

# "Making the Stage my Profession": Girlhood and Performance in Mary "Perdita" Robinson's *Memoirs*

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## Abstract

Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800) was one of the most famous actresses of her time. A notorious affair with the Prince of Wales, sparked when he saw her in David Garrick's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, left her indelibly marked with the nickname "Perdita." While it may seem a stretch to connect the adulteress Mrs. Robinson to Shakespeare's sixteen-year-old virgin, Robinson did just that when she constructed her girlhood self in her posthumously published *Memoirs*. The similarities between Shakespeare's lost girl and Robinson's invented one suggest that she was using Perdita's tale to negotiate and produce her own story. Although Robinson was twenty-one, married, and a mother when she played Perdita in Garrick's adaptation, I contend that Robinson uses Shakespeare's young heroine to do two things: first, to produce herself as a sexual innocent attempting to preserve her "natural" girlhood against the demands of a culturally mandated sexual role; and second, to re-imagine the whore-making space of the theater as a stage of girlish freedom and refuge from the social and biological demands of womanhood.

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*I had been then seen, and known, at all public places from the age of fifteen; yet I knew as little of the world's deceptions, as though I had been educated in the deserts of Siberia. — Memoirs of Mrs. Mary Robinson, written by Herself (1801)*

*[H]ow sad a tragedy had been acted in Sicily — this dishonored Hermione clapped up in prison, where she gave the king a princess — the child (the innocent milk yet in her innocent mouth) by the king's command, exposed; exposed even on the deserts of this kingdom. — David Garrick, *Florizel and Perdita* (1.1.41-45)*

Discovered by David Garrick at the age of fourteen, Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800) rose to fame on the English stage. The rediscovery of Robinson by literary scholars over the past twenty-five years has engendered a rich collection of studies about the English actress-turned-writer: some have focused on Robinson's savvy manipulation of her self-image and celebrity (Cullens 1994;

Mellor 2000; Engel 2011); others trace her prolific contributions to the Gothic novel and Romantic poetry (Ty 1990; Pascoe 1997; Robinson 2011). No matter what lens scholars bring to her work and life, however, one story persistently surfaces: Robinson's notorious and short-lived affair with the young Prince of Wales (later George IV) in 1780, first ignited when he saw her playing the title female role in a production of Garrick's *Florizel and Perdita*, an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*. The Prince moved on within the year, leaving Robinson no regular annuity and a permanently damaged acting career. Two years later, she suffered from rheumatic fever and a subsequent infection that left her partially paralyzed. From the time the affair started, Robinson would be known as "Perdita," a name that dogged her in satirical cartoons and poems, fake memoirs, and letters until her death at the age of forty-two. As this unflattering merging of Robinson and the Prince makes clear, the brief union turned "Perdita" into a harlot (figure 1).

As Daniel Robinson notes, since "'Perdita' was essentially a euphemism for 'whore' . . . Robinson never referred to herself by this name." At the same time, he argues, "the figure of Perdita is integral to Robinson's celebrity," since it was her affair with the Prince that launched her onto the larger public stage beyond Drury Lane (Robinson 2011, 4). Despite its sordid associations, then, "Perdita" was not always a negative epithet for Robinson. Lisa M. Wilson cites the popularity of the "Perdita Chemise," for example, as evidence of the actress's (and her moniker's) marketing power; the morning papers' puff-pieces cast her "as a trend-setter whom their readers might imitate, in dress if not in morals." Wilson also cites a "Hasty Sketch of Perdita by a Gentleman over Head and Ears in Love," published in the *Morning Post's* 29 August 1782 edition, in which the anonymous author opines: "Formed by the hand of nature for almost every opposite pursuit to that in which the whirl of life has engaged her, Perdita but half enjoys her present situation . . . her love is the child of nature" (cited in Wilson 2009, 158).

Here, Robinson and her love appear as nature's creations, her children. The image recalls the princess-turned-country-maid stage role that made Robinson famous and infamous. Although most scholars still refer to her as "Perdita," however, they have yet to mine the rich interplay between Shakespeare's/Garrick's stage girl and popular representations of Robinson. Given the apparent incompatibility between the figures, this critical silence is not surprising: the popular press overwhelmingly portrayed "Perdita" Robinson as a whorish adulteress (she was married and a mother at the time of the affair with the Prince, and she had others after him), whereas Perdita is a figure of spotless innocence. The only regularly noted crossover between Perdita and "Perdita" in the scholarship is the actress's 1781 portrait, painted by Thomas Gainsborough and commissioned by the Prince, in which she appears in a pastoral setting dressed as a shepherdess (figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

While it may seem a stretch to connect the sexually experienced Mrs. Robinson to Shakespeare's sixteen-year-old virgin, Robinson did just that when she constructed her girlhood self in her posthumously published *Memoirs*, written from 1798 until her death in 1800 (the second half was completed by her daughter Maria). Eleanor Ty was one of the first scholars to focus on Robinson's *Memoirs* and novels, classing them as "fictions of female selfhood" built upon "manipulated facts, fictions, and rhetorical conventions" (Ty 1990, 25). My goal in this essay is to explore the ways in which Robinson was using the story of Perdita to produce a fiction of her own female girlhood. The similarities between Shakespeare's lost girl and Robinson's invented one suggests that she was using Perdita's tale to negotiate and produce her own story: both are at the threshold of their sixteenth year when they first come into the public eye (an age at which, as I will discuss, Robinson artificially preserves herself in her *Memoirs*); both have been living in "desert" states (Perdita's literal, Robinson's metaphorical), protected from the violent realities that sexual maturity impresses upon females; both are suspected of inappropriate cross-class relationships with Princes; and both are aware of the dangers and possibilities to which their theatrical contexts expose them.

This latter point of intersection is an especially fruitful one to explore, as it allows us to consider girlhood, not as a period of docile conformity, but rather as a stage in which females could try on, discard, and create multiple roles. For the purposes of my analysis here, I am considering the particular stage of female development in which a girl is post-pubertal, but not yet married; this is a stretch of time with enormous potential, in that girls are still untethered to the role of wife, but their bodies look the part. In some ways, this stage of girlhood was (and is) limited by the conventional scripts of a girl's day; in other ways, however, it is a space that enables unique acts of female creativity. From here she can become a whore, a spouse, or an eternal maiden — and in the meantime (which could extend indefinitely), she is theoretically freer than at any other point in her life to embody and play with these roles, as well as to invent others. It is at this stage that audiences first meet the sixteen-year-old Perdita (in Garrick's adaptation, she does not appear as an infant); and it is to this stage that "Perdita" Robinson regularly returns as she attempts to construct a version of herself that is both an actress and an innocent.

### Whorish Performance

For Perdita and "Perdita," performance is a risky business: to be once in the public eye as a sexually mature female is forever to be in danger of the male gaze and the often unwanted attention that follows. And if a female was seen to be capable of changing roles, she likely was branded a deceptive whore. Both Perdita and the girlish "Perdita" of Robinson's *Memoirs* recognize

these dangers, and both resist certain kinds of play-acting — those forced upon them by parental figures and male lovers — by appealing to a space of girlhood that should be protected from enforced performances. At the same time, both Perditas actively create alternative stories and roles for themselves as they traverse this girlhood stage. In Robinson's tale, these stories find their home in the professional theater, for it is there that she imagines a playing space of extended girlhood that frees her from the oppressive script of female role-playing that her parents, husband, and other unwanted suitors thrust upon her.

In Shakespeare's play and Garrick's adaptation of it, Perdita's first act is to resist being "prank'd up" like the goddess Flora (Garrick 1981; 2.1.11).<sup>2</sup> As Julius S. Held explains, Flora was a complex figure that for early modern audiences denoted harlotry and theatricality as well as fertility (Held 1961).<sup>3</sup> (All of these mythical origins would have been known as well in the eighteenth century.) Perdita's resistance to the role speaks to the potential dangers of moving through this conventional script of female development: from maid to wife/mistress. This distaste for putting on Flora's robes, however, does not translate into a universal protest against role-playing. Shakespeare's Perdita, even the significantly pared down version of her in Garrick's play, quite consciously alters the script that Florizel and her "father" have handed her in order to preserve herself as a maid.

Although Garrick eliminated the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* and so downplayed the strengths of Hermione and Paulina, he kept enough of Perdita's resistant speeches to complicate Irene Dash's claim that she was the kind of compliant girl for whom the eighteenth century had a "penchant" (Dash 1983). She may begin by saying, "It is my father's will I should take on me / The hostess-ship o' th' day," but the performance shows marks of her own revisions, especially in her role as a goddess of fertility (Garrick 1981; 2.1.80-81). She makes time and reproduction stand still as she hands out her flowers and herbs. Turning to Camillo and Polixines, she states: "For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep / Seeming and savor all the winter long. / Grace and remembrance be unto you both" (2.1.83-85).<sup>4</sup> These are herbs that appear to defy the natural plant life-cycle of birth, death, and rebirth: they retain their colors and smells all through the winter.

When Perdita begins to play the more sexual role of Flora into which Florizel and her foster father have pressed her — describing how she would strew Florizel "o'er and o'er . . . like a bank for Love to lie and play on" (2.1.114, 116) — she stops her performance:

Come, come, take your flowers.  
Methinks I play as I have seen them do  
In Whitsun pastorals. Sure this robe of mine  
Does change my disposition. (2.1.116-20)

Perdita plays her part, but only to a point. When she senses that her role and costume are going to change her and that she is no longer in control of the script and its reception, she stops.

Although Robinson was twenty-one, married, and a mother when she played Perdita in Garrick's adaptation, it is my contention that Robinson uses Perdita to do two things: first, to produce herself as a sexual innocent attempting to preserve her natural girlhood against the demands of a culturally mandated sexual role; and second, to re-imagine the whore-making space of the theater as a stage of girlish freedom and refuge from the social and biological demands of womanhood. Morgan Rooney argues that, for Robinson, "authorship is a means of escaping the body — of escaping the limitations of eighteenth-century conceptions of the female body by refusing the logic that locates a woman's identity primarily by way of her bodily virginity and her supposedly non-intellectual nature" (Rooney 2006, 356). While my argument is very much in sympathy with Rooney's vision of Robinson as refusing the logic of traditional female roles, I see Robinson's use of her girlhood as an inventive reclamation of her virginity — a reimagining of girlhood as a stage in which one can use her body to escape the conventional scripts of female development to perform multiple alternatives.

### Adapting Perdita

Robinson begins her *Memoirs* with the story of her birth on a dark and stormy night in a gloomy Bristol mansion. Her inauspicious beginnings bear a distinct resemblance to Perdita's birth to a mother "clapped up in prison" (to recall the passage from *Florizel and Perdita* with which I began) — one soon followed by a tempest-tossed infancy:

In this gloomy habitation . . . in a tempestuous night, on the twenty seventh day of november, I first breathed in 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 hour of repose from sorrow. (Robinson 2010, 193-94)<sup>5</sup>

Robinson loads her birth story down with the sorrows of her jaded hindsight. She was already a broken woman on the edge of death when she sat down to write her story. As a single mother and a fallen woman, one senses at different points in the narrative that she sees Hermione's story as well as Perdita's as part of her own.

Much of the first section of Robinson's *Memoirs* details the trials and tribulations of her mother, a woman whose husband left her to find his fortune (and a mistress) in America. Although

"the comforts and even the luxuries of life distinguished our habitation" (Robinson 2010, 199), this stage of the abandoned mother's life is marked by an uncannily familiar Shakespearean tragedy: "At this period my Brother William died. He was only Six years of age, but a promising and most lovely infant. His sudden death, in consequence of the measles, nearly deprived my mother of her Senses" (200). Like the heartbroken Hermione, collapsing in the wake of her young son's death, Mary's mother almost dies of grief. And, like the wrongly accused, immovable Hermione, she "was preparing to encounter the freezing scorn, or the contrite glances of either an estranged or repentant Husband" (200). At this point, Mary is nine years old. When her father finally does return from America, it is only to deliver news of his permanent estrangement (although he remains a forceful figure in their lives), and Mary is sent to school in Chelsea.

It takes only four pages for Mary to slide over the next six years of her life and get to the stage of her girlhood around which all of the hopeful energy of the remaining *Memoirs* gathers. At this point, she declares herself to be "near fifteen years of age," finishing her education at Oxford-House, Marylebone. Here she writes verses and "even fancied that I could compose a tragedy, and more than once attempted the arduous undertaking" (Robinson 2010, 205). And it is here that she first entertains the possibility of a dramatic career:

The dancing master at Oxford House, Mr. Hussey, was then ballet master of Covent Garden Theatre. Mrs. Hervey, the accomplished governess of Oxford House, mentioned me to him as a very extraordinary genius for dramatic exhibitions. My figure was commanding, for my age, and (my father's pecuniary embarrassments augmenting by the failure of another American project), my mother was consulted, as to the propriety of my making the stage my profession: many examples of females who, even in that perilous and arduous situation preserved an unspotted fame, inclined her to listen to the suggestion, and to allow of my consulting some master of the art as to my capability of becoming an Ornament to the theatre. (205)

Robinson, acutely aware of the perils that a career in the theater could pose to a girl's reputation, focuses on the many "unspotted" female actresses to have emerged unscathed. "[M]aking the stage my profession," then, appears to preserve a fifteen-year-old girl's innocence, not push her into a compromising position of sexualized adulthood. She might be the theater's Ornament, but she will not be a man's plaything. In spite of her absentee father's injunctions to her mother that she should take care "no dishonour falls upon my daughter," Mary recites passages "of the character of Jane Shore" before Mr. Hull of Covent Garden Theater, who then presents her to Mr. Garrick (205). A star is about to be born — but as what?

[W]hat part to choose for my debut was a difficult question. I was too young for any thing beyond the girlish character; and the dignity of tragedy afforded but few opportunities for the display of such juvenile talents. After some hesitation my tutor [Garrick] fixed on the part of Cordelia. His own Lear, can never be forgotten. (206)

In this moment of dramatic elision, Mary's restrictive, profligate father disappears into the "tutor[ing]" body of Garrick's Lear. And in the sanitized eighteenth-century stage version, of course, father and daughter both live to see happy endings.

At this point in the narrative, Mary makes repeated references to her girlishness, but she also recognizes her emerging status as a sexually attractive object in the period running up to her stage debut:

While this plan was in agitation, I was one Evening at Drury Lane Theatre with my mother and a small party of her friends, when an officer entered the box. His eyes were fixed on me, and his persevering attention at length nearly overwhelmed me with confusion . . . It was Mr. Garrick's particular request that I would frequent the theatre as much as possible till the period fixed on for my appearance on the stage. I had now just completed my fifteenth year, and my little heart throbbed with impatience for the hour of my trial. (Robinson 2010, 206)

Mary's excitement, her throbbing heart, appears to stem in equal part from her dreams of the stage and her new position as a sight to be seen in the theater. It is both thrilling and dangerous. Mary describes how this "Stranger Officer" would follow her "to and from the Theatre." After conveying a letter to her declaring his "most ardent love" and offering marriage, the Captain gains the favor of Mary's mother. If not for a friend of the Captain's, "alarmed for my safety," Mary never would have learned that her lover was already married. More suitors follow, and Mary writes that "I now found myself an object of attention whenever I appeared at the Theatre. I had been too often in the public not to be observed; and it was buzzed about that I was the juvenile pupil of Garrick, the promised Cordelia" (206-207). Mary observes a tension between her dramatic aspirations and the role of spouse, between "the promised Cordelia" and the limits of wifedom: "I felt little regret for the loss of a husband, when I reflected that a matrimonial alliance would have compelled me to relinquish my Theatrical profession" (207).

When Thomas Robinson, an articled clerk, begins courting Mary, her mother (mindful of her absentee husband's warning) presses his suit to ensure a reputable match. Mary, lying ill with smallpox, gives way to her parents' wishes: "repeatedly reminded of my Father's vow, I at last consented, and the banns were published while I was yet lying on a bed of sickness; — I was then

only a few months advanced in my sixteenth year" (Robinson 2010, 209). Robinson starts pushing for an immediate but secret marriage, claiming that he still had three months of his clerkship at Lincoln's Inn and that a young lady (whom he claims he felt nothing for) was expecting to marry him at the end of that period. Mary, understandably "alarmed" at this news, "shrank from the idea of every thing clandestine; and anticipated a thousand ill consequences, that might attend on a concealed marriage" (210). Nonetheless, Robinson appeals to Mary's mother, reminding her of "the disapprobation which my Father would not fail to evince at my adopting a theatrical profession in preference to engaging in an honorable and prosperous connection" (210). Mary's mother "became a decided convert to his opinions," and between the two of them, Mary gives way and agrees to the secret marriage.

### "Natural" Girlhood

This section of the *Memoirs* is marked by a distinct hesitation on Mary's part to move forward according to the conventional script of female development. Although she shows signs of enjoying the attentions she is receiving from admirers, she portrays herself as innocent in the ways of love. Most important for my argument here, she figures her forced performance of wifedom as a violation of her natural girlhood self:

As soon as the day of my wedding was fixed, it was deemed necessary that a total revolution should take place in my external appearance. I had till that period worn the habit of a child, and the dress of a woman so suddenly assumed sat rather awkwardly upon me. Still, so juvenile was my appearance, that even two years after my union with Mr. Robinson I was always accosted with the appellation of *Miss* whenever I entered a shop or was in company with strangers. My manners were no less childish than my appearance; only three months before I became a wife, I had dressed a doll; and such was my dislike to the idea of matrimonial alliance that the only circumstance which induced me to marry was that of being still permitted to reside with my mother, and to live separated, at least for some time, from my husband. (Robinson 2010, 210-11)

Mary uses the trope of theatrical performance to emphasize how unfit she is to play a wife. The "revolution" in her appearance begins as soon as the wedding day is fixed, but "the dress of a woman" is a distinctly "awkward" costume. This section supports Chris Cullens's reading of Robinson's repeated references to her dress as evidence of her intense sensitivity "to how even everyday dress functions as costume, and how costume, in turn, functions on- *and* off stage as *the* signifying metonymy of the individual female's substance" (Cullens 1994, 281; emphasis in



original). Here, Robinson wants her reader to see the disjunction between her theatrical costume and her girlish body and gestures. Despite her change in social role and clothing, her "juvenile" appearance and manners continue to mark her as a childish maid for up to two years after her marriage.

Mary tells a puzzling anecdote soon after this passage that continues the impression that she occupies an extended juvenile stage. Mary's mother becomes suspicious of Robinson when it is revealed that he actually had come of age already and that he was not the nephew and heir, but rather the illegitimate son of the man whom he claimed would pass on his fortune to him. Under pressure from Mary's mother to avow the marriage publicly, Robinson takes a trip to his father's mansion in Treguntur to disclose the match. Mary describes the letter she received from him in which he tells his father (whom he had claimed and continued to claim was his uncle) of his intent to wed:

Mr. Robinson on his arrival at Tregunter dispatched a letter informing me that his *uncle* seemed disposed to act handsomely, but that he had only ventured to avow an intention to marry, fearful of abruptly declaring that he had been already some months a husband. Mr. Harris, for that was the name of my father-in-law, replied that "he hoped the object of his choice was not *too young!*" At this question Mr. Robinson was somewhat disconcerted.— "A young wife," continued Mr. Harris, "cannot mend a man's fortune. How old is the girl you have chosen?"

"She is nearly seventeen!"

I was then only fifteen and a few months. (Robinson 2010, 214-15)

Mary's insistence that she was still fifteen is especially odd given her careful tracking of her age at different points leading up to this moment. She had already claimed that she was a few months into her sixteenth year when she married Robinson. This artificial return to her fifteenth year, the same period during which she was preparing for her theatrical debut, suggests that this stage holds a special, preservative space in her construction of a girlhood self.

A similar confusion over time and, consequently, age circulates in *The Winter's Tale*. In Shakespeare's original play, Time claims to be sliding "o'er sixteen years" when the play moves from Sicilia to Bohemia (*The Winter's Tale*, 4.1.6), but then Camillo enters to claim that "it is fifteen years since I saw my country" (4.2.3). Garrick retains this confused sense of time in his adaptation: in his revision, the Clown urges his father to tell the wrathful Polixines "the truth of the matter; how you found her by the sea-side some eighteen years ago" (Garrick 1981; 3.1.34-35); yet Garrick retains Paulina's lines claiming "our carver's excellence, / Which lets go by some sixteen

years, and makes her [Hermione] / As she lived now" (3.4.63-65). It is possible that Mary, in constructing her girlhood, was using this device of distorted time — one which puts Perdita in a queer developmental space that resists the rules of forward linear movement — in order to create her own, more flexible and inventive stage.

Now that the marriage was public, Mary and her husband established a home together, and Mary, obliged to give up her professional theatrical aspirations, resigns herself to another kind of performance: "I now made my debut, though scarcely emerged beyond the boundaries of Childhood, in the broad hemisphere of fashionable folly" (Robinson 2010, 217). She describes her first public outing as a wife to the Ranelagh Gardens in Chelsea, but it is clearly inflected by her sense that she is not yet ready to take on the costume of an adult woman — that she has barely crossed over the "boundaries of Childhood": "My habit was so singularly plain, and quaker-like that all eyes were fixed upon me. — . . . My hair was without powder, and my head was adorned with a plain round Cap, with a white chip hat, without any ornaments whatever" (217-18). Mary emphasizes the plainness of her costume, yet she fashions herself as attractive to all eyes. She creates herself as that "unspotted" actress of fifteen who never got a chance to make her debut — an unornamented "Ornament to the theatre" that she is able to produce now in the hindsight of her *Memoirs*, despite the growing evidence that she is no longer a girl.

Before her next outing, Mary finds that she must spend more time "decorating my person . . . because my shape at that period required some arrangement: owing to the visible increase of my domestic solitudes" — in other words, her pregnancy. Even in the face of this most non-negotiable physiological mark of womanhood, Mary continues to insist on her immaturity. A few pages later, she declares "I was yet a Child, and wholly unacquainted with the manners of the world; . . . 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" (Robinson 2010, 219). Mary foregrounds the disjunction here between her own sense of belonging to an age of girlhood and her awareness that she is now taking on adult female roles, as a wife and expectant mother.

Things seem to take a turn for the worse when Thomas's creditors become "inexorable," and he insists that they leave London and go to his family's house in the country to escape prison (Robinson 2010, 228). When she is told by her father-in-law that he has no accommodations for her impending birth and confinement, Mary goes to Trivecca house, a mile and a half away, "a spacious mansion at the foot of a stupendous mountain." Here, away from London and the hateful scrutiny of her ignorant and prideful in-laws, she appears to become one with Shakespeare's natural shepherd girl:

Here I wandered about woods entangled by the wild luxuriance of nature, or roved upon the mountain's side, while the blue vapours floated round its Summit. O! God of Nature! Sovereign of the universe of wonders! In those interesting moments how fervently did I adore thee! (230)

When Mary gives birth, she finally acknowledges her womanly state, her "maternal bosom" (230). Nonetheless, when they return to London, and Mary is persuaded by some female friends to go on an outing, the "girlish simplicity" she claims to have left behind makes its way into her performance of wife and mother:

The dress which I wore was plain and simple. It was composed of pale lilac lustring. My head had a wreath of white flowers: I was complimented on my looks by the whole party, and with little relish for public amusements, and a heart throbbing with domestic solicitude I accompanied the party to Ranelagh. (235)

Mary again constructs herself as a simple child of nature at the center of attention. She has no desire to take part in "public amusements," yet she notes how her simple looks — complete with a wreath of white flowers reminiscent of Flora (and the pranked up Perdita) — attract everyone's admiration.

When Thomas is arrested a few months later and committed to debtors' prison, however, Mary declares that she will join him as his dutiful wife and mother of his child. The nine months in which she and her infant daughter are confined return us once again to the sad tale of Hermione, only now it is Mary and not her mother who must assume the role of suffering yet loyal wife:

The apartment which we obtained was in the upper part of the Building, overlooking a racquet ground. Mr. Robinson was expert in all exercises of strength or activity, and he found that amusement daily which I could not partake of. I had other occupations of a more interesting nature — the care of a beloved and still helpless daughter. . . . During nine months and three weeks never once did I pass the threshold of our dreary habitation; though every allurement, every Effort was made, to draw me from my scene of domestic attachment . . . God can bear witness that, at that period, my soul had never entertained a thought of violating those vows which I had made to my husband, at the altar. What I suffered during this tedious captivity! (Robinson 2010, 236-37)

Paula Byrne notes that Mary had the freedom to come and go from the prison quarters, but that she rarely ventured out. She adds that Mary, "lacking a wet nurse, breastfed her own baby, which was still perceived as an unusual step for a woman of her class" (Byrne 1994, 53). If Hermione's

tale of being a jailed, nursing mother provided a dramatic backdrop for Mary's birth, it continues to serve here as a narrative touchstone for Mary's life story as she takes on the roles of suffering wife and mother.

### Taking the Stage

Once Thomas is released and Mary is emancipated from her time as the imprisoned wife, however, she turns her thoughts once again to a career in the theater as a way to support her family: "It was at this moment of anxiety, of hope, of fear, that my thoughts once more were turned to a dramatic life" (Robinson 2010, 241). Thomas, soon back to his philandering ways, supports her return to the profession. She describes her first meeting with the playwright Richard Sheridan, which seems to return her to that innocent girl who first auditioned before Garrick: "At Mr. Sheridan's earnest entreaties, I recited some passages from Shakespeare: I was alarmed and timid, but the gentleness of his manners, and the impressive Encouragement he gave me, dissipated my fears, and tempted me to go on" (242). Despite being pregnant, she reunites with her former "tutor" Mr. Garrick, who fixes on the character of Juliet for her "as the trial of my debut" (242); Mary, "with zeal bordering on delight, . . . prepared for my approaching effort" (243).

As she narrates the evening of her debut and the moment in which she waits in the wings prior to her first entrance, Mary seems to be channeling another of Shakespeare's girls on the verge of performing the transition into womanhood — the nearly fourteen-year-old Juliet. After detailing "my monumental suit" of "white satin" and "a veil of the most transparent gauze which fell quite to my feet," she describes how "I leant upon the nurse's arm, almost fainting. Mr. Sheridan, and several other friends encouraged me to proceed, and at length with trembling limbs and fearful apprehension, I approached the audience" (Robinson 2010, 243). The actress playing the Nurse disappears here as Mary leans "upon the nurse's arm," an elision that helps to produce the effect of the pregnant Robinson herself disappearing into the trembling body of Juliet. By the end of the night, Mary feels the thrill of fame; but she also feels the thrill of Garrick's "penetrating eyes" upon her from the center of the Orchestra, and the "gratification which language could not utter" of gaining the praise of "one of the most fascinating men and the most distinguished Geniuses of the age" (243-44). She revels in Garrick's gaze and praise, but, as she describes it, they "awake in my bosom" the excitement of feeling "a union in regard, wholly uninfluenced by the affections of the Soul" (244). The stage has allowed her to return to her sexually innocent girlhood self while still experiencing a union with another man — one of regard, not of the flesh — and a communion with an audience who applauds her performance. Sheridan and his friends have encouraged this move, and Garrick has approved it, but these male influences bring Robinson freedom (both economic

and creative) as well as fame. Her debut movement away from the Nurse and onto the stage literally enacts the shift from dependent girl-child to performing female — but not, importantly, to sexual possession.

This period of asexual exhilaration (as Mary writes it) soon comes to an end, however, as her star rises and she "began to know the perils attendant on a dramatic life. It was at this period that the most alluring temptations were held out to alienate me from the paths of domestic quiet." She speaks of men who "offered most liberally to purchase my indiscretion" (Robinson 2010, 247); and although she claims no romantic attachment to Sheridan, she acknowledges "the powerful interest which Mr. Sheridan possessed over my mind" and feels guilt for "estrang[ing] him from his own domestic affections" (252). The loss of her newborn daughter Sophia and the continued financial and marital infidelities that she endures add to this growing sense of lost innocence.

But when Mary approaches the point in her *Memoirs* at which she will play Perdita and enter into her infamous love affair with the Prince of Wales, her tone shifts. As with her debut as Juliet, here the stage allows her to experience a return to a natural space of girlhood innocence; at the same time, this space, described in hindsight by one who has lived the scandal of being "Perdita," now feels dangerous. And it is at this point in the narrative where Perdita's tale surfaces most visibly within Mary's. As the night of her fateful performance approaches, it is as if all of the events and trials she has experienced between fifteen and twenty-one have left her unchanged from the girl she once was; only now, the older Mary recognizes the ominous consequences of her girlish naiveté:

I had then been married nearly five years, my daughter Maria Elizabeth, nearly four years old. I had been then seen, and known, at all public places from the age of fifteen; yet I knew as little of the world's deceptions, as though I had been educated in the deserts of Siberia. I believed every woman friendly; every man sincere; till I discovered proofs, that their characters were deceptive. (Robinson 2010, 253)

The "deserts of Siberia," Mary's metaphorical space of natural girlhood ignorance, recalls the "deserts of our kingdom [Sicily]" where Perdita was first exposed (to recall the opening passage from Garrick). And Mary, like Perdita, is launched into the public eye as she enters that queer temporal space between fifteen and sixteen.

Opening night arrives, and during her curtain call, "my eyes met those of the Prince of Wales; and, with a look I shall never forget, he gently inclined his head, a second time; I felt the compliment, and blushed my gratitude" (Robinson 2010, 254). Just as Mrs. Robinson the pregnant wife had disappeared into the virgin Juliet's body at her debut, here Mary seems to become Perdita locking eyes with her Prince. In a letter he wrote to his friend, in fact, the Prince described how

Mary "was attacked the other night in the house for addressing every tender speech she ought to have addressed to Prince Florizel to me, you may see what texture they are by reading them in Shakespeare" (quoted in Byrne 1994, 104). The illusion continues in the *Memoirs* as Mary describes a letter she receives a few days later from the Prince "addressed 'to-Perdita' . . . It contained only a few words, but those expressive more than common civility; they were signed, 'Florizel'" (254).

Anne K. Mellor suggests that when Mary describes meeting the Prince she uses one of a few versions of "Robinson's sexuality available during her day . . . the oft-told story of two 'star-crossed' lovers . . . She portrays herself as the victim of a Gothic romance," an idea furthered by Sharon Setzer in her analysis of the *Memoirs* as "inflected by the Gothic vogue of the 1790s" (Mellor 2000, 286-87; Setzer 2009, 36). Mellor also detects Shakespearean drama in the *Memoirs*. She argues that Robinson sets out to retell the story of Romeo and Juliet, "but the story she actually tells is that of a loving female whose lover, although initially devoted to her, nonetheless *voluntarily* deserted her" (Mellor 2000, 291; emphasis in original). This, of course, is not Juliet's tale — but it is possibly Perdita's (and certainly Mary's). Perdita uses this story to resist Florizel's insistence that she prank herself up as Flora and trust him. "With wisdom, I might fear," she tells Florizel, "You woo'd me the false way" (Garrick 1981; 2.1.137-38). And it is this part of the story that most informs Mary's own at this point in her narrative. Many more letters from the Prince follow his initial declaration, but Mary refuses to meet with him. Although she found him "the most amiable of men" and he gave her "some assurance of inviolable affection" every day, she feared "the Eclat which such a connection would produce, and the fear of injuring him in the opinion of his Royal Relatives" (Robinson 2010, 256). Here is perhaps Mary's most explicit use of Perdita's story: she writes of advising the Prince against declaring his love publicly for fear of incurring the displeasure of "His Royal Highness's family." She also urges him to remember that

he was young and led on by the impetuosity of the passions . . . I strongly pictured the temptations to which beauty would expose him; the many arts that would be practised to undermine me in his affections; the public alarm which calumny and Envy would heap upon me; and the misery I should suffer, if, after I had given him every proof of confidence, he should change in his sentiments towards me. (256)

Perdita makes the same argument to Florizel:

To me the difference forges dread: your greatness  
Hath not been used to fear; ev'n now I tremble  
To think your father, by some accident,

Should pass this way as you did. O the fates! (Garrick 1981; 2.1.20-24)

And when Florizel argues that he, like the gods, is changing his form for love, she replies: "Oh, but dear Sir, / Your resolution cannot hold, when 'tis / Oppos'd, as it must be, by th' power o'th' king" (Garrick 1981; 2.1.40-42). Perdita is clearly wary of becoming like the deceived and violated women whose stories Florizel alludes to when he justifies putting on his costume. The problem is that when he talks about change, it is only from the male perspective. The gods' transformations, he argues,

Were never for a piece of beauty rarer,  
Nor in a way so chaste, since my desires  
Run not before mine honor, nor my lusts  
Burn hotter than my faith. (Garrick 1981; 2.1.35-39)

Florizel focuses solely on the transformation of the gods into beasts and not on the changes that women must endure at their hands. Perdita replies by calling attention to what she (not imprudently) fears will happen to her if he is opposed by his father: "You must change this purpose, / Or I my life." (2.1.44-45). Florizel insists that she "strangle such thoughts as these," and rather "Be merry" (2.1.52-53). He wants her to wear her Flora garb with joy and welcome her guests — "entertain 'em sprightly" — and "Lift up your countenance as 'twere the day / Of celebration of that nuptial, which / We two have sworn shall come" (2.1.61, 55-57). This, of course, is the most dangerous role of all for an unwed girl to play. It is not her nuptial day. To pretend otherwise could lead to scandal and ruin — for her, not for him. The Prince in both tales, however, insists on his fidelity. Mary's even sends her a miniature portrait of himself, and in the case "was a small heart cut in paper, which I also have; on the one side was written 'je ne change qu'en mourant.' On the other, 'unalterable to my Perdita through life'" (Robinson 2010, 256).

In one of the last anecdotes Mary shares before the author dies and her narrative stops, she describes how the Prince proposes that she come to his apartment "in the disguise of male attire. I was accustomed to perform in that dress, and the Prince had seen me in the character of the Irish Widow. To this plan I decidedly objected. The indelicacy of such a step, as well as the danger of detection, made me shrink from the proposal" (Robinson 2010, 256-57). Note that Robinson is not averse to dressing as a man if it is on the stage and on her own terms; she resists the script that the Prince is pressuring her to perform. It is a poignant story for her to end with, as it reminds her readers that the professional theater had been for her a stage of her own, an "accustomed" space where she could play multiple parts and have a degree of female autonomy outside the restrictive

cultural roles of wife and mistress. Now, writing in hindsight, she knows that the outcome of her affair with the Prince will be exactly as she feared. He will toss her off after a public affair, leaving her an object of scandal and effectively ending her theatrical career.

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the only direct references to Shakespeare's Perdita to appear in the onslaught of critical ink spilled against Mary merged the figure of the harlot, the actress, and Shakespeare's lost girl. This, of course, was a union that Perdita and "Perdita" both feared and resisted in their attempts to reclaim their own playing spaces. On 12 February 1780, the *Morning Post* recounted an event in which Robinson, "the dart-dealing actress," was forced to move after she sat in a box directly opposite the Prince's at the theater. The paper mocked her, turning Perdita's own lines against her: "Poor Perdita! — Queen it not an inch further, but milk thy ewes and weep!" (quoted in Byrne 2004, 106). This choice of lines and their context binds Perdita's and "Perdita"'s storylines together, evoking both of their lowest points at which they feel abandonment and the harm that can come from performing: "I told you what would hap —" Perdita cries to Florizel, "this dream of mine; Being now awake, I'll queen it no inch farther, / But milk my ewes and weep" (Garrick 1981, 2.1.478-80). The revelation of Perdita's natural royalty spares her from this fate, of course. Mary would not be so lucky. As this parodic image makes clear (figure 3), Robinson would not be remembered by her contemporaries as the girlish "child of nature" who had moved freely on the stage. This Perdita, on her last legs, bows to a potential trick and limps into infamy.

### Notes

1. Paula Byrne reads the portrait as a sympathetic and "clear evocation of Mrs. Robinson's abandonment: she is Perdita the lost one, the pensive and thoughtful shepherdess," clasping a miniature of the Prince in her hand (Byrne 2004, 155); Mellor reads Gainsborough's portrait as a "subtle criticism" of Robinson as a "calculating coquette" (Mellor 2000, 278).
2. All references to *Florizel and Perdita* are to the text edited by Harry William Pedicord and Fredrick Louis Bergmann (Garrick 1981). All references to *The Winter's Tale* are to the Bedford/St. Martin's edition (Shakespeare 2008). All quotations from the play are to Garrick's adaptation unless otherwise noted.
3. Two stories about Flora's origins were in circulation from the sixteenth-century forward: the Ovidian tale of Chloris being transformed into the goddess after Zephyrus rapes her; and the sordid story of a whore who left her fortune to Rome and was, in return, praised and remembered as a goddess. In his invaluable study of Flora, Held provides many examples of portraits done by well-known painters of courtesans dressed as the mythical goddess (Held 1961).



4. Douglas Peterson was one of the earliest critics to note the resistance in Perdita's performance as Flora: "while she proceeds with the flower ceremony as Flora, she remains ironically aware of the incongruous role that she has assumed" (Peterson 1973, 175). As B. J. Sokol notes, Peterson was "perhaps the first to point out in connection with *The Winter's Tale* that Flora was a goddess whose 'shady reputation in Renaissance England would hardly have been missed by the play's seventeenth-century audiences.'" Sokol expands on Peterson's footnote to argue that Perdita's complicated situation — she "is surrounded by the misapprehension that she is illegitimate, and that she herself may become a highly placed concubine" — make her associations with Flora's whorish origins especially relevant (Sokol 1994, 131-32).
5. All references to Robinson's *Memoirs* are to Volume 7 of the *Works of Mary Robinson*, edited by Hester Davenport (Robinson 2010). Davenport, working from the unpublished manuscript, notes all of the places where the language was changed for publication. Given that I am exploring how Robinson constructed herself, I have chosen to quote the original manuscript wording rather than the posthumously published version that her daughter had a hand in editing.

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