ROMANCING THE SELF: MARY ROBINSON'S *MEMOIRS* AND THE SENTIMENTAL TRADITION

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Abstract: *Mary Robinson began writing her* Memoirs *to vindicate herself from the backlash that tarnished her reputation. The reason for her notoriety was her status as a former mistress of the Prince of Wales (future George IV), her various alleged liaisons, radical sympathies, and camaraderie with political figures such as Charles James Fox. All these factors contributed to the scathing criticism directed at her, transforming her into an object of derision in caricatures and period satirical writings. The* Memoirs *aimed to present a truthful account of her life and counter the persona that society has constructed for her as a fallen woman. However, what is peculiar about Robinson's life writing is her decision to narrate her story through the lens of sentimental fiction, portraying herself as a sentimental heroine, thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. This article focuses on the* Memoirs' *appeal to readers as seeking to engage their sentiments, not only to garner sympathy but also to encourage a moral understanding that would legitimise Robinson's virtuous character through familiar literary and cultural tropes. It positions Robinson's autobiographical writing within the context of moral sentimentalist theories, such as David Hume's* Treatise of Human Nature, *to demonstrate how Robinson's self-representation as an autobiographical subject in the* Memoirs *is narrativised in a way that produces a textual self which is to be construed via the reading habits of her audience.*

Key words: *Mary Robinson, Memoirs, Sentimental Tradition, autobiographical subject, self-fashioning*

> "Respecting the circumstances of the preceding narrative, every reader, as influenced by his preconceived habits and opinions, must be left to form his own reflections. To the humane mind, the errors of the unfortunate subject of this memoir will appear to have been more than expiated by her sufferings."[2]

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2 "Continuation By a Friend", *Memoirs of the Late Mary Robinson, Written by Herself. With Some Posthumous Pieces. In Four Volumes*. London: Printed by Wilks and Taylor, 1801, p. 373 (p. 167). All quotations are from Sharon Setzer's 2007 edited volume, *Women's Theatrical Memoirs*. Part I, Vol. 1. (1st ed.). Routledge: London & New York, using the pagination of this edition and not the original.

An actress, fashion icon, poet, novelist, periodical contributor and editor, Mary Robinson was, as Judith Pascoe (1997) describes her, "a cultural chameleon" (p. 1). Robinson's private life was a public affair: "Perdita," as she was called because of her role in a 1779 staging of *The Winter's Tale*, the performance that infatuated the Prince of Wales, the future King George IV, was a target of satirical caricatures and contrived autobiographies that sought to spice up the gossip surrounding her life. These helped to mythologise her image as a woman of easy virtue even when she became one of the leading woman writers of the period.[3] Robinson's reputation as a more liberated woman and a poet closely associated with Robert Merry and his Della Cruscan network – of which she was a part early in her poetic career – was under threat of calumny due to her notorious fame as a former royal mistress which haunted her career. Likewise, Robinson's extravagant life and intimacy with Whig political figures such as Charles James Fox and Lord Malden, her liaison with Colonel Banastre Tarleton, and her being a devotee of Marie Antoinette made Robinson an obvious target of satire and critical opprobrium that portrayed her as a woman of moral ambiguity.[4] A decade after her adulterous affair, Mary Robinson began writing her *Memoirs* to counter her negative image and refute the fabrications of her private life that proliferated during the heyday of her notoriety. The *Memoirs* thus shows Robinson's "desire to claim narrative authority over a life that had already been written numerous times before" (Setzer, 2009, p. 42). Considering that auto/biographical writing in the period was gaining traction, it is unsurprising that Robinson would attempt to vindicate herself by resorting to an autobiographical mode of self-representation, which could assist her in reclaiming respectability.[5] As a review in the *Monthly* (1801) noted, "That she had herself a favorable opinion of the effects of these memoirs, in clearing her fame, is evident from the solemn injunction which she imposed on her daughter, Miss Robinson, a few days before her death, to give them to the world" (p. 345). The anticipated favourable reception noted by the reviewer can also be attributed to Robinson's awareness of popular tastes and the reading habits of her audience, which informed her choice of form to narrate her autobiographical account.[6]

3 Some of these satirical prints include the anonymous *Florizel and Perdita* (1783), James Gillray's *The Thunderer* (1782), and the anonymous *Scrub and Archer* (1783). For a discussion of these 18th-century prints, see Anne K. Mellor (2000, pp. 233-235). The literary fabrications include *Poetical Epistle from Florizel to Perdita: With Perdita's Answer* (1781) and *Letters from Perdita to a Certain Israelite, and his Answers to Them* (1781), *Memoirs of Perdita* (1784), "A Sketch of the Life of the Celebrated Mrs R-----" (1782) (Setzer, 2009, p. 33, p. 35, 7n35).

4 For a biographical account of Robinson's life, see Paula Byrne (2004), *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson*. Random House.

5 In a letter to John Taylor written over a decade after the affair, dated 5 October 1794, Robinson voiced her indignation at how her reputation suffered as a result: "I, who sacrificed reputation, an advantageous profession, friends, patronage, the brilliant hours of youth, and the conscious delight of correct conduct, am condemned to the scanty pittance bestowed on every indifferent page who holds up his ermined train of ceremony?" (as cited in the introduction to *Memoirs of Mary Robinson, "Perdita",* edited by J. Fitzgerald Molloy. London & Philadelphia, 1895, p. xiii.

6 Although theorists often distinguish between the formal characteristics of autobiography and memoir, this article treats both as forms of life writing, that is, as retrospective narratives concerned

With the rising interest in women's life writing over the past decades, Robinson's *Memoirs* has been a focus of extensive research from multiple and varied perspectives: it has been examined in the context of confessional autobiography, scandalous memoir and appeal memoir, anti-adultery campaigns, commodity culture, the Gothic tradition, Romantic authorship and literary celebrity, among others.[7] More recently, Susan Civale (2019) has suggested that the text's fragmentary nature is strategic, arguing that its "formal and rhetorical gaps" demonstrate "a strategy of self-representation that allowed Robinson to straddle the contradictory identities of the victimised heroine of sensibility and the titillating actress" (p. 141). Such gaps, especially those that show ineptitude in describing heightened emotions (since these exceed language), were common in sentimental fiction: as John Brewer reminds us, "true sentiment was a phenomenon beyond language" (2009, p. 24). While scholarship on Robinson and the *Memoirs* has emphasised the ways the author engages in self-fashioning by capitalising on her victimhood to vindicate her reputation, it would be interesting to explore Robinson's self-representation as revealing how she positions herself to be construed via the reading habits of her readers. Robinson's *Memoirs* highlights the significance of sentimental feelings in validating the autobiographical self and her moral sensibility, even if such practice may be interpreted as a performative act of self-fashioning.[8] This article, therefore, seeks to add to the discussion on Robinson's *Memoirs* as a blur between fact and fiction by looking into how Robinson explored narrative possibilities of representation that her readers would easily recognise. Specifically, how she portrayed lived experience through the lens of the sentimental tradition to evince her moral character through familiar sentimental tropes, such as pronounced sensibility shown in responsiveness to natural and artistic forms and sympathy for fellow

with the author's private life. In this light, Sharon Setzer writes that the *Memoirs* shows "[h]ow Robinson's narrative destabilizes the traditional distinction between autobiography, associated with "exemplary fame," and memoirs, associated with "inglorious notoriety"," (2009, p. 45).

7 See Linda Peterson (1994), "Becoming an Author: Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* and the Origins of the Woman Artist's Autobiography," in *Re-visioning Romanticism, British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Hafner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 36-50; Caroline Breashears (2010), "The Female Appeal Memoir: Genre and Female Literary Tradition in Eighteenth-Century England," *Modern Philology*, 107 (4), 607-631; Diego Saglia (2009), "Commerce, Luxury, and Identity in Mary Robinson's Memoirs", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 49 (3), 717-736; Amy Culley (2014), "The Literary Family and the 'Aristocracy of Genius' in the Memoirs of Mary Robinson," *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840: Friendship, Community, and Collaboration* (Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 103-115; Whitney Arnold (2014), "Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* and the Terrors of Literary Obscurity," *Women's Studies*, 43 (6), 733-749. For a survey on studies in women's life writing in the long eighteenth century, see Amy Culley (2015), "Women's Life Writing in the Long 18th Century: A Critical Survey," *Literature Compass*, 12 (1), 1-11.

8 For discussions on Robinson's practices of self-fashioning, see Sharon Setzer (1996), "Mary Robinson's Sylphid Self: The End of Feminine Self-Fashioning," *Philological Quarterly, 74*, 501-520; Anne K. Mellor (2000), "Mary Robinson and the Scripts of Female Sexuality," in *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. by Patrick Coleman, Jayne Lewis, and Jill Kowalik (Cambridge University Press), pp. 230-235; Eleanor Ty (1995), "Engendering a Female Subject: Mary Robinson's (Re)Presentations of the Self", *ESC: English Studies in Canada, 21* (4), 407-431.

creatures, the "virtue in distress" plot, the portrayal of the domestic sphere as a site of emotional repression, neglect and confinement, among others. Paying attention to Robinson's appeal to her readers' sentiments in the context of moral sentimentalism, the article argues that Robinson presents herself in a manner that would not only garner sympathy but can be legitimised by readers through well-known literary and cultural tropes.

In *The Rambler*, Samuel Johnson (1801) stressed the importance of biography as a type of writing that sparks an "irresistible interest," is both "delightful" and "useful," and can be instructive to readers (vol. 2, No. 60, p. 36). Johnson's praise for biography also articulates the significance of inherently shared sentiments that help readers imaginatively embody the emotions described for the duration of the reading process. He wrote, "We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure" (1801, p. 37). Although Johnson's claim is made in favour of biography, it could be extended to other forms of life writing. Both biography and autobiography focus on personal narratives and, while purporting to be factual and truthful, can still embellish, distort, or deviate from truth by including fictional elements or literary narrative approaches. Significantly, reliance on fact to verify identity compromises the authenticity of the self and its complexity, as its truth overrides factual evidence (Marcus, 1994, p. 3). Patricia Meyer Spacks (1976) noted that "[a]utobiographies affirm identity," but although the practitioner of autobiographical writing seeks to corroborate the authenticity of their experiences by the testimonies they give, they still "exis[t] on the page by virtue of [their] story, [their] shaping of the events of [their] experience" (p. 1). Autobiographical writing is, moreover, as Paul de Man contended in his appraisal, a "figure of reading" rather than a mode or a genre, suggesting that "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium" (1984, p. 70). This perspective implies that writing one's life is already predicated on the author's intention and how this intention shapes the narrative techniques the autobiographical subject will employ to construct a life story and a self that will ultimately be read as fiction, which also anticipates its reception.

In *Auto/biographical Discourses*, Laura Marcus (1994) argues that the concept of "intention" is fundamental to autobiographical writing: "it not only refers to an authorial motive governing the production of the text, but becomes an elaborate structure which apparently defines the ways in which the text should be received" (p. 3). Approaching her life as the stuff of the novel, Robinson subtly collapses the distinction between fact and fiction. The editor's preface to the 1895 edition of the *Memoirs* acknowledges "some little negative disingenuousness in the writer," thus pointing out the fictitious character of the truthfulness that the writing avows to communicate, although "sufficient of uncoloured matter

of fact remains to show the exposed situation of an unprotected beauty" (p. v). Misleading the reader is only one possible way of overriding fact; events may also be presented solely from the subject's perception of these events and even deliberately embellished to achieve a greater impact on the reader. As Setzer has pointed out, "Robinson might well have felt at liberty to fabricate detail that would support her version of the essential "Truth" better than factual details ever could" (2009, p. 39). Significantly, this draws attention to the process of self-narration as reader-oriented and reader-guided identity construction.

Robinson began working on her *Memoirs* in January 1798 but left them unfinished due to her death in December 1800 (Setzer, 2009, p. 33). The *Memoirs* was published posthumously by her daughter Maria Elizabeth Robinson, who, as the quote from the *Monthly* states, dutifully honoured her mother's wish to publish her memoirs and collected works. Significantly, Maria Elizabeth is also credited with the "Continuation By a Friend" that follows the abrupt termination of Robinson's text.[9] The importance of moral and filial duty emphasised in the preface – "the solemn injunction of a dying parent, and the promise pledged by a child in the circumstances so awful and affecting" (Setzer, 2007, p. 10) – implies the moral pathos that Robinson's story seeks to provoke. The editorial advertisement that Robinson's daughter prefaced to the volume clarifies that the *Memoirs* sought to vindicate Robinson from the allegations that tarnished her reputation even though they might be considered indecent due to prejudiced views. The filial love and sentimental appeal in the para-text foreground Robinson's portrayal of her autobiographical self as a victim of circumstance that the narrative promotes: "the world will be little disposed," the note says, "to sympathize with an unprotected and persecuted woman [...]. Yet there are some feeling hearts and candid minds to whom she dares appeal!" (Setzer, 2007, p. 9). The preface implies a specific community of readers to whom Robinson appeals: "feeling" readers whose sympathy and moral sentiments the story will elicit. It is in the preface that Robinson's daughter shapes expectations and offers herself as a model reader whose cue other readers should follow: "it is impossible that she can feel indifferent to the vindication of a being so beloved and ever to be lamented, whose real character was little known, and who, in various instances, was the victim of calumny and misrepresentation" (Setzer, 2007, p. 10). Maria Elizabeth's sympathetic response to her mother's appeal to audiences articulates her ability to sympathise and encourages them to perform a sympathetic reading of the text.

Yet it can also be seen as a challenge testing readers' capacity for compassion or sympathy, implying that if the tragic story of her mother cannot affect and move readers, then they might not be equipped with the ability to respond to the feelings of others. She later writes in "A Continuation By a Friend" that these memoirs will be "appreciated by the reflecting and candid reader,

9 Maria Elizabeth published her mother's works in three volumes, *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson: Including Many Pieces Never Before Published. In Three Volumes.* London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1806.

whose sympathy they could not fail to awaken" (Setzer, 2007, p. 259). In this light, sentimentalist philosopher David Hume argued in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (Part II, Book XI, 1960, p. 316). As Hume's and Adam Smith's theories show, this propensity for sympathetic engagement is necessary as it is the foundation of forming social bonds and social order. John Mullan contends that period novelists recognised that habits of social interactions were unique, given that the world was driven by malice and sympathy was seldom acknowledged; however, such novels allowed readers to feel exceptional, suggesting that each reader could identify admirable sentiments and, by doing so, imply that these readers understood the communication of emotions and the strengths of sensibility. It appeared, Mullan argues, that the form of the novel established a kind of agreement, whereby the reader was dissociated from the anti-social tendencies or indifference represented in the narratives (1988, pp. 13-14). The *Memoirs* can be approached from a similar perspective, since it draws upon literary and cultural conventions, employing the "language of feeling" to invite readers to act as moral witnesses and to recognise their social sensitivity by responding to Robinson's pitiful story.

Although sentimental fiction had fallen into disrepute by the end of the century, largely due to its perceived formulaic patterns and the pejorative connotations of "sentiment" associated with emotional excess and insincerity, it remained popular with readers in the 1790s (Mullan, 1996, p. 236; Rivero, 2019, p. 1, 2). As an actress, Robinson had a natural penchant for drama and an awareness of her audience, therefore, narrating her life through the lens of fiction seems not an unlikely decision. This suggests that Robinson's *Memoirs* would have catered to readers' reading preferences even if they had initially been drawn to them by a voyeuristic curiosity to reveal more about her affair with the Prince of Wales. Robinson continually reinforces her sensibility in a fashion similar to the depictions of heroines in sentimental fiction, where sentiment and sensibility testify to their virtuous character. In this way, Robinson's writing evokes associations with some of the most popular heroines, such as Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) or Burney's *Evelina* (1778). The *French Encyclopedie* (vol. XV, 1765, p. 38) provides the following definition of sensibility:

> Tender and delicate disposition of the soul which renders it easy to be moved and touched. Sensibility of soul, which is rightly described as the source of morality, gives one a kind of wisdom concerning matters of virtue and is far more penetrating than the intellect acting alone. People of sensibility because of their liveliness can fall into errors which men of the world would not commit; but these are greatly outweighed by the amount of good they do. [...] sensibility makes a man virtuous. Sensibility is the mother of humanity, of generosity; it is at the service of merit, lends its support to the intellect, and is the moving spirit which animates belief. (as cited in Brewer, 2009, p. 25)

The entry outlines key meanings of sensibility and its implications for one's character that were prevalent during the period. It emphasises that sentiment and emotion are linked to morality while also highlighting the dangers that such a lively predisposition could present and that human fallibility does not necessarily undermine one's virtuous character. Robinson's portrayal of her life and self is premised on such understandings: to counter the unflattering accounts in the press that proliferated at the beginning of the 1780s, she crafts a narrative that follows the life of her young self as an innocent, inexperienced, and vulnerable heroine who endures domestic abandonment – first as a daughter whose adventurous and adulterous father leaves the family to pursue opportunities in America and subsequently abandons them for another woman, and then as a young wife suffering the deception and neglect she is subjected to by a profligate and libertine husband, at the same time as she tries to navigate the threats posed by society. Robinson stresses that it was her "heart, which was the source of all [her] succeeding sorrows" because her acute sensibility and credulity exposed her to the duplicity and selfishness of scheming individuals (Setzer, 2007, p. 73). Her story depicts her as, in her own words, "the most wretched of mortals" (Setzer, 2007, p. 84). Robinson's sensibility is, therefore, a source of moral virtue as well as suffering: a trait that heroines in sentimental novels possess and that serves as a cue to readers.

From the beginning, Robinson presents herself as a young woman of distress whose turbulent life seems to have been presaged. For instance, she writes that the storm which occurred during her birth foreshadowed the tragic events that were to mark her life: "Through life the tempest has followed my footsteps, and I have in vain looked for a short interval of repose from the perseverance of sorrow" (Setzer, 2007, p. 16). Likewise, she later interprets a storm "as an ill omen, but little thought that at future periods of my life I should have cause to regret that *I had not perished!*" (Setzer, 2007, p. 98), amplifying the dramatic effect of the utterance. Such early cues to the readers foreshadow the emotional and psychological turmoil Robinson will later recount, inviting them to engage empathetically with her retrospective narration. Robinson highlights her sympathy, pointing out people's perception of her as an angelic, kind, and selfless creature. In addition to her keen sensibility, Robinson stresses her proficiency in the so-called female accomplishments: she plays the harpsichord, recites poetry, and even attempts to write verse. Robinson writes:

> As soon as I had learned to read my great delight was that of learning epitaphs and monumental inscriptions. A story of melancholy import never failed to excite my attention; and before I was seven years old I could correctly repeat Pope's Lines to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady; Mason's Elegy on the Death of the beautiful Countess of Coventry, and many smaller poems on similar subjects. (Setzer, 2007, p. 26)

These feminine qualities typical of sentimental heroines promote Robinson's natural virtues and talents. The persistent reiteration of her pensive and

melancholy disposition, here exemplified in her choice of literary readings, further attests to her natural genius and delicate sensibility.

The theme of virtue is introduced early on as a leitmotif in the *Memoirs*. Laura L. Runge (2004) has argued that the *Memoirs* was Robinson's attempt to dissociate herself from labels such as "prostitute," whereby she partook in the so-called anti-adultery campaign. According to Runge, Robinson deliberately drew upon this discourse and "revises her history, not as the repentant whore, but as the embodiment of the virtues and contradictions that drive the discourse against adultery" (p. 564). However, what further transpires in Robinson's narrative is her prescription of the "virtue in distress" plot and its relation to the representation of sexuality in the *Memoirs*. The "virtue in distress" scenario contrasts markedly with the scandalous image associated with Robinson's persona in the public imagination, which turned her reputation into a marketing tool and a commodity for public consumption through the unflattering satirical accounts. Robinson establishes her claim to virtue and moral decency by stressing that she is the descendant of a family of virtuous and pious women. Her great-grandmother, Catherine Seys, for example, apart from belonging to a respectable family, was also "a woman of great piety and virtue" (Setzer, 2007, p. 17), and her grandmother possessed "unaffected piety, and exemplary virtue" (Setzer, 2007, p. 19), which, by implication, Robinson also inherited. Her representation as a paragon of virtue when it comes to sexual politics begins with her doubting the true intentions of her husband-to-be, who insists on keeping their marriage a secret to hide his illegitimacy: "I felt an almost instinctive repugnance at the thought of a clandestine marriage" (Setzer, 2007, p. 78). Throughout the story, Robinson emphasises that her mother's primary concern was maintaining her reputation uncontaminated. She also asserts that she regarded chastity as the most significant attribute of the female mind (Setzer, 2007, pp. 91-92).

Robinson describes herself as a precocious child to stress her lack of experience and vulnerability. She writes on marrying Mr. Robinson: "I was yet a child, wholly unacquainted with the manners of the world. Yet, young as I was, I became the traveller of its mazy and perilous paths; – at an age when girls are generally at school, or indeed scarcely emancipated from the nursery, I was presented in society as a wife, – and very nearly as a mother" (Setzer, 2007, pp. 112-113). Robinson's coming out into society is marked by premature exposure to roles and responsibilities that women are expected to fulfil in society, those of a wife and a mother. Her virtue is continually tested as she finds herself at the centre of London society, which is shown to be driven by vice, dishonesty, and secret machinations. Her portrayal of fashionable circles also shows that she must be alert to the dangers of social life and cautiously navigate them since her innocence and vulnerability make her an easy target for the gazes of dissipated men. She writes: "I attribute the snares that were laid for me to three causes. The first, my youth and inexperience, my girlish appearance and simplicity of manners. Secondly, the expensive style in which Mr. Robinson lived, though

he was not known as a man of independent fortune; and, thirdly, the evident neglect which I experienced from my husband" (Setzer, 2007, pp. 139-140). Robinson capitalises on her vulnerability as a woman exposed to the threats posed by the masculine gaze, seeing her as an object of desire, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a wronged and neglected but dutiful wife.

Despite the many threats to her virtue, Robinson manages to withstand danger, relying on her strong moral principles and resilience. Hence, the virtuous aspect of Robinson's moral character is juxtaposed with the rakish gentlemen and scheming women of high society who try to subdue and corrupt her. Nancy Armstrong (1987) observed, for example, that female protagonists in eighteenth-century fiction relate their "social experience as a series of sexual encounters" (p. 29). Robinson's approach in the *Memoirs* is similar. The metropolis is presented as the hub of *haut ton*, which offers opportunities to forge connections with the social elite, and as a place where gossip and men of questionable morality prowl on young, attractive women: an image Robinson continually projects. In contrast to profligate and dissipated individuals driven by selfish desires and ulterior motives, Robinson asserts moral superiority by emphasising her strong character and sensibility. The numerous attempts by dubious characters to seduce her are unsuccessful, as Robinson demonstrates her will to resist them, yielding neither to masculine power nor flattery. Her refusal to submit to lascivious gentlemen and strict insistence on her virtuous character mark her as a paragon of feminine virtue.[10]

In addition to the predatory atmosphere in public spaces such as Vauxhall Gardens, the scene of her trials is also her home, the domestic space that should secure her against the sexual advances of male invaders. This shows how the position of women in the private sphere is equally threatening as is the public sphere, where they are exposed to the masculine gaze and temptations of the metropolis. As indicated, the domestic sphere and marital relations are presented as oppressive and potentially dangerous. It is in the private sphere that predatory men such as Mr Fitzgerald, Lord Lyttleton, and Mr Brereton, among others, try to impose themselves on Robinson: "It was with extreme regret," she writes, "and frequently with uncontrollable indignation, that I endured the neglect of my husband and the tauntings of the profligate Lyttelton – 'The child,' for so he generally called me, was deserted for the society of the most libertine men and the most abandoned women" (Setzer, 2007, p. 118). Despite the challenges she faces, she strives to maintain her sense of propriety. Robinson consistently reiterates her correct conduct and adherence to her domestic duties and role in society as a dutiful wife and devoted mother despite her husband's profligacy and brazen affairs with women of low status and ill repute, or, as she

10 For example, the Italian Angelina Albanesi, Robinson writes, never failed to take the opportunity to "ridicule my romantic domestic attachment," and introduce her to the possibility of "the splendid life into which I might enter, if I would but know my own power, and break the fetters of matrimonial restriction" (Setzer, 2007, pp. 190-191).

calls it, "his domestic apostacy [*sic*]" (Setzer, 2007, p. 257). "But Mr. Robinson knows what I endured," Robinson asserts,

> and how patiently, how correctly I suited my mind to the strict propriety of wedded life: he knows, that my duty as a wife was exemplary, my chastity inviolate; he knows that neither poverty nor obscurity, neither the tauntings of the world nor his neglect, could tempt me even to the smallest error: he knows that I bore my afflicting humiliations with a cheerful, uncomplaining spirit; that I toiled honourably for his comfort; and that my attentions were exclusively dedicated to him and to my infant. (Setzer, 2007, pp. 193-194)

Despite her husband's unfaithfulness, Robinson's conduct was "exemplary": she followed her domestic, marital, and maternal duties stoically despite her husband's indifference. Even when describing her budding affair with the Prince of Wales, which continued in letter form for months before they met in person, Robinson highlights that she did not submit to credulity but prudently questioned the Prince's intentions and even acted as a guide, warning him against the dangers of passion and a relationship that could compromise the royal family. In this light, to vindicate her reputation as a courtesan, Robinson hints on several occasions that she bore no romantic love for her husband.[11] Robinson intimates:

> Alas! I never knew the sweet soothing solace of wedded sympathy; I never was beloved by him whom destiny allotted to be the legal ruler of my actions. I do not condemn Mr. Robinson; I but too well know that we cannot command our affections. I only lament that he did not observe some decency in his infidelities; and that, while he gratified his *own* caprice, he forgot how much he exposed his *wife* to the most degrading mortifications. (Setzer, 2007, p. 215)

Robinson further insists that her infatuation with the Prince was not provoked by wantonness or economic profit but was inspired by sincere affection, which she had not experienced prior to this moment. However, due to her death, her narrative halts abruptly before she goes on to describe the liaison in more detail, but it also appears as if she deliberately omitted the most "scandalous" aspect of her autobiography, the cause of her notoriety, as an act of erasure. In her seminal discussion of the autobiographical subject in the eighteenth century, Felicity A. Nussbaum (1989) comments on women's scandalous memoirs, which began proliferating in the middle of the century. Nussbaum notes that while such texts sought to vindicate the author by revealing her private life to rectify her public character, they, nevertheless, tried to eschew the "moral and social system" that demanded an explanation (p. 180). Although being linked to the tradition of scandalous memoirs, Robinson's *Memoirs* seems to deviate from standard practices: instead of defying and resisting moral codes by discussing her sexual autonomy, Robinson invites her audience to read her story against these very systems to form their own moral judgement of her character and conduct.

11 Robinson also writes: "I had been an example of conjugal fidelity; but I had never known the perils to which the feeling heart is subjected in a union of regard wholly uninfluenced by the affections of the soul" (Setzer, 2007, p. 209).

Significantly, to recover her reputation, Robinson raises important questions about judgement and misjudgement, central to eighteenth-century theories of moral sentimentalism. Theories such as Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) posit that the moral evaluation of one's character is not grounded in reason but in sentiment and that individuals develop moral understanding through shared feelings, which allows them to imagine themselves in the place of others and to respond with sympathy or indignation. In the *Treatise*, Hume argues that sentiments of approbation and disapprobation must be informed and refined by sympathy to achieve an impartial perspective that helps overcome personal biases. According to Hume, moral approval is grounded in moral sensibility, that is, feelings of pleasure or aversion evoked by observing particular traits or characters. He writes:

> In general, all sentiments of blame or praise are variable, according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam'd or prais'd, and according to the present disposition of our mind. But these variations we regard not in our general decisions, but still apply the terms expressive of our liking or dislike, in the same manner, as if we remain'd in one point of view. (Book III, Part III, 1960, p. 582)

Hume acknowledges variations in subjective perceptions and responses but claims that these are offset when one applies a general point of view shaped by sympathy and shared sentiment. Continually reinforced by the unflattering accounts in satirical and literary fabrications, Robinson's image as an adulterous woman circulated in society and provoked feelings of moral disapprobation. Robinson compellingly writes, "Indeed the world has mistaken the character of my mind; I have ever been the reverse of volatile and dissipated; I mean not to write my own eulogy; though, with the candid and sensitive mind, I shall I trust, succeed in my vindication" (Setzer, 2007, pp. 90-91). By emphasising the sincerity of her sentiments and the integrity of her moral conduct, Robinson sought to challenge these biases and elicit a sympathetic response, encouraging her readers to set aside personal prejudice and adopt what Hume describes as a "common point of view" (Book III, Part III, 1960, p. 591).[12] Further in her story, Robinson similarly exclaims: "Ah! how little has the misjudging world known of what has passed in my mind, even in the apparently gayest moments of my existence! How much have I regretted that ever I was born, even when I have been surrounded with all that could gratify the vanity of woman!" (Setzer, 2007, p. 94). The sentimental mode of her narrative and detailed description of the private events and felt experiences narrow the distance – the sense of remoteness – allowing her readers a more intimate look to engage their feelings. In this way, "[w]riting and reading become performances of affect" (Brewer, 2009, p. 30).

12 Hume writes: "In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation" (Book III, Part, III, pp. 581-582).

Significantly, Robinson's *Memoirs* also draws attention to the nature of life writing and its connection to truth, simultaneously inviting us to think about the instability of autobiographical writing. Well into her narrative, Robinson states: "These pages are the pages of truth, unadorned by romance, and unembellished by the graces of phraseology; and I know that I have been sufficiently the victim of events, too well to become the tacit acquiescer where I have been grossly misrepresented" (Setzer, 2007, p. 134). While she leverages facts and objectivity to reclaim her authorial voice over her personal story and self-representation and to establish her credibility, what immediately draws attention is the assurance that what she presents to readers is "truth, unadorned by romance" and unwarranted figurative language and fanciful imaginings. This misplaced, even suspicious, claim is, in fact, contradictory, considering that from the beginning of her story, she portrays her life in a manner evoking novels of sentiment, highlighting what de Man argues in his essay: namely, that self-representation is a form of figuration since the subject who writes and the subject written about are not one and the same (1984, pp. 70-71). Robinson's text calls attention to its fictionality, on the one hand, and, on the other, points to the fact that the reader participates in interpreting its meaning, conditioned by her use of the "language of feeling" as a literary and cultural convention. Accordingly, a review of the posthumously published volume in the December issue of the *Monthly Magazine* (1801) pointed out Robinson's tragic fate to which her inexperience greatly contributed, adding that "[s]he may have been one 'more sinned against than sinning' in her matrimonial connection" but shows a degree of scepticism, noting that her husband should have been given a right to tell his version of the story since although Robinson claims to have told the truth, it cannot be "the *whole truth*" (p. 345). Importantly, the reviewer draws attention to Robinson's fictionalised life narrative: "The beautiful, ingenious, and unfortunate Mrs. Mary Robinson has thrown over the present account of herself all the air of a novel. She labours to touch the feelings and to melt the heart of the reader" (1801, p. 345). The comment's perceived criticism rather confirms that Robinson's fictionalised account is deliberately constructed to elicit readers' emotions, aligning with contemporary notions of sympathy and sensibility and their importance as markers of sociability.

In making her story public, Robinson sought to win the sympathies of her readership and, in doing so, regain control over her personal truth and reputation. Robinson's sensibility provides a source of narrative credibility, enabling her to reclaim her moral virtue, which was undermined by the cultural status of a fallen woman she acquired following her public affair with the Prince of Wales. Robinson projects herself in familiar roles: a dutiful daughter, a young but morally strong woman, a sympathetic observer, a faithful yet wronged wife, and a caring and affectionate mother. These are female roles reprised in sentimental novels that readers have been conditioned to respond to with pity and admiration, thus establishing bonds of sympathy with fictional characters.

Most significantly, Robinson's narrative techniques in the *Memoirs* call attention to the fragile boundary between fact and (re)presentation, thereby complicating the question of truth as an unequivocal factual proposition in autobiographical writing. Despite Robinson's insistence on objectively recounting her life, the modes of representation and narrative strategies she employs to mediate her identity and to place particular emphasis on specific traits of her character and social conduct reveal an intention to fictionalise experience and present it in a form that is recognisable, and that will regulate readers' responses and fellow feelings. This underscores the inherent instability of autobiographical writing and reflects how the authorial self is constructed and construed through the act of reading.

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