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Fashioning the Self-Portrait: Mary Robinson's Personas in Pictures and Words❖

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ABSTRACT

This paper recognises the intimacy and inextricability of the relationship between image and text, and reads visual representations of Mary Robinson along with her own words. In this paper, I examine the two famous portraits of Robinson painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1782 and 1784 respectively, before I turn to her autobiography, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself* (1801). This study seeks to explore the dynamic nature of performative modes and particularly the presence of female performers in visual and textual ways, and to investigate how Robinson employs different media and venues to recuperate and invent a new identity for herself in the late eighteenth century. This study prompts readers/viewers to think about the possible collusion or incompatibility between textual and visual dimensions. It also points out the need to situate Robinson's multiple personas and representations within the development of events that characterised her life and person, and also to problematise self-narratives and the political and social contexts in which they emerge.

KEYWORDS: portraiture, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mary Robinson, Perdita, autobiography

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The Romantic period witnessed a growing sense of the insecurity and unsustainability of a unified self. Such anxiety and distrust of a sustained self is forcefully reflected in *The Prelude*, in which William Wordsworth turns to nature to understand the world and trace the progressive development of an inner self. As Elizabeth Fay points out, the period saw "the overwhelming popularity of portraits and of portraitive objects and practices" (3) in response to the notion that a unified self, or a sustained identity, is impossible. Portraiture, in this sense, offers a dynamic cultural and social site for an examination of how women, especially women in the public world, negotiated and crafted "public intimacy," a term Felicity Nussbaum borrows from Joseph Roach, in eighteenth-century society. According to Nussbaum, "public intimacy" requires one's "performing within the public realm with the express intent to expose private matters and to generate affect around their own persons in order to kindle celebrity" ("Actresses" 150).[1] In her monograph, *Rival Queens*, published in 2010, Nussbaum carries on her investigation into eighteenth-century actresses and describes a special type of femininity that allows them to market themselves as "a valuable commodity" (16).[2] The boundary between public persona and private self, then, could be deftly manipulated by actresses. Women of the stage were beginning to be seen as celebrities, owing to the rising popularity of such theatrical stars as Ann Oldfield, Frances Sheridan, Dorothy Jordan, and the legendary Sarah Siddons. Laura Engel has reminded us that in this period, "audiences' fascination with actresses suggests that female celebrities had the potential to disrupt, revise, and reinvent traditional models of female identities by calling into question the relationship between authenticity and theatricality central to ideas about desirable femininity both on- and off stage" (*Fashioning* 2).[3] Actresses, then, serve as "the perfect vehicle for looking at how ideologies of femininity, performance, and embodiment materialized in eighteenth-century culture" (Engel, "Stage Beauties" 751).

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[1] In this book chapter, Nussbaum argues for the indispensability of theatre as a commercial site and remarks that the economy of the theatre further complicates the display of femininity in the eighteenth century.

[2] See *Rival Queens*, in particular chapter 3, in which Nussbaum focuses on six celebrated actresses of the eighteenth century, including Nell Gwyn (1642-87), Lavinia Fenton (1708-60), Anne Oldfield (1683-1730), Charlotte Charke (1713-60), George Anne Bellamy (1731-88), and Sarah Siddons (1775-1831), to argue for the relations between biographical descriptions and femininity.

[3] For discussions of celebrity culture in the eighteenth century, see also Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*; McPherson; and Wanko, *Roles of Authority*.

Early Romantic women writers have received increasing critical attention over the past few decades, and scholars have revisited many of the literary texts previously marginalised or overlooked. I turn my attention to Mary Robinson (1757-1800), because I think she presents a pertinent and interesting case for discussions about the ways in which women "fabricate" the self to tell their own stories. As one of the most well-known actresses of the 1770s, Robinson is well-versed in the language of social critique and custom in the theatrical world, and a skillful manipulator of the boundaries on and off stage, between domestic and public. Robinson was living a life of celebrity and clearly aware of the impact of her scandalous affair with the Prince of Wales. Nevertheless, Robinson was not merely a victim of public scrutiny; she was also a manipulator of her public persona. As one of the Prince of Wales's mistresses, she was taunted in printed assaults that appeared in newspapers, periodicals, magazines, and pamphlets.[4] She complained in her autobiographical work, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself* (1801), that she "was again assailed by pamphlets, by paragraphs, by caricatures, and all the artillery of slander," and that "tales of the most infamous and glaring falsehood were invented" (2: 78).[5] Jacqueline M. Labbe reminds us, in the introduction to *Women's Writing*'s special issue on Robinson, that she is indeed "a proliferating personality as well as a prolific writer, conversant with multiplicity and open to multiple readings" (3). As my study will show, Robinson was skilled at manipulating the expectation of audiences, and her attempt to define proper femininity was consistently revealed in different representations of her public images. It is the argument of my paper that Robinson took advantage of the growing intimacy she shared with audiences and readers to construct her own public images and make them more accessible.

Critics including W. J. T. Mitchell, Julia Watson, Sidonie Smith, and Laura Engel have argued for the inextricable connection between the visual and textual. Watson and Smith, for instance, point out that "[v]isual modes encode histories of representation and invite viewers to read stories within them," whilst "[t]extual modes make their meanings through imagery and through such

[4] For press coverage see, for example, chapter 9 of Bryne's biography of Robinson *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson*, and Gamer and Robinson, especially 228-33.

[5] All references in this paper are to this edition: Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself*, edited by Maria Elizabeth Robinson (1803). Hereafter referred to as *Memoirs* for the sake of brevity, and cited parenthetically by page number.

figure as ekphrasis" (19). This paper recognises the intimacy and inextricability of the relationship between image and text, and reads visual representations of Robinson along with her own words, to unveil the ways in which Robinson constructed her self-representations and negotiated multiple selves. As Jens Brockmeier reminds us, "pictures and words, imagery and narrativity are interwoven in one and the same semiotic fabric of meaning. They are overlapping trajectories within the same symbolic space, a space of meaning in which our experience takes place and in which we try to make sense of the world" (255). This paper explores the dynamic nature of performative modes and particularly the presence of female performers in visual and textual ways, for whilst the rise of portraiture provides an effective vehicle through which the crafting of public persona is made possible, autobiographies of celebrities reveal a real endeavour and an underlying desire to create one's persona. Michael Gamer and Terry F. Robinson have warned us of the danger of separating the later Robinson (the writer) from the earlier one (the actress), arguing that the theatre "not only provided the central vehicle for Robinson's transformation of herself from actress to icon, but also governed her metamorphosis in the late 1780s from icon to poet" (220). I share with this conviction that ignoring her previous self-representations would lead to a partial and biased understanding of her person and life. In the following, I will first look at Robinson's two portraits produced by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1782 and 1784 respectively, before I turn to examine the ways in which she fashioned her own self-portrait in *Memoirs*. Autobiography offers narratives that could be at variance with articulations in visual forms. Robinson's self-portrait in *Memoirs* tells a story shaped by the constant mediation of the disjunctions between her public and private personas. The role and function of various portraitive practices in constructing different expressions of identity and creating subjectivity has been carefully examined in Fay's *Fashioning Faces: The Portraitive Mode in British Romanticism* (2010). This paper shares her conviction that portraiture "allowed people to try on new identities, to play with versions of 'self' and 'I,' to see themselves in different ways" (6). Yet, as my paper will show, portraitive practices could create conflicts when identity is at variance with cultural and social norms, and discordance between public and private personas could lead to anxiety. By exploring different modes of performative narratives, through visual and textual representations, this paper

demonstrates the ways in which Robinson's public personas were imagined and how artificiality is achieved through her offstage representations.

I. Reynolds's Portraits

In the late eighteenth century, portraits assumed a significant place in the world of art. In *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (1993), Marcia Pointon offers an important reminder that portraiture is "the major genre in eighteenth-century England" and that "the continuing preoccupation with portraiture" (9) in eighteenth-century culture demands further examination. Gill Perry attributes this, at least partly, to "the growth of exhibition culture in Britain" in the period, for it "increased publicity, open[ing] up markets for different genres of painting, including portraiture" (*Spectacular Flirtations* 19). Fay, in a similar manner, points out that "the painted portrait became an increasingly dominant a representational genre" for "its ability to characterize the modern epoch's changing perception of relations between the self and the world" (44). Take the Royal Academy, one of the most important centres for artistic activities, for instance: its renowned annual exhibition was dominated by portraits between 1781-85, far outnumbering other genres such as history painting (which was held as the most elevated and respected genre of all), still-life, and landscape. In 1783 alone, portraits constituted 44.67% of works exhibited at the Academy.[6] There is no doubt that portraiture dominated the production of art and provided an important market for artists.

Portraiture, nevertheless, is a complicated genre in the history of arts.[7] Art historian Shearer West reminds us that though portraits are commonly associated with the idea of the real world and likeness, in fact they are "not just likenesses but works of art that engage with ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and place"; this is because elements of portraits are "not fixed" and are "expressive of the expectations and circumstances of the time when the portrait was made" (11).

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[6] According to Marcia Pointon, Reynolds showed ten portraits while Gainsborough twenty-five in the Royal Academy exhibition of the year 1783, and they are only two among a total of roughly 111 portrait painters active in the artistic life in London in the 1780s. See *Hanging* 36-40.

[7] This paper is not about different types of portraits in this period, as it would require more space to fulfil this much needed but difficult task. For a comprehensive study of portraiture, see West.

Pointon similarly notes that portraiture ensures that "clothing, jewelry, and personal adornment contributed discursively as well as materially" to eighteenth-century life and culture ("Surrounded" 48). In this light, portraiture's engagements with society, exhibition culture, viewers' expectations, artistic practices, and the qualities of the subject stressed by painters indeed offer much to be explored. Literary scholars have long held the consensus that the development of individual identity and the concept of the "self" was greatly reformed in the eighteenth century.[8] The practice of portraiture was influenced by the emerging genre of biography of this time, and became an important cultural commodity that embodied the notion and significance of individual identity.[9] Although portraits of this time do not share the outspokenness of today's portraits, we should not read them as simply reflections of sitters, for they have much more to tell.

The relations between celebrity and art were particularly relevant towards the end of the eighteenth century, when a variety of performative discourses were employed to construct sustainable codes of femininity amidst shifting gendered boundaries and tremendous social changes. It was in this atmosphere that Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), the first president of the prestigious Royal Academy, and one of the leading portrait artists in Britain, completed two portraits of Robinson in the early 1780s. Robinson was a much celebrated beauty in the period, who drew attention of artists including Reynolds, Romney, and Gainsborough, among many others, to paint her portraits.[10] In her early years, she garnered fame through her theatrical career. One of her most well-known and highly acclaimed performances is her appearance as Perdita in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in December 1779. It was also in this performance that she met the Prince of Wales and afterwards began their romantic relationship. The first portrait of Robinson by Reynolds is *Mary Darby, Mrs Thomas Robinson "Perdita"* (1782), currently on display at Waddesdon Manor (Fig. 1). A miniature copy mirroring this portrait, created by John Hazlitt (1767-1837), is housed in The Wallace Collection in London. This portrait is very likely to be inspired by the portrait of Hélène Fourment,

[8] See Mascuch for a detailed analysis of the development of individual identity.

[9] In exploring the culture and politics of the Renaissance in his book *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (1984), Stephen Greenblatt traces the growing concept of individual identity back to the Renaissance Europe. See also Taylor; Wahrman; and Harvey, in particular chapter 5.

[10] For an introductory study of Mary Robinson and her portraits, see Ingamells.



Fig. 1. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mary Darby, Mrs Thomas Robinson "Perdita,"* 1782 (Waddesdon Manor, England).

produced by her husband Peter Paul Rubens, in which she is pictured in a low-cut dark blue dress with white lace cuffs and a large black feathered hat. Robinson sat to have this portrait done for around ten times at least.[11] This portrait, along with another one by Gainsborough, and two miniatures created by Richard Cosway, were together on display at the annual Royal Academy exhibition in 1782.[12] In this portrait, Robinson is portrayed as an intelligent and confident woman.[13] On a closer look, this portrait speaks fashion rather than professional achievement. Robinson, clothed in a fine black dress with muslin fichu and ruffled lace, poses as a figure of fashion, and her identity as a renowned actress is enlivened and reinforced by the crimson theatre curtain placed behind her. Even after she resigned from the Drury Lane Theatre in 1780 at the Prince's request, her appearance in London theatres still created a remarkable sensation. Her social appearances were regularly circulated in newspapers, and her clothing style was frequently copied by women of her era.[14] Her hair is exquisitely arranged under a fashionably larger black hat with feathers. All the elements of the composition, including the formality of her dress, hat, feather, hair arrangement, her pose, crossed arms, the background, and her gaze—which is directed straight towards the viewer—together signal her positioning herself as an actress and a fashion icon of eighteenth-century London fashionable society.[15]

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[11] According to John Ingamells, she "sat to [Reynolds] three times in January, five times in February, twice in March, and lastly on 5 April" (31). The portrait was later shown at The Royal Academy in late April 1782.

[12] See Paula Byrne, "Thy hand," in particular 48, for more information about the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1782.

[13] Reynolds's admiration for women with great professional achievements is evident. He has created portraits for a number of well-known actresses including the famous Sarah Siddons (as a queen-like figure in his portrait *Siddons as the Tragic Muse*), Elizabeth Hartley, Frances Abington, Mary Robinson, and many others.

[14] For the fashion and new styles Robinson inspired in the late eighteenth century, see Gamer and Robinson, especially 220-28; see also Brock. Chloe Wigston Smith explores the relation between words and material culture, and examines the ways in which Robinson used clothes to show her identity (145-61). Diego Saglia examines the ways in which luxury is represented and reworked in Robinson's *Memoirs*.

[15] Here my reading is aligned more closely with Smith's observation on how Robinson appears "as a woman worthy of being painted by Reynolds" (156). On the other hand, Anne K. Mellor conversely maintains that although Reynolds's portrayal of Robinson here speaks of "an attempt to establish a respectable lineage for a woman now fallen on hard times" (280), the dress is itself "a subtle reminder—along with her half-closed, calculating eyes and slightly pursed lips—of Mary Robinson's domestic infidelity" (280-81).

Reynolds's two portraits both present a beautiful Robinson with gorgeous clothing and a back ribbon round the throat, delicate and feminine, and her turning slightly to the right; nevertheless, considering these two portraits together, one can notice that there is a theme of a woman in the process of change. Reynolds's second portrait of Robinson is titled *Mrs Mary Robinson* (1784), housed in The Wallace Collection in London (Fig. 2). The date of this portrait indicates that it was produced after Robinson's illness, a partial paralysis, developed while she pursued her then lover Banastre Tarleton. This accident prompted Robinson to withdraw from her theatrical career and the fashionable society in London, forcing her to concentrate on writing. The demeanour and appearance of Robinson has significantly changed in this rendition. Despite her youth and beauty (the second portrait was produced only two years after the first one), it features a more sympathetic portrayal of Robinson in a self-contemplating, meditation posture, occupied in a deep and thoughtful reflection. Physically lounging, she leans on her right arm and gazes into the distance, her eyes filled with melancholy and sorrow. This melancholy figure, reflected in the dark and gloomy background of sea, offers a direct contrast to the lively, sociable, and confident woman pictured in the previous portrait. A fitting title that displays the elements Reynolds highlights here is given to William Birch's engraving of this portrait in 1787: "Contemplation" (see "Description"). Unlike the first portrait, which features Robinson gazing at the viewer, in the second portrait her view is directed to the open horizon background—stormy sky, the sun sinking under the tempestuous sea—and it is impossible to see her whole face.[16] Despite her notoriety and scandals, this portrait invokes femininity and suggests a shift in her commitment from being an actress to her other roles—a writer and a mother.[17] While this picture reveals a new, reformed Robinson, who has stepped back from a stage career and retired

[16] Robinson's daughter Maria Elizabeth will later, when editing Robinson's unfinished *Memoirs* for publication, include a passage that immediately be alluded to Reynolds's second portrait of Robinson discussed here. Describing her mother's residence in Brighton in summer 1788, she writes: "Mrs. Robinson beguiled her anxiety by contemplating the ocean, whose successive waves, breaking upon the shore, beat against the wall of their little garden. . . . Whole nights were passed by Mrs. Robinson at her window in deep meditation, contrasting with her present situation the scenes of her former life" (2: 115).

[17] Engel has different readings of this picture. She sees this as "a calculated performance" of Robinson, in which several identities are presented, including "the idealized Gothic/romantic heroine; the introspective 'authentic' Robinson . . . and the actual Robinson—the ghostly, paralyzed body behind the image" (*Fashioning* 80).



Fig. 2. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs Mary Robinson*, 1784 (The Wallace Collection, England).

to a more humble and secluded position in the literary world, it seems to suggest the idea that her real self, the one that is underneath layers of fashioning and costumes, somehow remains hidden in obscurity. Here Reynolds creates a melancholic air, transmitted through the contemplative posture and the reflective appearance of Robinson, leaving room for interpretation about her seeming withdrawal from the present and imaginations for a more hopeful future. This might explain Robinson's decision to use the engraving of Reynolds's second portrait by T. Burke (Fig. 2) as the frontispiece of several of her works, including *Poems* (1791), *Lyrical Tales* (1800), and also the posthumous *Poetical Works* (1806), which she made her daughter promise to publish after her death. The use of portrait frontispieces implies that Robinson, to some extent, approved of this portrait and its representation of her in the period. The portrait then functions as a complementary approach to read her work, and to understand her position and identity as a professional writer. Portraitures, in this case, can be understood as "the product of a number of negotiations and transactions between the painter and sitter" (Munteanu 130), and reflect a kind of narrative agency and self-expression Robinson grants for herself before she penned her own memoirs.

To more fully understand these portraits, it is necessary to consider the relationship between the painter and the sitter, and the cultural and social context in which this intimacy emerged. Helen E. M. Brooks's argument for the complex relations between an actress's labour and the commodity she creates is helpful in this context to examine the nature of portrait-making. She reminds us that actresses "were not only the laborers and traders of the product of the labor, but also embodied that product in and of themselves. It was this duality . . . [that] was fundamental to the performers' ability to promote and maintain their professional status within the industry, giving them control over their labor" (50). Similarly, when a portrait is commissioned, the artist and sitter (client) discuss and negotiate the elements to be included in the portrait, and determine the pose and style. In both of the portraits I discuss here, there are traces that inform us of the relationship between Reynolds and Robinson, and of the ways in which Robinson is inscribed in these portraits.[18] Having one's

[18] While critics who have paid attention to portraits of Robinson regularly maintain that there are clear allusions to her sexually promiscuous lifestyle, Anca Munteanu rejects such readings and notices the "common aspirations," the ambition and desire to "move up within the social hierarchy" (127) shared by Robinson and her portraitists.

portrait painted involves several visits to the artist's studio to discuss the signifiers, including the costume, pose, accessories, and background that suit the goal of the portrait. In this light, we can see portrait painting as an activity that is, in the words of Richard Wendorf, "collaborative in nature," for both the painter and sitter need to "accommodat[e] each other as they strived to reach common ground"; the finished portrait, then, is "a record of this transaction, a record of the personal and artistic encounter that produced it" (132), a message conveyed by the subject and artist. William Hazlitt, in his essay "On Sitting for One's Picture" (1823), also elaborates on the relationship between the painter and sitter. This relationship, in his opinion, is reciprocal in nature.[19] Hazlitt compares this relationship to that between two lovers: "the amicable understanding and mutual satisfaction and good-will subsisting between these two persons, so happily occupied with each other!" (28-29).[20] Before the portrait is complete, the painter would function as a "stage manager or director" who is responsible for "defining the setting, establishing the appropriate pose and choosing the most suitable costume, rehearsing with his subject as sitting follows sitting, and occasionally . . . capturing spontaneous gestures and attitudes before they entirely disappear" (Wendorf 131-32). In fact, as an ardent viewer of theatrical performances, Reynolds's knowledge about theatre and its impact as a form of performative art was so comprehensive and profound that even Sarah Siddons sought his advice in acting and performing.[21] Reynolds was well-versed in the qualities of a good stage director and the significance of this role in administering performance, and clearly aware of "the commercial potential of the huge expansion of the market for engraved prints in the late eighteenth century" (Byrne, "Thy hand" 48). As for Robinson, sitting for portraits, in this case, was very much like playing a role on stage—highly performative, and requiring close attention to the finest details, something she was familiar with and excelled in. If "having one's picture painted is like the creation of another self" (Hazlitt 26), Robinson's many portraits could indicate that in a way she was encouraging others to participate in the re-production of her representations and interpretations of self.

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[19] For discussions of portraiture and its function, see Woodall.

[20] Hazlitt's essay also records Reynolds's interaction with his sitters; see 28-29.

[21] Richard Wendorf notes that the legendary star Sarah Siddons would ask Reynolds's advice on "the selection of her costumes" and on theatrical performance in general (131). Regretfully not much information about Mary Robinson and her portraits can be found in this insightful book on Reynolds.

Visual representation of Robinson reached its height in the late eighteenth century because of her legendary beauty and increasing fame. Artists swarmed to capture her in paintings, in response to the public's curiosity of Robinson, both as a celebrated actress and once the Prince's mistress, and partly to satisfy collectors' vanity to own her portraits. The lives and stories of actresses became a kind of "public property" in the period, and the "widespread dissemination of cheap engraved copies of portraits and popular prints through which their exploits were caricatured, contributed to the popular mythologies constructed around their public and private activities" (Perry, "Women" 34). In this context, Reynolds's two portraits were produced "as a mutual publicity deal," since "Perdita's image was a commodity in great demand" (Byrne, "Thy hand" 48). During the process of viewing, the eyes not only train themselves to value artistic expressions or aesthetic elements, but also to consider the objects in terms of consumption. As Engel points out, "her status as 'the Perdita' confirmed her value as an object to be passed around and owned," and her multiples images suggest that "she was available for public consumption" (*Fashioning* 71). Robinson was acutely aware of her popularity following her embarking on a theatrical career: "My popularity increasing every night that I appeared, my prospects, both of fame and affluence, began to brighten" (2: 31). She was constantly placed in the spotlight, and the crowds followed her wherever she went. In a letter written to a friend in 1783, Robinson expresses her utter amazement at the public's intense interest in her presence: "Whenever I appeared in public, I was overwhelmed by the gazing of the multitude. I was frequently obliged to quit Ranelagh, owing to the crowd which staring curiosity had assembled round my box; and, even in the streets of the metropolis, I scarcely ventured to enter a shop without experiencing the greatest inconvenience" (2: 67-68).

However, Robinson clearly understood the importance of marketing her public image through portraits, and the need to use portraits as a form of publicity—to promote herself in any way offered to her. In *Women, Work, and Clothes* (2013), Chloe Wigston Smith examines Robinson's narratives about her clothes and visual images (particularly those in the Charles Burney Collection in the British Museum) and argues that fashion functioned as "a form of armor" that allowed Robinson to "silence and disarm her critics" and to "perform, even offstage" (147). The power of visual culture was gradually made clear to her, and portraitures in the late eighteenth century were significantly

used to create effective narratives for celebrities like Robinson. Just as Robinson "adjusts her clothes for specific audiences and specific circumstances" to "support her narrative of glamour and suffering" (Smith 149), my discussions demonstrate that Reynolds's portraits likewise functioned as a kind of performance off stage that allowed her to fashion her self-portraits. These portraits also signify an endeavour to feed the public's appetite for celebrity, and perhaps more importantly, to control the discursive and interpretive spaces allowed through the visual.[22] This space defies a linear perception of time and opens up possibilities of the revision of the past and present, for the mobility offered here requires imaginative power to read, view, and interpret to fulfil its meaning. This is not to say that there can be no facts or truths about visual portraitures. In fact, they cannot be defined and understood through linear narratives, for they are constantly and continually being re-interpreted through viewing. It is their own temporality that enables their dynamic existence in the world of art. As Jens Brockmeier reminds us: "Portraiture was meant to situate an individual, or a group, within a web of well-defined symbolic meanings, outlining an often hidden system of reference to the social, religious, and intellectual culture the person belonged to or wanted to be seen as belonging to" (260). In this sense, Robinson's strategy was to leave her multiplying selves to be constituted through the process of negotiating, creating, viewing and imagining.

II. Portrait in Her Own Words: *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*

While Britons' appetite was being fed by the overpopulation of portraits produced and exhibited every year in the eighteenth century, biography gradually encroached upon the domain of literature and emerged as one of the important ways of understanding and portraying history.[23] Unlike portraits, which capture a cultural and historical moment in a person's life, biography presents an array of details and events in which the subject is located and crafted, and provides a coherent narrative and sustained commentary on the life of a certain individual. Like visual representations in portraits, self-framing

[22] Paula Byrne further suggests that it might be for this consideration (the need of artists to create engravings of this portrait), that Reynolds "employs a high proportion of black and white" in this portrait, so that "it would translate well to the monochrome medium of engraving" ("Thy hand" 49).
[23] For studies of the history of biography, and its development as a literary form, see Altick; Stauffer.

moments can be found in life writing. By this time, Robinson had already experimented with different genres. During the last ten years of her life (between 1790 and 1800), she published seven novels, along with six long poems, several political essays, two plays, a translation, many other poems for periodicals and newspapers, and also an unfinished memoir.[24] She was respected by some of the greatest writers of her day: William Godwin, William Wordsworth and others admired her work and talents, and Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins praises her writing as "works of genius" (25). In her later years, Robinson had suffered prolonged and agonising pain. She died on 26 December 1800. While Reynolds's two portraits reveal different sides of Robinson, an aspiring actress and a vulnerable ill woman, these visual portraitures do not succeed in defending her against other harsh, malicious representations. This prompts Robinson to pen her own autobiography despite her declining health two years before she died, but she did not live long enough to carry out the plan. In the end, her daughter Maria Elizabeth stepped in to finish the story for her mother and prepared the whole volumes for publication. Within a year following the death of Robinson, *Memoirs* was published posthumously in 1801.

Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself nevertheless expresses Robinson's horror over false or distorted representations of her person and life. Different biographical narratives concerning Robinson, published across a wide spectrum of time periods, tended to highlight her sexual behaviour and her elevated taste in fashion and luxury. Even later biographies of Robinson continued to sexualise her, as revealed in their titles: from Dutton Cook's "Poor Perdita" (1865), Stanley Victor Makower's *Perdita: A Romance in Biography* (1908), Lily Moresby Adams Beck's *The Exquisite Perdita* (1926), Hester Davenport's *The Prince's Mistress: A Life of Mary Robinson* (2004), to Paula Byrne's *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson* (2004), among others. The intention of emphasising the lineage of the work—by incorporating "Written by Herself" in its title—is not only elicited by satirical commentary of Robinson and her scandalous affair with the Prince of Wales, but perhaps also influenced by the posthumous publication of *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), which

[24] According to Michael Gamer and Terry F. Robinson, Robinson's final performance on stage was 31 May 1780 (220).

was written by William Godwin with the intention to celebrate his late wife Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work, but unfortunately had the opposite effect and placed her posthumous reputation in serious jeopardy. Robinson began writing her *Memoirs* shortly after the publication of Godwin's biography. Her determination to complete and to publish her own memoirs is documented by her daughter: even though Robinson was "hourly declined towards that asylum where *the weary rest*, her mind seemed to acquire strength in proportion to the weakness of her frame" (2: 156-57). She prepared the half-written memoir, along with other papers and resolutely requested Maria Elizabeth to publish them: "*Promise* me that you will print it!" (2: 158). This last wish indicates that Robinson, to some extent, was earnestly engaged in the construction of her "self-portrait," one that she could comfortably identify with. Indeed, *Memoirs* opens with Maria Elizabeth's declaration that should anyone "call in question the propriety of this publication, they are requested to recollect the *solemn injunction* of a dying parent, and the *promise pledged* by a child in circumstances so awful and affecting." This attempt to justify the need for its publication reflects Robinson's desire to have her story retold, not by others, but by herself this time.

The biographical descriptions in *Memoirs* portray Robinson as a doomed victim and encourages readers to sympathise with her unfortunate situations and distressing plight. Robinson's narrative speaks of a young wife whose husband is a womanizer and gambler, and who fails to fulfil the obligations of a husband. Robinson foretells her tragic marriage early in *Memoirs*, when describing the relationship of her parents and their separation: "A freezing, formal, premediated separation from a wife who was guiltless of any crime, who was as innocent as an angel, seemed the very extent of decided misery" (1: 30-31). Her decision to marry Thomas Robinson is replete with hesitation and scruples: "I pleaded that I thought myself too young to encounter the cares and important duties of domestic life" (1: 65). Even on the day of marriage, she feels herself "the most wretched of mortals [for she] could scarcely persuade [herself] that the union, which [she] had permitted to be solemnized, was indissoluble" (1: 71-72). Gradually, Thomas Robinson was led "from the paths of domestic confidence to the haunts of profligate debasement" (1: 105), and their relationship had since become irreparable. J. Fitzgerald Molloy, editor of the 1895 edition of *Memoirs*, endorsed this vulnerable and sympathetic version of Robinson. To Molloy, Robinson was one of "an unprotected beauty" who

was "exposed to the gaze of libertine rank and fashion, under the mere nominal guardianship of a neglectful and profligate husband" (v). In addition to her unfaithful husband, the Prince of Wales, once an avid admirer and lover of Robinson, has a significant influence on her life and fate. In Robinson's letter to John Taylor in October 1794, she attributes her misfortune to the Prince:

> Have I not reason to be disgusted when I see him, to whom I ought to look for better fortune, lavishing favours on unworthy objects, gratifying the *avarice of ignorance* and *dullness*; while 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! (*Mary Robinson* 366)

Memoirs emphasises the moments in her earlier days when she was subjected to the public gaze as a celebrity figure, and portrays the time when she seemed most vulnerable. Robinson's theatrical talents, her achievement on the stage, and literary ambition, are overshadowed by the portrayals of her sexual attractiveness and vulnerability alone. In the preface to *Memoirs*, Maria Elizabeth describes her mother as "the victim of calumny and misrepresentation" and laments that "the world will be little disposed to sympathize with an unprotected and persecuted woman." In the opening pages of *Memoirs*, Robinson revealed her feelings and foretells her own sad fate: "on the twenty-seventh of November, 1758, I first opened my eyes to this world of duplicity and sorrow. . . . 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" (1: 4). While attempting to construct a public persona through her autobiography, Robinson maintained a delicate balance between revelation and disguise with words, to sustain a balance between sexual profligacy and feminine sentimentality. In her study of eighteenth-century actress, Engel has reminded us that "it is a mistake to read actresses' letters, memoirs, and diaries as uncomplicated vehicles of truth" ("Stage Beauties" 751). Likewise, Thomas Postlewait has warned against the unreliability of actresses' autobiographies; nevertheless, he contends that "these autobiographies may indeed be profoundly valuable documents, expressing, however obliquely, complex truths

about actresses' lives on and off stage" (268-69).[25] As Susan Civale has discussed, "part of Robinson's appeal lies in her sexual transgressions, and she is aware of the insatiable public appetite for revelations about actress's private lives" (196). Therefore, it is necessary to keep a delicate balance between life events and to attract readership.

Although Robinson was well aware of the danger of relying on one single identity, and, as Fay observes, she "never confined herself to a single role or style" (215), her self-staging of multiple identities created inconsistencies and disjunctions in *Memoirs*. As celebrity figures vied for attention in the public eye, audiences of the eighteenth century were eager to possess intimate knowledge of celebrities. Autobiographies, in this regard, encourage the audience to possess private information openly and publicly, creating an illusion that could obscure the writer's professional identity. Robinson was writing and publishing other works while working on her own autobiography in the late 1790s. Her literary works, including her feminist tract, *Letters to the Women of England*, and her last novel, *The Natural Daughter*, were both published in 1799, a year before her death. As Fay rightly points out, "[s]elf-framing becomes an increasingly important device for Robinson's efforts to portray herself differently; doing so required critiquing patriarchal culture while affirming her right to access various places in it rather than to be placed" (213). Robinson's works can be read as her continual turn to her subjective experiences in a way that departs from her previous self-portrayals. It is worth noting that Robinson's own narration is interrupted in the middle of her descriptions of her romantic affair with the Prince of Wales, and *Memoirs* has been read as a flawed endeavour to rectify the public's impression of her person and life, and seen as a failed attempt to rescue her reputation. Eleanor Ty, for instance, deemed the gaps in this text as evidence of Robinson's "manifestations of her struggle with her subjectivity" (414). Cheryl Wanko points out the "recent recognition of actresses as at least co-agent in constructing their own celebrity, rather than as victims manipulated by a patriarchal theatre management and Grub Street" in her 2011 article on celebrity ("Celebrity Studies" 354). If we see the inconsistencies and sometimes fragmented narratives as a deliberate gesture employed by Robinson, these can be seen as her signaling a message to readers. As Civale points out, the repeated

[25] I am indebted to Engel in *Fashioning Celebrity* for the inclusion of Postlewait's observation here.

inconsistencies are not "failures" but "innovations" that allowed her to "balance opposing elements of her character, maintaining the virtue, authenticity, and feminine decorum commensurate with a heroine of sensibility, and the suggestive allure of a practiced actress" (192).[26] Here I share with her conviction that the seemingly contradictory self-representations in *Memoirs* do not threaten the constructions of self; in fact, they should be viewed as evidence of her ways of mediating traditional feminine decorum and codes to negotiate possible narratives for herself.

I find the conflict of different female models and the resulted ambiguity in Robinson's attitude rather fascinating. In the first half of *Memoirs*, Robinson creates an image of herself as an unprotected woman, whose father was unfaithful and negligent, and whose husband was womanizing and undutiful. However, this line of narrative is interspersed with incidents and words that picture a loving image of female roles in family, both as a mother and daughter. There are numerous instances in this memoir when the more amorous and sexual part of her life is introduced, her maternal role and affection come in, and *Memoirs* is constantly replete with indicators of Robinson's chastity and female fortitude against temptations. Early in *Memoirs*, Robinson makes it clear that despite her husband's mercurial personality and infidelity, she nevertheless remains faithful to her marriage:

> I had now been married nearly four months: and, though love was not the basis of my fidelity, honour, and a refined sense of feminine rectitude, attached me to the interest as well as to the person of my husband. I considered chastity as the brightest ornament that could embellish the female mind; and I regulated my conduct to that tenor which has principle more than affection to strengthen its progress. (1: 79-80)

In her study of female autobiography, Linda H. Peterson proposes the idea of "narrative duplicity," namely "the doubling of life-lines, and the repetition of narrative elements within an autobiography" ("Female Autobiographer" 165),

[26] In her article, Susan Civale traces the afterlives of Robinson's *Memoirs* in the nineteenth century, including the fictional *The Royal Legend: A Tale* (1808), Cook's "Poor Perdita," and Beck's *The Exquisite Perdita*, to argue that *Memoirs* extends the scope of Romanticism and our presumptions about periods and genres.

as often observed in female autobiographies.[27] This "narrative duplicity" can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, and argues that there is a kind of "self-duplicity" that further leads to "self-deception" or "self-confusion" (170), when there is a sharp and inherent conflict between descriptions of professional and domestic lives. According to Peterson, "the female autobiographer seems to be caught between the (masculine) tradition of public self-representation and the (feminine) tradition of private self-revelation" (171), and this is fairly typical of the predicament they find themselves in. It was not until "the late Victorian and early modern periods" when female autobiographers seemed to "become more certain about the issues raised by their double lives" (175).[28] In a similar vein, Ty sees the doubleness of truth-telling in *Memoirs* as Robinson's "manifestations of her struggle with her subjectivity," influenced by the conflicting ideologies and "different conventional constructions of womanhood" (414). What is interesting in the above excerpt is a sense of moral rectitude and strong gender piety, two qualities Robinson wanted to send to her readers. Although she received numerous seduction proposals, Robinson endeavoured to present an image of chastity. She made solemn remarks about female virtue and her adherence to the role of wife prescribed by social forces: "God can bear witness to the purity of my soul; even surrounded by temptations, and mortified by neglect" (1: 109), and she firmly declared that "my mind had never entertained a thought of violating those vows which I had made to my husband at the altar" (1: 168).

In fact, Robinson seems to have adopted a remarkably modest attitude towards her literary career and intellectual achievements in *Memoirs*, while emphasising her much-praised appearance and filial devotion, and using her own story as a parable of feminine vulnerability. When Robinson took the pen to narrate her own story, she could be considered an experienced writer;

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[27] Peterson contends that *Memoirs* presents two main plots that seemingly work against one another: one plot tells the story of "the fall of a beautiful young woman from chastity to infidelity"; another presents her as "a loving mother and faithful daughter" ("Female Autobiographer" 166-67). The first plot Peterson refers to here echoes the pattern "chroniques scandaleuses"; for discussions of "chroniques scandaleuses" and its eighteenth-century context, see Nussbaum, *Autobiographical Subject.* I am indebted to Peterson for this reference.

[28] In "Becoming an Author," Peterson notes that the association between maternity and female authorship, as shown in Robinson's *Memoirs*, will later "become a dominant Victorian myth of female authorship" (44). Peterson extends this to a book-length project to examine the relations between the publishing world and female professional authorship in the Victorian period; the careers of several Victorian female authors including Harriet Martineau, Mary Howitt, and Charlotte Riddell are closely examined in this meticulous monograph *Becoming a Woman of Letters.*

however, her attitude towards writing remained exceedingly humble. In her youthful days, Robinson wrote some "juvenile compositions" and "verses" when she was "between twelve and thirteen years of age" (1: 35). Nevertheless, later when Robinson talked about her poems, she referred to them as "indeed trifles, very trifles" (1: 159), which she read "with a blush of self-reproof" (1: 159). Even after she acquired more experience with words, she still found it necessary to express reservations about her writing. Commenting on her new poem, she again lamented that "it was superior to [her] former productions; but it was full of defects, replete with weak or laboured lines," which she read with "a suffusion on [her] cheeks" (1: 170). Her literary career received only a passing note in the first volume of *Memoirs*. Robinson's active role as a hostess in the fashionable society came to an end after she had a serious fever, which caused a partial paralysis, when she was only in her twenties. This incident, following the abandonment by the Prince and then Colonel Tarleton, prompted her to consider becoming a professional writer to support herself and her daughter. Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins writes of Robinson in this phase of life: "She then took up new life in London, became literary, brought up her daughter literary, and expressed without qualification her rage when her works were not urged forward beyond all others" (33-34). This re-orientating of her career and re-making of her "self" is a necessary step for Robinson. However, although Robinson wrote and published prolifically in the 1790s, there was a sense of unsupportiveness from critics. She was evidently daunted by criticism and the unkindness she received, and viewed her literary career with some trepidation. Writing to John Taylor in October 1794, Robinson lamented: "I shall feel a very severe struggle in quitting those paths of fancy I have been childish enough to admire—false prospect. They have led me into the vain expectation that fame would attend my labours, and my country be my pride. How have I been treated?" (*Mary Robinson* 365). This prompted her to declare that "when I leave England . . . I will never publish another line while I exist, and even those manuscripts now finished I WILL DESTROY" (365). Robinson laments that she knew little of "the fatigue or the hazard of mental occupations," and calls writing as "a destroying labour" (1: 185). Here Robinson distanced herself from her romantic past and public attention, tending to make room for her account of motherhood by consistently linking authorship to maternal roles and affection. Her alignment of professional authorship and motherhood is explicitly revealed in this scene: "In a small basket near my chair slept my little Maria; my table

was spread with papers; and every thing around me presented the mixed confusion of a study and a nursery" (1: 162). Describing her life, she writes: "I divided my time betwixt reading, writing, and making a little wardrobe for my expected darling" (1: 132). She loudly proclaims her determination and commitment to domestic life: "I little regretted the busy scenes of life; I sighed not for public attention" (1: 132). Even when her husband's infidelity was disclosed and publicly known, she remains resolute in her conviction: "Still I pursued my plan of the most rigid domestic propriety: still I preserved my faith inviolate, my name unsullied" (1: 175). In the eyes of her daughter, Robinson is a good mother who was "fondly devoted" to her child and whose "assiduities were incessant and exemplary" (1: 114). This combination—Robinson's literary work and maternity—somehow "aligns biological and literary creation" and "makes authorship seem as 'natural' a role as motherhood" (Peterson, "Becoming" 44).

I want to further argue that the narrative dilemma, and the difficulty in negotiating her domestic roles and professional presence in the public world, is to some extent the result of her rather precarious reputation and a good number of prints featuring a beautiful, amorous, feminine Robinson. As an aspiring pupil of the renowned actor and much respected theatrical manager David Garrick, Robinson began to find "herself an object of attention whenever [she] appeared at the theatre" (1: 54) even at a young age. This in fact alludes to one of the most pressing situations professional women found themselves in: to be considered as unruly and pretentious once they have transgressed into the world predominantly male. As a female member of the profession, Robinson was acutely aware of how her image and work would be received in this world. As Ty notes, although Robinson "purports to be telling the truth, she is constrained not only by her feelings about what is acceptable to polite society, but also by language itself" (408). In this vein, she has to keep in mind how her works would likely be scrutinized and, in this case in particular, how representations of herself would be judged carefully. Therefore, we can see *Memoirs* as an attempt to reconcile between conventional social expectations of women and Robinson's desire to prove herself as a professional woman writer, for there is a fine line between looking too transgressive a woman and boastful a writer. Nevertheless, I want to point out that Robinson's readers and viewers were aware of her continual self-transformation and the slippage between her multiple identities, and knew that Robinson is a master manipulator of her

public images. This public intimacy Robinson shared with her readers and audiences enabled her to assume a narrative authority to tell stories and to construct a personality. Civale has noted that: "Perhaps a reputation is not something merely to be 'damaged' or 'salvaged,' but something to be shaped" (200). In *Memoirs*, Robinson demonstrates an ambition to recuperate her damaged and notorious reputation, and the strategies of self-representation she employed in composing her autobiography. An investigation of *Memoirs* helps us understand the path she took when turning herself from a theatrical star and fashionable icon into a professional writer, and of the fluid nature of self-representations she embodies.

There are the multiple depictions and interpretations of Robinson in her days, many of which are socially, politically, and sexually threatening. The biographical details of her life and person have been brought to the public realm, turning her body into a controversial monument, ready to be consumed by the public. Dubbed by both Judith Pascoe (1) and Chloe Wigston Smith (158) as a "chameleon," Robinson proves to be a skillful manipulator of her public personas. *Memoirs*, in this understanding, becomes a cultural site to facilitate the exchange of private information and intimate knowledge. To this end, she borrowed from Reynolds through a recycling of the delicate relationship between painter and sitter. For Robinson, autobiography was an artistic practice that allowed her to negotiate disjunctions among multiple representations of herself, and to move beyond other performative modes in order to fashion her own self-portrait. To view the different performative modes more broadly, her multiple representations enabled her to play more active roles and create multiple personas. Her performance of characters was no longer restricted to particular venues; instead, by carefully fashioning the interaction between her multiple personas—public and private, on and off stage—she created possibilities that demonstrated her mastery of performative skills and reinforced her presence through her artistry in crafting narratives of identity.

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