radical revisioning of the heterosexual union as well.

THOU INHUMAN FATHER!’: THE RADICAL POWER OF PERFORMATIVE SPEECH AND THE DEATH OF THE FATHER/HUSBAND PATRIARCH

Empowered by their relationships to their daughters and to each other, the only problematic relationships that remain for the women of Wollstonecraft’s and Robinson’s final novels lie in the seemingly unrelenting circularity of compulsory heterosexuality under the strictures of patriarchal society. This cycle of patriarchal oppression, it appears, will continue as long as Maria and Jemima, Martha and Mrs. Sedgley, allow themselves to be drawn into the cycle of exchange between men.

In Wollstonecraft’s The Wrongs of Woman, the dream of romantic heterosexuality cannot ultimately be fulfilled or fulfilling for a woman who would demand the right to govern her own destiny. In the fragmented endings of the novel, Maria’s sentimental hero Darnford is, like Robinson’s 1797 antihero Walsingham,
proved to be a fraud, and together with Jemima, she retreats from society, abandoning all future hope of relationships with men. In this way, Maria and Jemima are united through the sharing of their stories, their empowerment as mothers of a shared daughter, and their implicit self-reclamation as subjects beyond the reach of patriarchal influence. In the final fragments of the novel it appears that in order to carve out an alternative future for their daughter, Wollstonecraft’s heroines must finally enact a full retreat from society. It is only with a complete rejection of heterosexual relationships and the patriarchal society in which they are conducted, it seems, that Maria and Jemima can finally escape the suffocating categories of eighteenth-century sex and gender that had divided them from their sense of self-worth, and threatened the fate of their shared daughter.

In the closing pages of Robinson’s novel, however, we see a very different conclusion emerge. Unwilling to sacrifice heterosexual love in her vision of an egalitarian utopian future, Robinson instead boldly rewrites the fragmentary ending of Wollstonecraft’s novel into a radically utopian vision, enacting the symbolic murder of the domineering father/husband patriarch that oppresses women in the confining categories of incommensurable sexual difference, in order to envisage a new kind of radical masculinity that would reopen the possibility for women to forge egalitarian heterosexual unions with men as equal citizens of a revolutionary new world order.

As Dustin Friedman has shown, this attempt to envisage a radically reconfigured masculinity had, in part, been attempted by Wollstonecraft. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Friedman argues, Wollstonecraft ‘inaugurates a new way of talking and thinking about masculinity’ with the introduction of Maria’s uncle, who represents ‘the aesthetically

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611 The fourth fragmentary plotline at the close of *The Wrongs of Woman* simply reads ‘Divorced by her husband–Her lover unfaithful–Pregnancy–Miscarriage–Suicide’ (202). For Walsingham’s fraudulence see Chapter 4 of this thesis.
productive and creative man of artistic sensibilities.'\textsuperscript{612} Friedman contends that Maria’s uncle exhibits the qualities of universal benevolence that, as I have argued, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson promote in their novels. However, this ‘paragon’ of positive masculinity comes at the cost of (hetero)sexual desire: ‘This figure of the “benevolent uncle” […] serves as an exemplar of benevolence through his abjuration of marriage and heterosexual production. […] [H]e can only be an effective “parent of the mind” when he no longer has the potential to be an actual parent.’\textsuperscript{613} Thus, in Maria’s relationship with her uncle, Friedman asserts, Wollstonecraft did begin to imagine positive and productive relationships between men and women, but only at the expense of the heterosexual union.

When Robinson came to write \textit{The Natural Daughter}, however, she was unwilling to give up the heterosexual union as the price of female freedom as Wollstonecraft had done. Instead, I argue, she begins to envisage a new kind of radical masculine role model in the figure of lord Francis Sherville. Throughout most of the novel, lord Francis appears to be another Darnford, the cunning sophist who speaks the language of enlightened liberty, only to be exposed in the end as a libertine. Like Darnford, who relates how his youth was spent in ‘vices’ (\textit{WW}, 94) and dissipation, lord Francis is introduced to the novel through his libertine reputation, with the rumour that he ‘has debauched more wives and daughters than any man of age in the three kingdoms’ (\textit{ND}, 133). Hearing that he ‘has more things [children] at nurse than his estate’ (134), Martha comes to suspect that Francis is the father of little Fanny, and the libertine betrayer of Mrs. Sedgley.

The truly revolutionary character of lord Francis comes to light, however, when he agrees to adopt Fanny: ‘How generous, how benevolently noble did such conduct appear, when contrasted with the jealous and suspicious pride of Mr. Morley’ (140).

\textsuperscript{613} Friedman, ““Parents of the Mind”,” 437, 444, 443.
While Mr. Morley preaches small-minded morality, lord Francis embodies the true virtues of universal benevolence in his treatment of Martha and Fanny. Indeed, lord Francis’s apparent goodness is perplexing for Martha, who struggles to assimilate the man she knows to the man who betrayed her friend:

[S]he could scarcely suppose it possible that a soul so nobly philanthropic would have debased itself by an action so unworthy; and yet the circumstances which had transpired were so strongly calculated to corroborate his guilt, that even the humanity of his behaviour towards her, by appearing like assumed virtue, tended only to brand him with hypocrisy. (250)

At this point in the novel, Francis does appear to have become another Darnford, as he seems hypocritically to be preaching the language of benevolence while privately indulging in licentiousness and vice. However, this understanding of him was not to last. Indeed, it was to be entirely overturned in the cathartic mountains of Rousseau’s Switzerland.

With her mind focussed on the vindication of her innocence, Martha leads Mr. Morley to Switzerland to see Mrs. Sedgley. It is fitting that the novel’s denouement takes place in a country that, like France, had recently undergone a revolution. Released from the social constraints of conservative Britain, and imbued with the fresh air of revolution, the women of the novel find in this radical space a new freedom to speak out against oppression, leading Mrs. Sedgley, and even little Fanny, to join Martha in a vocal reassertion of control over their relationships.

Indeed, just as, in Wollstonecraft’s novel, Maria’s rescue from near-suicide comes ultimately from her own daughter’s cry of ‘Mamma!’ (203), for Martha in The Natural Daughter, it is little Fanny’s trembling ‘mother’ (293), as she seeks Martha’s protection from the demonic behaviour of Mr. Morley, that urges on the explosive conclusion of the novel. In fact, it is my assertion that this moment of speech from the

614 Indeed, according to Ulrich Hoff, the region of Vaud (Mrs. Sedgley’s place of retreat, Lausanne, was the capital) was one of the most enthusiastic in its support for the Revolution. Ulrich Im Hoff, ‘Switzerland,’ in Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution, ed. Otto Dann and John Rowland Dinwiddy (London: Hambledon Press, 1988), 183-198 (194).
novel’s ‘Natural Daughter’ marks the moment at which Robinson once more invokes the subversive power of theatrical feminism, to a more radical effect than ever before in her writing. In her first utterance in the novel, I argue that Fanny’s declaration in fact constitutes a radical act of performative speech that, in its insurrectionary potential, leads to revolutionary changes in the lives of her many parents.

The concept of performative speech acts was originally developed by J.L. Austin. Austin argued that performative utterances (which he termed ‘illocutionary acts’) are those that invoke what they state – ‘performance of an act in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something’ –, such as a priest leading a marriage stating, ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’ In *Excitable Speech* (1997), Judith Butler explores the political potential of such performative utterances. In this text, she explains that ‘the capacity of [established] terms to acquire non-ordinary meanings’ bears ‘political promise’ in constituting the potential for these performative utterances to become ‘insurrectionary acts.’ To return to my previous example, the established term of marriage bears ‘political promise’ when used in a ‘non-ordinary way’ to refer to the union of two men or two women, thus becoming an ‘insurrectionary act’ through which to claim greater rights for the gay community.

In the novels of Wollstonecraft and Robinson, I assert, the cries of the infant daughters become ‘insurrectionary acts’ in the momentous effects they have on the people around them. In Wollstonecraft’s novel, the cry of her daughter represents the impetus through which Maria finally gains the courage to extract herself wholly from the tortuous world of patriarchal heterosexual relationships, moving away from passive desire for Darnford – ‘wish[ing] to be alive only to love’ (191) – to once more being possessed with the radical and active power of maternity: ‘The conflict is over! – I will live for my child!’ (203).

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In Robinson’s novel, little Fanny’s acknowledgement of Martha as a second ‘mother’ pushes the release of the heroines from patriarchal oppression still further than this, acting as the impetus to events which finally liberate Robinson’s heroines from the tyranny of patriarchal society. Fanny’s performative utterance here constitutes an ‘accent […] of nature’ (293). In using the established term ‘mother’ (293) to describe Martha, Fanny performs an insurrectionary speech act, revolutionising the relationship between mother and child from one of biology to one of rational sensibility. Martha is Fanny’s mother: in her love and protection for the infant they are family; an assertion that infuriates the patriarchal Mr. Morley in the way in which it establishes its primary relationships outside the patriarchal paradigm of marriage.

On threatening to destroy this little harbinger of change however, it is Mr. Morley himself who is caught in the tangled web of patriarchal relationships. On witnessing the violent actions of Mr. Morley and the revolutionary words of little Fanny, Mrs. Sedgley is imbued with a similar power of speech, and for the first time in the novel finds herself finally able to assert the truth that Mr. Morley is the child’s ‘inhuman father!’ (294), thus performing an insurrectionary performative utterance of her own. On hearing this insurrectionary ‘fiat of destiny’ (294), there occurs a short gap in the action of the novel which seems to indicate that Mr. Morley’s death is brought about by the revolutionary action of Mrs. Sedgley’s speech alone:

‘My child! my infant! oh Morley, Morley! thou inhuman father!’
Mr. Morley heard the fiat of destiny! He heard it pronounced by lady Susan Sherville; the sister of the noble, liberal lord Francis. The deserted mother of his own unknown offspring.
Lady Susan was conveyed by her brother and Mrs. Morley, to the hermit’s cell. They had witnessed the just vengeance of insulted Heaven! They had seen the libertin who, under the mask of sanctity, had violated all the laws of honour and religion, who had assumed through life the name of a philanthropist merely as a safeguard from suspicion, perish! The scene was awfully impressive. It was the stern judgement of an offended GOD, exemplified amidst the grandest works of nature!’ (294)
In this utterance, Mrs. Sedgley enacts a revolutionary insurrectionary act that transforms the familial relationships of the listeners. Plunging to his death, Mr. Morley is stripped first of his patriarchal power and then subsequently of his life, taking with him the suffocating spectre of patriarchy that had haunted the steps of the women of both novels in their struggles to live as independent and enlightened citizens.

As husband to both Martha and Mrs. Sedgley and as father to Fanny, Mr. Morley truly does symbolise the ultimate father/husband patriarch that had pursued Maria and Jemima in *The Wrongs of Woman* to the point of forcing them out of society. The union of ‘GOD’ and ‘nature’ in their ‘stern judgement’ of Mr. Morley’s actions further vindicates the women, as it establishes Martha, Mrs. Sedgley and little Fanny on the side of goodness in opposition to the tyrannical patriarchy represented by Mr. Morley. In this moment, a dramatic revolution occurs, too, for Mrs. Sedgley, as she is transformed in the textual gap that represents the death of Mr. Morley into ‘lady Susan’ Sherville. Finally set free through her radical act of speech from the debilitating oppression of patriarchal judgement, lady Susan is finally able to reclaim the name and status that Mr. Morley’s heinous actions had taken from her.

Moreover, this is also a freeing moment for Martha, who like Mrs. Sedgley is liberated from a domineering husband. Indeed, the implications of this freedom for Martha extend still further, as they once more open her up to the possibility of egalitarian heterosexual union with the newly vindicated lord Francis Sherville. While Mrs. Sedgley’s performative utterance enacts an ‘insurrectionary act’ that leads to the death of Mr. Morley, I argue, it is in this final relationship between Martha and lord Francis that we can at last begin to see the staging of a truly revolutionary family.

Lord Francis’s revolutionary potential as a new kind of model of masculinity is hinted in his Christian name. He, like Fanny, is a symbolic child of the early ideals of revolutionary France, and in his relationships with Martha, Fanny, and lady Susan he
becomes a new and powerful male role model for the women to build their futures on. Thus, in the symbolic death of the father/husband patriarch, Mr. Morley, Robinson at last succeeds in liberating men from the crisis of masculinity that had haunted the pages of her 1797 novel, *Walsingham*. Instead of the crippling anxiety of Walsingham, in the character of the vindicated lord Francis Robinson is finally able to depict a man in possession of the radical masculinity of Sir Sidney Aubrey, who transcends the limitations of incommensurable sexual difference to unite the best qualities of ‘masculine’ rational virtue and ‘feminine’ active sensibility.

Indeed, in the closing pages of the novel, Martha, lord Francis, lady Susan and little Fanny join together to create a new kind of revolutionary family: one built not only on the biological and economic relationships of patriarchal society, but on relationships grounded in the twin markers of transcendent genius: rational virtue and benevolent sensibility. In the union of Martha and lord Francis, Robinson is at last able to rescue heterosexual marriage from the doomed fragmentary ending of Wollstonecraft’s final novel. For Martha, marriage to lord Francis is only thinkable on the condition that lady Susan and little Fanny will be considered as an integral part of their family life, and, in a re-enactment of Martha’s radical claim to non-biological maternity, lord Francis too, becomes a second father to the infant, Fanny.

As ‘the bright dawn broke over the […] death’ of the old world order (295), the formation of this little group thus enacts the staging of a truly revolutionary family: a network of radical relationships built on the very egalitarian notions of social, political, and familial equality that Wollstonecraft had so longed for in *The Wrongs of Woman*, but had ultimately failed to imagine. In the closing moments of Robinson’s final novel, I argue, we at last begin to glimpse the beginnings of that which Robinson had been striving in her theatrical feminist writings throughout her life: a radically new kind of

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617 See Chapter 4 of this thesis.
family grouping that could at last erase the ravages of the Terror to become the Natural Daughters and Sons of the early ideals of the French Revolution. In their transcendent union of rational virtue and benevolent sensibility, it seems, Martha’s revolutionary family truly are Franc(e/i)’s.

In thus establishing a radical feminist vision of utopian relationships beyond the patriarchal paradigm – between men and women, between parents and children, and between women among themselves – it is my contention that Robinson uses her final novel to rewrite the fragmentary ending of Wollstonecraft’s last work into a joyful manifesto for the future. In her bold utopian vision of a revolutionary family grouping that transcends the limiting eighteenth-century categories of incommensurable sexual difference, I argue, in *The Natural Daughter* Robinson is at last able to bring together the strands of theatrical feminism that she had woven throughout the 1790s, as the transcendent female genius of her Marie Antoinette and Sappho writings is at last married to the utopian image of radical masculinity depicted in *Walsingham* to stage the inception of a truly revolutionary family. In so doing, Robinson is finally able to trace the shape of a new kind of society beyond the tyranny of patriarchal control: a utopian vision of the future that could finally right The Wrongs of Woman, and seal her place in the British national consciousness as the Natural feminist Daughter of the late Mary Wollstonecraft, true heir to the revolutionary cause of *The Rights of Woman*.

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618 For a reading of Robinson’s Marie Antoinette writings, see Chapter 2 of this thesis. For a reading of her Sappho writings, see Chapter 3. For an exploration of radial masculinity in *Walsingham*, see Chapter 4.
**CONCLUSION**

**Mary Robinson’s ‘Visionary Idea!’**

Oh! Heavens! If a Select Society could be formed, – a little Colony of Mental Powers, a world of Talents, drawn into a small but brilliant circle, – what a splendid sunshine it would display; and how deeply in gloom it would throw all the uninteresting vapid scenery of Human life! Visionary Idea!

Mary Robinson, letter to Jane Porter (1800)\(^{619}\)

In a letter to Jane Porter dated 11 September 1800, Robinson reconceives of the desire she had expressed in *The Natural Daughter* for a revolutionary family grouping in a vision of radical intellectual community. Mary Robinson’s ‘Visionary Idea!’ – expressed here in such utopian terms – depicts an idyllic space in which her talents could be both fostered and celebrated by her contemporaries. While in ‘the common routine of Society’ the ‘sons and daughters of Genius’ have been ‘severely persecuted by the vicissitudes of pain and fortune,’\(^{620}\) in this ‘Select Society’ Robinson imagines a radically different social milieu in which newly enlightened minds would at last be able to see beyond her chequered past to appreciate the genius that stood before them.

In this thesis, I have sought to resituate Robinson in her specific historical context as a celebrity actress to argue that it is this very performative specificity that inspired her to develop a powerful feminist vision at the end of the eighteenth century. Moving through ‘this wide theatre, the world,’ Robinson adapted the skills of subversive performance that she had learned as an actress to navigate the complex political discourse of the 1790s. Searching for something more than the French revolutionary discourse of the ‘Rights of Man’ that actively excluded women from citizenship and brought about the death of her luminary, Marie Antoinette, Robinson worked in her 1790s writings to develop a new revolutionary discourse: one that would

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\(^{620}\) Robinson, letter to Porter, 326.
open the original revolutionary ideals of *liberté* and *égalité* to women as well as men. In order to do this, Robinson had first to elucidate what the new woman and man of her revolutionary vision would look like. She achieved this for women through her negotiation with the performative voice of Sappho, and for men in the radical critique of 1790s masculinity found in the pages of *Walsingham*. In her final novel, *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson brought the new woman and the new man together in a conception of a new kind of family beyond the limitations of the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference. This was a utopian vision, in which the original values of the French Revolution could at last be rescued from beneath the corruptions of the Jacobin Terror and re-established in a new ‘world of Talents,’ and women could finally sit alongside men as their equals.

Thus, in Chapter 1, I traced the effects that the discourse of incommensurable sexual difference had on feminist writings of the 1790s. For Robinson, I argued, her status as a celebrity actress and public woman disbarred her from the defence of female sexual virtue that comes into play in other 1790s feminisms. Instead, she built her feminism on the discourse of eighteenth-century celebrity actresses, who sought to redefine virtue apart from chastity as a quality consisting in intellect, honour, and self-defence, in order to reclaim their status as virtuous women despite their sexual promiscuity. In her *Letter to the Women of England* (1799), I argued, Robinson turned away from Wollstonecraft’s ascetic feminism of ‘modesty, temperance, and self-denial,’ instead mounting her feminist vision on the subversive performative power of the celebrity actress. In so doing, she succeeded in recuperating sensibility for women alongside rational virtue in a utopian image of the female genius.

In Chapter 2, I sought to explicate the roots of Robinson’s 1790s feminism in her identificatory relationship with Marie Antoinette. For Robinson, I argued, Marie

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Antoinette was a powerful site of female performative power, and through her trial and execution, Robinson was confronted with the misogynist basis of French revolutionary discourse. In her writings on Marie Antoinette (1791-1793), I showed, Robinson argued that the queen’s murder represented the corruption of the original ideals of the Revolution that she had praised so highly. This did not lead her to a wholehearted rejection of the principles underlying the French Revolution, however. Rather, I argued, for Robinson, Marie Antoinette represented the promise of a future in which women could be celebrated, rather than silenced, for their power of self-display, and in the rest of her writings Robinson would work to create a vision of a new world in which that future could be possible.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how Robinson redirected her passionate identification with Marie Antoinette into the performative voice of Sappho. In Robinson’s Sappho poetry (1796), I argued, her articulation of the complex experience of female passion was inextricably tied to the experience of female genius, as Robinson traced Sappho’s ascendance to the status of revolutionary prophet. Rejecting the coldness of masculine ‘philosophy’ Robinson’s Sappho achieved sublime transcendence from the limits of incommensurable sexual difference through a bold leap into passion and genius, thus representing a powerful foremother who could lead other women towards freedom. In The False Friend (1799), Robinson explored the sad destiny of women who lacked such foremothers. In her Letter to the Women of England, meanwhile, I argued that Robinson herself inhabited this role of foremother, connecting her name to Sappho’s through the performative voice of Anne Frances Randall in order to position herself as the preeminent female genius of the eighteenth century.

In Chapter 4, I turned to Walsingham (1797) to explore Robinson’s complex critique of 1790s masculinity in the novel. Building my argument on modern masculinity studies, I demonstrated how Robinson exposed a ‘crisis of masculinity’ in
the 1790s through the anxious Walsingham. For Robinson, I argued, Walsingham revealed the violent results that stemmed from the weakness of the 1790s masculine model in his abduction and rape of Amelia. In contrast to the anxious Walsingham, Robinson created Sir Sidney, whose secure experience of masculine subjectivity was not compromised by her female biology. Indeed, Sidney’s union of masculine and feminine qualities – rationality and sensibility – allowed her to transcend the limiting boundaries of incommensurable sexual difference that had caused such anxieties in Walsingham. It was only by learning from Sidney, Robinson hinted, that Walsingham, too, could escape the crisis of masculinity in the 1790s.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I turned to Robinson’s final novel, *The Natural Daughter* (1799), to show how Robinson’s articulation of the new woman and new man were brought together in a vision of the revolutionary family. I asserted that Robinson here rewrote the ending of Wollstonecraft’s fragmentary *Wrongs of Woman* in order to reimagine her pessimistic retreat from society as a utopian vision of equality. As in *Wrongs of Woman*, Robinson’s heroines were brought together through the shared mothering of an infant daughter. While Wollstonecraft’s Maria was overwhelmed by the debilitation of passive sensibility, however, Martha transcended this position through her experience as an actress. Moreover, Robinson located her novel during the Jacobin Terrors in order to reclaim the original values of the French Revolution. In the final action of the novel, I argued, Robinson depicted the death of the tyrannical father/husband patriarch, in order to pave the way for the creation of a revolutionary family beyond the limiting categories of incommensurable sexual difference in a utopian vision of the future that could finally right the ‘Wrongs of Woman’ and seal her place in the British national consciousness as heir to the cause of *The Rights of Woman*.

In this way, in this thesis I reject the argument of critics such as Gary Kelly and Eleanor Ty that positions Robinson as more conservative than her radical female
contemporaries. I also reject the argument of Anne Mellor, who in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) contends that women writers of the 1790s were concerned with inciting an ethic of care, rather than an ethic of justice, in their readers.\(^{622}\) Indeed, for Robinson, justice was the whole point, and in her *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) she demands nothing less: ‘What then is WOMAN to do? Where is she to hope for justice?’\(^{623}\) Through her experience as a celebrity actress on the borders of acceptable femininity, Robinson found her answer. Women, she argued, must look to themselves for justice, and they would find it in the radical union of ‘feminine’ sensibility with ‘masculine’ rational virtue that she first conceived of through her relationship to the writings of eighteenth-century actresses: a union that would allow women to attain the realm of transcendent genius and so lift themselves out of the limitations of the myth of incommensurable sexual difference. Through this experience of transcendence in the union of supposedly sexed characteristics, women, Robinson suggested, could also become ‘agents of inspiration for social change,’\(^{624}\) inspiring men to join them in freedom from oppression, just as Sidney inspires Walsingham to leave behind the masquerade of insecure masculinity to become at last the true ‘pupil of nature.’ This union was made real for Robinson in the closing pages of her final novel, *The Natural Daughter*.

Robinson was not a lone feminist voice at the end of the eighteenth century, however, any more than Wollstonecraft had been. Indeed, as my thesis shows, there are many connections between Robinson’s feminism and the feminisms of her contemporaries, especially with those of Charlotte Smith, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Inchbald, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

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\(^{624}\) This phrase is borrowed from Kari E. Lokke, *Tracing Women’s Romanticism: Gender, History and Transcendence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 13. See Chapter 3 of this thesis.
With Charlotte Smith, Robinson shared a heartfelt sympathy for the sufferings of Marie Antoinette and a conflicted relationship to the events of the French Revolution as it unfolded in the decade. As I explained in Chapter 2, this conflict is demonstrated in Smith’s book-length poem *The Emigrants* (1793), in which she meditates on her concerns over the likely implications of the Revolution’s excesses, and pities the fate of the French queen. Indeed, along with Helen Craik, Smith was the only novelist of the 1790s besides Robinson to locate the action of one of her novels – *Desmond* (1792) – in revolutionary France. As Adriana Craciun has demonstrated, this important contribution to the historical novel is only now being given the critical attention it deserves.625

With Mary Hays, Robinson shared the desire to privilege female passion alongside masculine reason. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, in Hays’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) she explores an idea of female passion – or sensibility – very similar to that which Robinson articulates in her feminism: ‘What are passions, but another name for powers?,’ she asks. ‘The mind capable of receiving the most forcible impressions is the sublimely improvable mind!’626 Later in the novel, Hays’s heroine returns to this idea, stating that ‘my reason was the auxiliary of my passion, or rather my passion the generative principle of my reason.’627 Although Hays’s ‘Preface’ to the novel complicates this joyful celebration of passion with a warning of the dangers of sensibility, still, the complex negotiation with female passion represented in its pages

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For a detailed account of Charlotte Smith’s life and works, see Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), and Amy Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
627 Hays, Memoirs of Emma Courtney, 142.
finds a close companion in Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon*, published in the same year.\textsuperscript{628}

With Elizabeth Inchbald, Robinson shared a theatrical background, and an interest in the topics of educational philosophy and its effect on masculinity. As I indicated in Chapter 4, in *Nature and Art* (1796), Inchbald, like Robinson, traces the influence of education on the creation of productive masculinity. In her depiction of two brothers and the way they raise their sons, she shows, like Robinson, the damage that is inflicted on male subjectivity by eighteenth-century society. While Henry becomes the ‘child of nature’ under the guidance of his benevolent father, William is infected with the selfish folly of his avaricious father, who privileges social mores above higher morals, and ‘who taught him to walk, to ride, to talk, to think like a man – a foolish man, instead of a wise child, as nature designed him to be.’\textsuperscript{629}

With Helen Maria Williams, Robinson shared a revolutionary fervour that would outlast the horrors of the Jacobin Terror to maintain faith in the Revolution’s original principles. Like Robinson, Williams grounded this faith in the experience of sensibility, which she privileged as essential to the success of the revolutionary project. While, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5, Robinson expressed this fervour in *The Natural Daughter*, Williams expressed it in her *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France* (1795) in her rumination on the death of Robespierre, in which she writes that, on his fall, ‘the terrible spell which bound the land of France was broken,’ and ‘the waters’ of the original revolutionary spirit ‘are regaining their purity.’\textsuperscript{630}


\textsuperscript{630} Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France, From the Thirty-First of May 1793, till the Twenty-eighth of July 1794*, 3 vols (London: 1795), III, 190-191.
And then there was Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom, as I have repeatedly shown in this thesis, Robinson shared many similarities; not least, the bold radicalism of her feminist project and her playful manipulation of gendered language. However, as I argued in my Introduction, it is only by looking beyond the significant presence of Wollstonecraft’s specific strain of Enlightenment, rationalist, Dissenting feminism, that we can understand the uniqueness of each of these women’s important feminist voices at the end of the decade. This is not to divide these 1790s radical women from each other entirely. Rather, it is to argue that there is more benefit in listening to a feminist symphony made up of many unique voices, than in allowing one voice to drown out all the others. As Robinson herself said, in the opening pages of her Letter to the Women of England, ‘it requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence.’

Indeed, Robinson returns to this idea in her 1800 essay, ‘Present State of the Manners, Society, &c. &c. of the Metropolis of England,’ printed in four instalments in the Monthly Magazine in the months leading up to her death. In the third instalment of this essay series, which covers everything from the theatre and sculpture to fashionable ‘refinement,’ Robinson turns her attention to the genius of British literary women. Here, once more, her ‘Visionary Idea!’ is repeated, but this time it is expressed in a vision of specifically female community and mutual support:

England may enumerate, at the present aera [sic], a phalanx of enlightened women, such as no other nation ever boasted. Their writings adorn the literature of the country; they are its ornaments, as they ought to be its pride! But they are neglected, unsought, alienated from society; and secluded in the abodes of study; or condemned to mingle with the vulgar. For even among themselves, there appears no sympathetic association of soul; no genuine impulse of affection, originating in congeniality of mind. Each is ardent in the pursuit of fame; and every new honour which is bestowed on a sister votary, is deemed a partial privation of what she considers as her exclusive birth-right. How much is

For more information on Helen Maria Williams, see Steven Blakemore, Crisis in Reputation: Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and the Rewriting of the French Revolution (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), and Deborah Kennedy, Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution (London: Associated University Presses, 2002).

Robinson, Letter, 2; original emphasis.
genius deceived when it seeks this single, this unconnected species of gratification! How powerful might such a phalanx become, were it to act in union of sentiment, and sympathy of feeling; and by a participation of public fame secure, to the end of time, the admiration of posterity.

‘How powerful might such a phalanx become’: this is indeed a question for posterity. When we look at some of the interior debates preoccupying modern feminism(s) – discussions that are too often mired in generational conflict – Robinson’s question suddenly seems all too resonant.

As Lise Sanders has written, ‘rifts between generations of feminists can signal the challenges of envisioning community as either a conceptual model or a practical organising principle for feminist action.’ However, if we can move past the surface tensions of feminism, if we can begin to acknowledge that a feminism such as Robinson’s, grounded in the subversive performative potential of eighteenth-century theatrical discourse, is as legitimately feminist – and as legitimately radical – as a feminism such a Wollstonecraft’s, grounded in the rationalist discourses of Enlightenment and Dissenting philosophy, then perhaps we can begin to turn the same understanding on ourselves.

Indeed, Robinson’s call to come together in a ‘union of sentiment, and sympathy of feeling’ is echoed by bell hooks, who writes that, ‘rather than thinking we would come together as “women” in an identity-based bonding we might be drawn together rather by a commonality of feeling.’ As Sanders explains, this ‘emphasis on feeling instead of identity works to enable such alliances,’ by allowing the productive debates and differences between feminisms to come to the fore. Thus, perhaps it is time that we came together to build a new ‘legion of Wollstonecrafts,’ a multiplicitous symphony

634 bell hooks, Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations (New York: Routledge, 1994), 217; original emphasis.
635 Sanders, ‘Feminists Love a Utopia,’ 11.
of feminist voices who could become agents of inspiration for social change for generations to come, just as Robinson desired to do at the close of the eighteenth century.
APPENDIX

Sappho and Robinson, Interpretation of Translation

I here reproduce those eighteenth-century translations of Sappho that Mary Robinson reworks in her Sappho poetry, in order to allow the reader more ably to see the ways in which Robinson borrows the language of ‘Sappho’ (via Philips) to enhance the passionate and sublime effects of her verse, as well as the connections between them.

SAPPHO 31\textsuperscript{636}

Ambrose Philips, Fragment of Sappho (1711)\textsuperscript{637}

\begin{quote}
Blest as th’ immortal Gods is he,
The youth who fondly sits by thee,
And hears and sees thee all the while
Softly speak and sweetly smile.
Twas this depriv’d my soul of rest,
And rais’d such tumults in my breast:
For while I gaz’d in transport tost,
My breath was gone, my voice was lost:
My bosom glow’d; the subtle flame
Ran quick through all my vital frame;
O’er my dim eyes a darkness hung;
My ears with hollow murmurs rung.
In Dewy damps my limbs were chill’d;
My blood with gentle horrors thrill’d;
My feeble pulse forgot to play;
I fainted, sunk, and dy’d away.
\end{quote}

Mary Robinson, ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ Oracle (5 October 1793)

\begin{quote}
False is the \textsc{youth}, who dares by \textsc{thee} recline,
Who listens to thy Song’s melodious tone,
And hears each dulcet cadence vainly own
That \textsc{love}’s deceitful transports are all thine!
Then fear him, \textsc{lesbia} – fear him, Nymph divine!
For, ere my transient hour of bliss was flown,
About \textsc{my} breast he bound the myrtle zone,
And for \textsc{my} flowing hair did laurels twine!
In vain for me the Muse unfolds her store,
Love’s radiant scenes are changed to scenes of Care;
The Sun’s proud beam illumes my Grot no more;
Dark are the Spheres – and dimm’d each prospect fair;
For \textsc{phaon}, whom my Soul must still adore,
My \textsc{couch} with Cypress strews – to \textsc{mock} \textsc{despair}!
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{636} These are the generally accepted titles in modern Sappho scholarship.
\textsuperscript{637} From Joseph Addison, The Spectator, 22 November 1711.
Mary Robinson, ‘Sonnet XXXII: Dreams of a Rival,’ *Sappho and Phaon* (1796)

Blest as the Gods! Sicilian Maid is he,
The youth whose soul thy yielding graces charm;
Who bound, O! thraldom sweet! by beauty’s arm,
In idle dalliance fondly sports with thee!

Blest as the Gods! That iv’ry throne to see,
Throbbing with transports, tender, timid, warm!
While round thy fragrant lips, light zephyrs swarm,
As op’ning buds attract the wand’ring Bee!

Yet, short is youthful passion’s fervid hour;
Soon, shall another clasp the beauteous boy;
Soon, shall a rival prove, in that gay bow’r.
The pleasing torture of excessive joy!
The Bee flies sicken’d from the sweetest flow’r;
The lightning’s shaft, but dazzles to destroy!

Here we can trace how Robinson moves away from the homoerotic undertones of the original translation in her ‘Sonnet to Lesbia,’ only to return to them in ‘Dreams of a Rival.’ (This sonnet is not discussed in my Sappho chapter as, although a fascinating poem in itself, it is not significant in the overall narrative of the sonnet sequence.) We can also see how Robinson adopts the physical descriptions of Sappho in her second sonnet to experiment with the sublime language of passionate love and desire.

*Sappho 1: ‘Ode to Aphrodite’*

Ambrose Philips, ‘An Hymn to Venus’ (1711)\(^{638}\)

O Venus, beauty of the skies,
To whom a thousand temples rise,
Gaily false in gentle smiles,
Full of love perplexing wiles;
O goddess! from my heart remove
The wasting cares and pains of love.

If ever thou hast kindly heard
A song in soft distress preferr’d,
Propitious to my tuneful vow,
O gentle goddess! hear me now.
Descend, thon bright, immortal guest,
In all thy radiant charms confest.

Thou once didst leave almighty Jove,
And all the golden roofs above:
The car thy wanton sparrows drew,
Hovering air they lightly flew;
As to my bower they wing’d their way,
I saw their quivering pinions play.

\(^{638}\) From Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 15 November 1711.
The birds dismiss’d (while you remain)  
Bore back their empty car again:  
Then you, with looks divinely mild,  
In every heavenly feature smil’d,  
And ask’d what new complaints I made,  
And why I call’d you to my aid?  

What frenzy in my bosom rag’d,  
And by what cure to be assuag’d?  
What gentle youth I would allure,  
Whom in thy artful toils secure?  
Who does my tender heart subdue,  
Tell me, my Sappho, tell me who?  

Tho’ now he shuns thy longing arms,  
He soon shall court thy flighted charms;  
Tho’ now thy offerings he despise,  
He soon to thee shall sacrifice;  
Tho’ now he freeze, he soon shall burn,  
And be thy victim in his turn.  

Celestial visitant, once more  
Thy needful presence I implore!  
In pity come and ease my grief,  
Bring my distemper’d soul relief,  
Favour thy supplicant’s hidden fires,  
And give me all my heart desires.  

Mary Robinson, ‘Sonnet XXXIV: Prayer to Venus,’ *Sappho and Phaon* (1796)

Venus! To thee, the Lesbian muse shall sing,  
The song, which Mytlenelian youths admir’d,  
When Echo, am’rous of the strain inspir’d,  
Bade the wild rocks with madd’ning plaudits ring!  
Attend my pray’r! O! Queen of rapture! Bring  
To these fond arms, he, whom my soul has fir’d;  
From these fond arms remov’d, yet, still desir’d,  
Though love, exulting, spreads his varying wing!  
Oh! source of ev’ry joy! of ev’ry care!  
Blest Venus! Goddess of the zone divine!  
To Phaon’s bosom, Phaon’s victim bear;  
So shall her warmest, tend’rest vows be thine!  
For Venus, Sappho shall a wreath prepare,  
And Love be crown’d, immortal as the Nine!  

Here we can see how Robinson adopts the longer Sapphic ode to the Petrarchan sonnet style. Here, however, the desire is less for sublime vengeance in making Phaon ‘victim,’ than in submitting herself as ‘victim’ to a transcendent union that would raise up ‘Love’ to the status of ‘the Nine’ muses of creative genius.
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