

“[L]INES, EVIDENTLY WRITTEN BY A FEMALE HAND”: MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN MARY ROBINSON’S *VANCENZA*

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A celebrated public figure who became an iconic woman, Mary Robinson was an actress and a member of a community of eighteenth-century intellectual women writers. This study discusses her first novel, *Vancenza* (1792), and focuses on the relationship between the young protagonist, the orphan Elvira and her dead mother. By analysing Elvira’s explorations and discoveries in the castle and eliciting the features of the Gothic in the novel, I intend to show how the discourse of authorship is framed within the daughter’s urge to find out about her origins and her mother’s revelatory written texts.

Keywords: Mary Robinson, *Vancenza*, authorship, mother’s written texts, manuscript-discovery narrative, Gothic.

1 Introduction

In January 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a letter to Mary Hays, inviting her to a supper party: “I expect Mrs [Mary] Robinson and daughter, to drink tea with me, on Thursday, will you come to meet them. She has read your novel [*Emma Courtney*], and was *very much* pleased with the *main* story; but did not like the conclusion” (qtd. in Byrne 2005, 349, emphases in the original). Part of a larger community of women writers, these three Marys shared time, opinions and valuable critical remarks making their ways into the opportunities and difficulties of the intellectual women in this period.

Mary Robinson was born in Bristol in 1757.¹ This is how four decades and several fictional writings later she describes in her *Memoirs* the beginning of her life:

In this awe-inspiring habitation, [...], during a tempestuous night, on the 27th of November, 1758, I first opened my eyes to this world of duplicity and sorrow. I have often heard my mother say that a more stormy hour she never remembered. The wind whistled round the dark pinnacles of the minster tower, and the rain beat in torrents against the casements of her chamber. 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. ([1801] 1895, 3)

¹ There is some ambiguity about the date of her birth. See Byrne (2005, 429–30).

Placed within the Gothic setting of a dark and stormy night, the imagery of a woman whose life is marked by grief and pain will be a constant feature of Mary Robinson's writings. Mary's father, Nicholas Darby, was a merchant who left his family when Mary was a child, travelled to America and took a mistress. Her mother, Hester, brought up five children and managed to support her family by starting a school for young girls in London, where Mary herself taught. The school was run until her father ordered it to be closed, a right he was entitled to by the English law of the time. At an early age, Mary wrote poems, then took up an interest in drama and was cast for a few roles, yet soon her mother convinced her to enter a marriage that appeared to be a convenient match but turned out to be a troublesome relationship instead. Thus, at the age of 16, Mary gave up the stage and married Tom Robinson, who claimed an income he did not have and was put into prison for debts. In 1774, just after the birth of her first child, Maria, Mary accepted to accompany her husband to prison, a decision often made by women at the time. But before long, she decided to return to the stage, and after her debut in 1776, encouraged and appreciated by actor-manager David Garrick and playwright Richard Sheridan, Mary became a famous professional actress. In 1779, her performance in *Florizel and Perdita*, an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*, caught the attention of young Prince George of Wales (later Prince Regent, then King George IV), who fell in love with Mary and offered her to become his mistress. Mary started an intense and troubled relationship with him, which ended within a year but affected her whole life: she was promised an annuity, which was rarely paid, gained notoriety and earned the nickname of "Perdita" forever.

2 The Notorious Eighteenth-Century Celebrity

Besides being an actress, Mary Robinson was famous for her numerous and much talked-of love affairs. Her husband's infidelity from the beginning of their marriage and the family's difficult economic conditions encouraged a wide range of men to flirt, support and seduce her throughout her life. Her strong sense of independence contributed to the creation of the image of a transgressive woman, both in her private and public life, one of the first women to be called a "celebrity" (a term gaining currency in the eighteenth century), her notoriety ranging from sexual indiscretions to questionable behaviours (Close 2004, 172). Mary was also well-known for being a fashion leader, and her dresses—labelled "Perdita" or "the Robinson"—became instances of proto-celebrity branding. Her most voguish outfit was the 1782 "Perdita Chemise" (a hoop-free muslin gown fastened with a silk sash), one of her signature designs which became both recognizable and reproducible (Wilson 2009, 158).

In addition to featuring in caricatures and satires, Mary Robinson was one of the most frequently portrayed women of her day: the list of her portrayers includes Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and George Romney. These visual representations have provoked varied interpretations: whereas Anne Mellor and Eleanor Ty understand Gainsborough's full-length study from 1781 and Reynolds's half-length portrait from 1782, respectively, as endorsements of the "actress as a whore" version of Mary Robinson's life (Mellor 2000, 278; Ty 1998, 28), Anca Munteanu believes, instead, that the portraits present this beautiful, albeit notorious woman in a most flattering light (2009, 127). Whatever the case, the portraits are reminders of her unquestionable celebrity.

In the course of her life, Mary Robinson successfully metamorphosed from a glamorous yet morally suspect actress and a mistress of the Prince of Wales into a prominent member of the Della Cruscan literary circle. The various pseudonyms she used in her life—such as Laura, Laura Maria, Sappho, Oberon, Tabita Bramble, Lesbia, Julia, Bridget and Portia—all express the multi-faceted aspects of her public "self." As Lisa Wilson writes, "throughout her career, shaped as it was by an excruciatingly public gaze, Mary Robinson remained intensely self-conscious about her relationship to the critical apparatus, and she took an active role in shaping her public identity" (2009, 156). Very much concerned about public approval and visibility in society, Mary embodied the celebrity who was not only an image but also made herself publicly visible (Arnold 2014, 741). Besides her extravaganza, Mary was well-known for her radical political sympathies and feminist philosophy. A friend of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, she was a supporter of human rights, and in 1799 she wrote, under the pseudonym of Anne Frances Randall, the prose tract "A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination," in which she exhorted women to write and publish their works.

In 1783, a rheumatic fever seriously damaged her health and left her partially paralysed for the rest of her life. Despite her precarious physical condition, at the age of twenty-five, Mary Robinson became a literary woman. She authored six collections of poems, two plays, seven novels, essays, political treatises and a memoir. Her reputation as a writer gained her the title of "The English Sappho." Coleridge, who thought of her as a "woman of undoubted Genius," wrote: "I never knew a human Being with so *full* a mind," [...] bad, good, & indifferent, I grant you, but full, & overflowing" (Griggs 1956, 1: 562 emphasis in the original).

Mary died in 1800. At her death, she left a draft of her memoirs for her daughter to be continued. Maria, who was her mother's constant companion throughout her entire life, published the *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson, Written by Herself with Some Posthumous Pieces* in 1801. In the autobiography, which covered Mary

Robinson's childhood, marriage, early writing, and career in the theatre, the author combined fiction and truth, building a public image of herself to be passed down to posterity. Although she repeatedly invoked a "Gothic structure" to define the characteristics of her own contemplative mind and to prove that she had a propensity to melancholic meditation (Close 2004, 173; Setzer 2016, 34), she must have been well aware that her *Memoirs* were to be completed by the hands of another author.

Her first novel, *Vancenza* (1792), was a literary sensation soon to be translated into French, German and Dutch. In fact, the novel received a mixed critical reception, and even Mary Robinson's daughter, when putting together her memoirs, gave an unfavourable opinion of the text, attributing the immediate popularity of the novel to her mother's reputation:

Encouraged by popular approbation beyond her most sanguine hopes, Mrs. Robinson now published her first essay in prose [...], of which the whole edition was *sold in one day*, and of which five impressions have since followed. It must be confessed, this production owned its popularity to the celebrity of the author's name, and the favourable impression of her talents given to the public by her poetical compositions, rather than to its intrinsic merit. (Robinson [1801] 1895, 216, emphasis in the original)

Allegedly "the work of a few days," the book was a great success, which flattered Mary. She wrote a Dedication "To the public" for the book's fourth edition, encouraged by the repeated instances of the "public favour" with which she had been honoured. Dated to 1793, the fourth edition (used for this study) slightly differs from the first, since it includes a number of additions, a feature not unusual at the time of its publication. The added parts are of two types: some are narratives expanding the subplots, while others unfold a prose which clearly goes beyond fiction and reveals the narrator's theorisation on topics ranging from rank and power to virtue and vice.

Vancenza being a little known novel, its short synopsis might be useful at this point. The story is set in fifteenth-century Castile, at the eponymous castle of Vancenza, where the Count lives with his sister, the Marchioness de Vallorie, her daughter Carline, and Elvira, an orphan whose family is unknown. When Prince Almanza, the son of an old friend of Count Vancenza, is wounded and rescued near the castle, Elvira falls in love with him. Her love is reciprocated, but a few misunderstandings create obstacles to their happiness. Eventually, marriage is arranged, but the day before the wedding Elvira discovers a case in a hidden part of the castle which contains a letter from her mother. It reveals that Elvira is the illegitimate daughter of the Count's dead sister and Prince Almanza's father, thus she is the half-sister of her fiancé. Devastated by despair and horror at her incestuous love, Elvira dies. The novel features a number of subplots, such as the mischievous behaviour of the

Duke del Vero, who attempts to seduce Elvira, the intrigues within the high society of Madame Montalba in Madrid, the confession of the real identity of the impostor Marquis Petrozi, and the Pilgrim's love story.

The full title of the novel is *Vancenza; or the Dangers of Credulity. A Moral Tale*. Before discussing "the dangers of credulity," I would like to focus briefly on the term "moral tale," as it raises the issue of the eighteenth-century debate concerning the "novel" form and the moralists' warning against women's novel-reading, based on the assumption that it was dangerous due to its mechanisms of automatic replication and recapitulation. The major preoccupation was that a woman reading about the seduction and fall of fictitious female characters would repeat the fate of that character in real life (Campbell 2008, 161). Whether or not at this stage of her writing career Mary Robinson was concerned about the issue, the epigraph on the title page sounds like an explicit warning, taken from *Hamlet*: "Be wary then: best SAFETY lies in FEAR" (Shakespeare [1601] 2015, 1.3). Laertes's words to his sister Ophelia convey advice that is to prevent the reader's loss of control in matters of love; the emphasis on "safety" and "fear" was added by Mary Robinson.

The aim of this essay is to focus on the relationship between Elvira and her mother. By analysing Elvira's explorations and discoveries in the castle and eliciting the features of the Gothic in the novel, I intend to show how the discourse of authorship is framed within the daughter's urge to find out about her origins and her mother's revelatory writings.

3 In Search of One's Origins

In *Vancenza* the main character, Elvira, is described as a quiet young woman endowed with beauty, virtue and knowledge. Like other female characters in the novel—Carline and the Marchioness, who has a degree in classical knowledge—she receives a proper education: Elvira's studies in literature range from French to Italian authors, such as Petrarch and Ariosto. Unlike the settings of other Gothic novels, the castle in which Elvira lives is neither hostile nor haunted, but a place where the young woman feels most at ease. The friendliness of the place, however, does not prevent Elvira from exploring it in constant search for secrets she will eventually reveal. Her first discovery occurs early in the novel. While sitting in a "pensive" mood at one of the windows of the gallery overlooking the peaceful view of the nearby lakes, mountains and valleys, Elvira notices some words written on the casement: "The small panes of glass were alternately painted in a variety of

devices, which made it difficult to decipher the characters; each square containing a single stanza” (Robinson [1792] 1793, 1:88–89).²

Unexpectedly, the ordinary contemplation of her surrounding world leads Elvira to an extraordinary discovery. Despite her difficulties in detecting them—a Gothic literary device which will be used elsewhere in the novel—Elvira manages to read the words on the window panes, a poetic text of five stanzas in which the speaker laments the loss of happiness. Two of the stanzas read as follows:

Perchance, when youth’s delicious bloom
Shall fade unheeded in the tomb,
Fate may direct a daughter’s eye
To where my mould’ring reliques lie;
And, touch’d by sacred sympathy,
That eye may drop a tear for ME!

Betray’ed by love; of hope bereft;
No gentle gleam of comfort left;
Bow’d by the hand of sorrow low;
No pitying friend to weep my wo:
Save her who spar’d by Heav’n’s decree,
Shall live to sigh, and think of ME! (*V* 1:89–90)

The author addresses a daughter whose “eye” might hopefully chance upon the lines written by a mother not only reporting her grief but also wishing for the remains of her body to receive the needed “sympathy” for having been betrayed by love. The impact of this mother’s premonitory wish on Elvira is both psychological and physical: “Something unfelt before seemed to take possession of all her faculties: the tenderness of love, the sympathy of sorrow, suffused the azure heralds of her soul with tears of pity!” (*V* 1:90) The entrenched lines affect the young reader who *does* experience the “sympathy” wished for by the author. Moreover, by placing the written text on the window panes, the narrative seems to enhance the space of liminality in which Elvira is set at this point, on the threshold between the outside and the inside, the known and the unknown, in search of a connection between her present and past. Thus, animated by “something unfelt before,” Elvira

[...] read the lines over and over with the most earnest solicitude; the throbbing of her heart told her that they were connected with some tale of wo [sic], in which she bore a part; she was transcribing them in her pocket book when the Count awakened her attention by informing her that he waited for her. (*V* 1:90–91)

² All further references are to this edition of *Vincenza*, from now on abbreviated as *V* in in-text references.

In a sort of rite of passage, Elvira crosses the threshold, the urge to read as strong as the pressure to write the words in her notebook, in an attempt to appropriate herself of the text. Her effort to make sense of the discovery, however, is not private, but also affects others in the castle, the finding of the written text being immediately shared with the Count, who admits to having seen the lines before, but not knowing who they belong to. The only help the confused Count provides to the puzzled Elvira is that “they were written by a lady” who had lived a tragic life and had died in the castle about a decade earlier (*V* 1:91).

Here the narrative may have included a flashback to unfold the life of this mysterious lady. Instead, in the midst of the crucial discovery of the embedded text, after moving Elvira reluctantly away from the window, the narrative retains the mystery and shifts the setting to the high society of Madrid. Elvira, the Marchioness, Carline and Count Vancenza are invited there to parties organised by Madame Montalba, a fashionable woman whose guests are a display of disreputable characters of high social rank. In the following seven chapters, the plot focuses on the visit to Madrid, which eventually turns out to be fatal for Count Vancenza, who suffers a mortal wound when one of Madame Moltalba's friends, the mischievous Marquis Petrozi, tries to abduct Carline.

After the death of Count Vancenza and the family's ensuing mourning, when Elvira, Carline and the Marchioness sadly return to the castle, the Marchioness “br[eaks] the melancholy silence” by providing the young girls with a comprehensive analysis of the condition of the female sex (*V* 2:21). The lengthy narrative unfolds issues such as women's vulnerability, men and love, and a warning on the delusion of human perfection. The Marchioness's picture of life also deals with the issue of virtue and points out its contrast with vanity, avarice, ambition, passion and frivolous pursuits, all vices responsible for contaminating its purity. In this part of the narrative, as elsewhere, by making the Marchioness speculate on rank and power, Mary Robinson shows her increasing radicalisation and delivers her political commentary on universal rights; her fiction becomes the platform on which the author displays to the reader her vision of life: for example, that “[i]gnorance only descends to bestow admiration upon [...] rank” (*V* 2:26), or that the enlightened mind searches truth and reason (*V* 2:27).

Empowered by the Marchioness's sound reasoning, and convinced that she is eligible to know more, Elvira proceeds to explore the castle, in a premonitory search for some traces of her past, even if when she goes back to the window panes, the sight of the lines renews her sorrow: “That some sad history was enveloped in the oblivious shroud of time, there remained not a single doubt; and her prophetic soul informed her, that she alone must unveil the fatal secret” (*V* 2:37). The words on the window pane have agency in the narrative not only because of their content but

also due to their visual features; the handwriting, albeit difficult to read, remains so impressed in Elvira's mind that it will enable her to detect another text later in the novel. Convinced of the existence of a "mystery," Elvira painstakingly looks for clues which may help her overcome her fears and hopes, her ingenuity and curiosity playing a crucial role in her search. The discovery of the secret remains her constant aim throughout the narrative, which yet once again shifts to a subplot, the lengthy story of a pilgrim's reciprocated love for a nun and its tragic end.

It will take eight chapters into the second volume and the unfolding of Prince Almanza's love for Elvira to return to the discovery of another embedded text, which will determine the course of the story. While taking away the old ornaments of the walls in preparation for her wedding, Elvira accidentally finds a hidden board behind the frame of a female portrait. After carefully removing the panel, Elvira realises she has come across an "extraordinary appearance of some secret repository" (V2:111). Despite being petrified with horror, she remembers she is in possession of a little key given to her previously by the Count (without a clear explanation), which may open the door of the recess. When she eventually finds the courage to use the key, the discovery is shocking: "Within the hollow space, evidently contrived for the purpose, stood a small casket of massy gold, fastened with three broad badges of wax, bearing the arms of Vancenza" (V2:113). Finding a "hollow space" in the wall (a metaphorical womb) and the family name paralyses Elvira. The Marchioness, who keeps watch of Elvira, awakes her from her "reverie" and is made privy to the discovery. Afraid and aware of the importance of her discovery, Elvira "seizes" the hand of the Marchioness, takes her to the casket and asks *her* to open it (V2: 114). With some hesitation and only after having called in her daughter, Carline, the Marchioness breaks the seal and the "awful ceremony of inspecting its contents" is performed:

Thus far having accomplished the task of dreary inquiry, they discovered a small crimson-velvet case fastened with clasps of gold. Upon opening it, they found it contained several sheets of paper closely covered with lines, evidently written by a female hand. (V2:116)

Once again, Elvira's discovery of a written text is not a private experience but an event shared with others, in this case with other women. In a crescendo of tension whereby the voices are tremulous, the cheeks pale and the gazes fixed, the three women support each other by holding hands, a physical and symbolic female empowering bond. Yet it is left to Elvira to inspect the papers carefully and recognise the handwriting therein:

Elvira, bending her eyes towards the papers which lay on the table, exclaimed: "Gracious God! I have seen these characters before!" The sad complaint inscribed upon the gallery window, was imprinted on her brain: the exact similarity chilled her almost to instant annihilation. (V2:117)

If the resemblance with the handwriting of the stanzas on the window pane is surprising, the authorship of the papers is shocking: “the manuscript was unfolded, and the last page presented the signature of MADELINE VANCENZA” (*V2*:150). The “female hand” that authored the lines belongs to the Count and Marchioness’s dead sister. Unaware of its content, Elvira asks the Marchioness to read out the manuscript aloud to her. By doing so, the Marchioness gives voice to Madeline Vancenza, Elvira’s real mother, in an overlapping of female maternal roles. The lengthy first-person narrative reveals the domestic tyranny of Prince Almanza over Madeline Vancenza, who—a victim of credulity—at first thought the Prince was in love with her, only to be abandoned after the birth of her daughter, Elvira. As she herself writes, “I was the *credulous* victim of an illicit passion” (*V2*:122). Madeline Vancenza found asylum at her brother’s castle and soon died, leaving her daughter unaware of her mother’s life story. At this point, truth is restored, but the eventual revelation of the ancient secret has a devastating effect on Elvira: unable to cope with it, she becomes ill and dies.³

Elvira discovers her mother’s existence by reading her poem and her letter, written texts which not only give voice to a woman’s suffering and victimhood, but also raise the issue of a daughter’s maternal legacy, passed down in the form of a text penned by a dead or missing mother. As Jill Campbell writes, such mother-daughter plots not only “extend the implications of the novelistic narrative beyond the individual case, making it the bearer of rational, social or political critique,” but also become the place of “intense, irrational, even uncanny emotional power” (2008, 164). Elvira cannot escape her mother’s seduction plot and turns into a victim, despite her virtue. One may question whether the novel is a tale of a wronged woman (Madeline Vancenza) or of female transgression (Madeline’s and Elvira’s love for the wrong man). As Stephanie Russo claims, *Vancenza* seems to be a tale of female victimhood rather than transgression (2013, 594). It is a story in which the sins of the mothers fall on innocent daughters whose only fault is to have found out the truth. Moreover, the narrative fits well within the debate on the effects of fiction on women readers. The story of Madeline Vancenza is a warning against the “dangers of credulity,” as the title of the novel reads. Indeed, credulity is a feature which also emerges in the novel’s subplots: Elvira mistakes the Duke Del Vero for Prince Almanza, the Marchioness and Prince Almanza believe that Elvira is in love with Del Vero, the Marquis Petrozi is not an aristocrat but an impostor, and the Pilgrim pretends being a confessor in order to seduce the nun in the monastery.

³ The first-person narrative of a long-dead mother *topos* resonates with Mary Hays’s novel *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), in which the young protagonist Mary reads about the seduction and betrayal of her mother, Mary, in a letter.

4 A Gothic Novel

Vancenza unfolds a narrative filled with features of the late eighteenth-century Gothic genre: fifteenth-century Spain and Italy for a setting, a castle, a young orphan woman of unknown parentage, siblings unaware of their kinship falling in love with each other, attempted abductions, murders, villains and a mysterious casket that contains a secret letter relating the past of the heroine's mother. Yet, unlike most Gothic novels of the time, *Vancenza* is profoundly pessimistic in the representation of social codes and conventions, portraying the lack of available options for women, and especially for transgressive women (Russo 2018, 588). The lack of options is also due to the issue of rank, an evident class prejudice being expressed throughout the novel. Elvira's unknown family origins place her at a subordinate level in society, and despite her virtue and beauty, she is considered inferior. The only character who seems not to be worried about rank is the young Prince Almanza. Yet, the impossible union between the two lovers seems to underline that the radical protest against class- and gender-based prejudices provides no solutions.

Among the several Gothic elements in the novel, one focuses on the recurrent feature of the female writer's hand and handwriting. In one part of the letter, Madeline Vancenza pictures herself after her death thus:

When the hand that writes, and the heart that dictates these lines, are freezing on the dreary pallet of the grave; when the faint traces of my sorrows shall fade before the obliterating wing of time; perchance some kindred eye may drop the last commiserating tear, and wash out the remembrance of my woes forever. (V2:120)

The manuscript here resonates with the words on the window panes Elvira well remembers. In contrast to the opinion of the anonymous critic, who in a 1792 issue of *The Critical Review* decided that this very paragraph was a perfect example of Mary Robinson's "improperly" ornamented language of poetry ("*Critical*" [1792] 2016), I think that what emerges here is the author's ability to merge poetry and prose by making the characters of the words of the manuscript resemble the ones in the lines on the window pane. First surprised by the discovery, the daughter eventually sheds tears in commiseration of such a sad story. The same imagery of the writing hand resonates in the words of Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* picturing the "life" of her own writings after her death: "Probably these pages will be read, when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave" ([1801] 1895, 83).

By means of another typical feature of Gothic literature, the author makes the manuscript found in the casket difficult to decipher. "The second [page] was scarcely legible, being blotted by the marks of many drops of water; probably the tears of the unfortunate writer.—The following pages were, with some difficulty, deciphered

[...]” (*V* 2:120). Despite the difficulty, the three women succeed in decoding the text, their reading unearthing physically and metaphorically what had been buried. In contrast, the final part of the narrative informs the reader that the manuscript (after the erasure of the family name) is eventually deposited in the library of the University of Naples (*V* 2:150), evoking a sort of new burial. Drawing on the tradition of eighteenth-century Gothic novels, such a literary device not only proves that the story is “authentic” but also assures readers that the text is well preserved for posterity.

Despite its unquestionable Gothic features, the novel has been rarely mentioned among (women's) Gothic writings. The novel is neither referred to in *Women's Gothic* (Clery 2000) nor in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Hogle 2002). It is only briefly cited in the volume *Romantic Gothic. An Edinburgh Companion* as “an imitation of Ann Radcliffe” (Wright and Townsend 2016, 38), and in *Gothic Incest. Gender, Sexuality and Transgression*, where in a footnote to the chapter on queer mothers, the writer draws a similarity between *Vancenza* and Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) regarding the issue of the lovers who discover that they are siblings just before their wedding (DiPlacidi 2018, 273). Interestingly, it is the biographer Paula Byrne, who admits to *Vancenza* being the product of the vogue for Gothic fiction and a fascinating historical document, albeit a novel whose literary merit is “now overblown to the point of absurdity,” and invites the reader to turn to Mary Robinson's later novels for something “still worth reading” (Byrne 2005, 299). Jerrold Hogle's recent publication *Mary Robinson and the Gothic* eventually gives credit to the novel by including it in the chapter “The Gothic Image of the Defining Other” (Hogle 2023, 20–22).

In conclusion, I would like to go back to the image of the three Marys meeting up for tea. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, these women had a straightforward way of relating to each other. In one of their exchanges of literary opinions, when reviewing her novel *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), Mary Wollstonecraft sharply criticised Mary Robinson's style thus: “her sentences are often confused, entangled with superfluous words, half-expressed sentiments, and false ornaments” (qtd. in Byrne 2005, 348). It may be feasible to imagine Mary Robinson accepting such comments, as she herself in the final stage of her life admitted her regret over most of her works being “composed in too much haste” ([1801] 1895, 239).

The life of such a celebrated woman ended prematurely at the age of forty-four, and with as little public involvement as possible in her later years. Besides her daughter Maria, only two people, William Godwin and the satirist John Wolcot attended the funeral. Yet when we look back at Mary Robinson's insubordinate and multi-faceted personality, we know she has the right to claim a place among the many other rebellious Marys who made history.

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