

**THE VICTIMISATION OF GENIUS:
MARY ROBINSON'S IDEALISATION OF THE FEMALE AUTHOR
IN SENSIBILITY LITERATURE DURING THE DECADE OF THE 1790s**

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that “The victimisation of genius: Mary Robinson’s idealisation of the female author in Sensibility literature during the decade of the 1790s” is my own work and that all the sources which I have used and quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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ABSTRACT

Mary Robinson's perceived entrapment within masculine discourse has led to a somewhat distorted portrayal of this author as 'victim': critical focus on how she and eighteenth-century society may have constructed her authorial identity, reflecting her primarily as a historical and cultural product, has contributed indirectly to diminish due recognition of the level of autonomy she attained within her own writing. However, recent political interpretations of Robinson's work have largely challenged these views, acknowledging her considerable influence within the public realm of the 'masculine' Romantic. In this dissertation, I aim to build upon, and argue beyond, those readings which have explored Robinson's political uses of victimisation, as well as those which have studied her promotion of female authorship. I will argue that, by exploring Robinson's own portrayal of the female philosopher and author, as well as her manipulation of victimisation within sensibility literature, we may be able to better interrogate modern feminist thinking around the concept of the eighteenth-century female philosopher, and thus begin to situate the value of Robinson's work within a firmer literary compass. I will focus upon the following novels: *Walsingham* (2003 b), *The False Friend* (1799), and *The Natural Daughter* (2003 a).

While I will root my arguments in the abovementioned approach, I will avoid contributing further discussion to Robinson's use of radical politics and defence or fostering of female authorship. First because these are relatively well explored issues around her writing, and secondly because it is wise to be cautious when affirming Robinson's radical politics, as ultimately this impulse ties into a modern yearning to portray her as a radical feminist. Robinson certainly adopted a radical political stance in some of her novels; yet, I will argue, we cannot value her writing primarily in terms of its political bent, however tempting this approach may be.

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INTRODUCTION

*I think, my dear sir, that the clouds are dispersing, for my darkest cloud is the *obscurity* to which I have been consigned these four months past. I have been twice in captivity - I never shed a tear -, I was always proudly gay, and lifted by the spirit of my soul above all adventitious circumstances; for, I know not how it is, but I am always more high in mind when most depressed in fortune. This is no vaunting; my friends have *seen proofs* of the assertion - they have seen me brave, in proportion as I have been persecuted.*

Mary Robinson, Letter 15: 11 November 1800 (Setzer 2009: 328)

This is an extract from one of the final letters which Mary Robinson wrote before she died, in which she decries the fact that she, once the idol of so many, is forced to

‘labour in undelighted solitude; - for whom? - for a few unfeeling *creditors!* The idea will not bear the investigation of a reasoning mind’ (Setzer 2009: 328)

Circumstances have changed for Robinson since she wrote these words. Though quite neglected for two hundred years, with the advent of feminism and its project to include eighteenth-century female writers into the Romantic literary canon, she has attained the status of recognised poet and writer in the twenty-first century. No doubt, Robinson would be pleased to know that she did not ‘labour’ merely to satisfy a few creditors, but that her work has become the subject of dedicated scholarly study, especially within the feminist scope.

In the past few decades, scholarship on Romantic literature has evolved from focusing primarily on well-known male poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, to including female writers such as Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, Anna Barbauld, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Ann Radcliffe, amongst several, with the result that research on Romantic literature now addresses itself not only to poetry but to novels as well. The achievements of feminist scholarship cannot be underestimated regarding the re-introduction of female writers into the Romantic canon. Ellen Pollak notes that in the last three decades feminism has ‘transformed the field’ of eighteenth-century studies, affecting it in such ‘profound and irreversible ways’, that it can no longer be reflected upon independently from feminism (2009: 13, 14). However, she also notes a growing trend within intellectual and academic circles whereby feminism is deemed to have ‘exhausted’ itself and

the category of 'women studies' to have become 'essentialist' and 'ethnocentric' to the extent that it will be superseded eventually by 'cultural studies' (2009: 17-18).

Pollak admits to being extremely perturbed by this change in direction, whose initial impulse she traces to a conviction that we are currently in a position to abandon 'old identity politics', with its list of oppressions and social determinates, in order to move towards a more 'heterogeneous model of human identity' (18). However, she counters it, by asserting that

'political realities defy it and we have seen the totalizing effects of the impulse to *simply* mainstream the study of women and gender before.' (18)

Pollak is convinced that students, at least, still need to be informed on how concepts such as race, gender, and sex formed our social identities, because only then

'will they have the tools to think their way through traditions that have shaped their present and thereby develop the forms of agency they will need to chart the future,' [as feminist questions need to be] 'kept alive and on the table.' (19)

In expressing her serious concern for the future of feminism in the field of eighteenth-century studies, Pollak makes several valid observations, but she fails to acknowledge explicitly the reductive influence that feminism itself has had on the shaping of literary history and social identity. Post-feminism insists on the view that feminism has accomplished its goals, and often functions as a critique of it:

'On the one hand, post-feminism is perceived as a pro-patriarchal, anti-feminist stance, a backlash against feminism and its values, whereas, on the other hand, it is seen to denote a postmodern and poststructuralist feminism that discredits homogeneity and unified subjectivity' (Brabon & Genz 2007: 1-2)

I would dispute specifically the post-feminist assumption that feminism has accomplished its goals within eighteenth-century studies, and I would argue that what is needed, on the contrary, is a re-examination of feminist ideology in terms of the impact it has had upon the evaluation of eighteenth-century Romantic female writers.

Both Gillian Beer's 'Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past' (1997: 77-90) and Margaret Ezell's *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993) draw attention to the fact that feminist scholarship needs to assess the effects of its modern-day ideologies upon the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts from past centuries. Both authors observe that imposing contemporary feminist values upon earlier narratives causes us to re-fashion women's literary history into a *linear* trajectory, often over-simplifying female-authored texts for the benefit of feminist ideology. Many of the complexities surrounding these texts are ignored in order to achieve a cohesive feminist theoretical objective. William Stafford's *English feminists and their opponents in the 1790s: Unsexed and proper females* (2002) questions the feminist assertion that eighteenth-century female writers were inherently trapped in patriarchal discourse, arguing that they had sufficient means to dispute masculine conceptions of women, even if those methods do not always satisfy feminist scholars' analyses. Judith Pascoe's 'Unsexed females: Barbauld, Robinson and Smith' (2004: 211-226) convincingly argues that gendered studies of female authors in many ways have subsumed their subjects' individuality into a larger feminist cause.

The views of these scholars provide the foundation upon which this dissertation will construct the argument that greater cognisance must be given to the *negative* impact that certain feminist ideologies have had on the emergence within Romantic literature of an eighteenth-century female writer such as Mary Robinson. I will argue that Robinson's novels *Walsingham* (2003 a), *The False Friend* (1799) and *The Natural Daughter* (2003 b) have been evaluated largely to endorse Robinson's 'value' as a 'good' feminist and not primarily as a Romantic artistic writer. Through examining how feminists envisage the ideal 'female philosopher' namely, as an individual who advocates the view that gender is socially constructed (as opposed to the biologically inherent two-sex system), an outspoken Wollstonecraftian, a political radical, and a victim of oppressive masculine institutions -, I will strive to determine to what extent Robinson's work responds to these modern feminist scholarly expectations. I will endeavour to show that Robinson is depicted reductively by feminist scholars as merely a victim of patriarchy, a manipulator of gender stereotypes, and a writer with 'multiple identities'.

Robinson is viewed occasionally as a powerful political feminist. However, the dominant premise is that her 'moderate' feminism does not quite compare with Wollstonecraft's. Although Robinson is acknowledged as a Romantic poet, she is still sometimes barred from

the realm of ‘masculine’ Romanticism. From the essentialist point of view expressed in Anne Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), feminine forms of Romantic literature do not participate on an equal footing with masculine ones.

There are two main trends within modern readings of Robinson. The one is represented by those scholars who have not fully broken away from the reductionism of second-wave feminism, namely: Stuart Curran (1994, 1996, 1999, 2002), Anne Mellor (2000), Sharon Setzer (1996, 1997, 2000, 2003), Julie Shaffer (1999, 2001, 2002, 2003), and Eleanor Ty (1993, 1996, 1999). The other is sustained by those scholars who currently challenge or modify this viewpoint, such as Beth Lau (2009), Adriana Craciun (2003a), Stephen Behrendt (1995, 2009), and Ashley Cross (2001, 2002, 2009). They question the desirability of entitling women to a ‘literature of their own’, emphasising that women writers should be studied on *equal terms* with their male peers. These scholars’ approaches continue in the spirit of what Beer advocated: a self-evaluation of ideological context.

It is upon this latter basis of feminist ideology that I will strive to build the framework of my argument. There is a keen interest in how Robinson constructed herself, yet it is notable that little attention is paid to how modern feminist scholarship constructs *her*, i.e. according to certain ideas or ideals of what a ‘female philosopher’ ought to be. This is an aspect which this dissertation will address.

Although the novels *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter* are examined often with a view to illustrate the feminist values they are considered to contain, this dissertation will strive to demonstrate that these novels should be valued for more than their assertions on gender.¹ I will argue that these texts offer insight into existential problems, the flaws inherent in human nature, and the limitations of the civilisation process, and convey the Sadean insight that mankind is instinctively prone to the abuse of power. Furthermore, I will attempt to examine how Robinson exploits a sensibility concept of ‘victimised genius’, which displays an ‘artistic egotism’ akin to that of the Romantic male poets, thus disputing the perception that eighteenth-century women writers participated only in the realm of the ‘feminine’.

¹ It should be noted that resisting the dominant ideology, be it patriarchy or something other, can be an aesthetic achievement in its own right, so that it is difficult to separate ‘artistic capability’ from political significance.

I suggest that it is important to loosen Robinson from the grip of a feminist theoretical prop, because eventually academic discourse disseminates into the realm of popular culture. When a *male* Romantic poet is mentioned, he is automatically understood to be a writer of “value”. The inherent quality of his artistic work is seldom questioned. The same privilege cannot be claimed for most eighteenth-century female writers. The artistic value of their work is yet to be fully understood and appreciated, and they are still viewed as a “pet project” of feminist scholarship. This perception needs to be altered and this can be done only if more formalistic readings of their work are undertaken. Robinson’s work needs to be judged independently from her (at least assumed) feminism, in some regard.

Chapter One reviews prominent scholarship on eighteenth-century female writers and provides some historical and theoretical background on female philosophers and sensibility. Chapter Two investigates the paradox of female villainy to be found in Robinson’s novels, attempts to show how her female villains illustrate the idea that the corruption of power is not gender-specific, and questions the usefulness of feminism’s persistently benevolent portrayal of womanhood in the interpretation of these novels. Chapter Three explores Robinson’s use of victimisation within her work and argues that it not only points to patriarchal oppression, but also portrays disillusionment with the over-optimistic ideals of the eighteenth century, often expressed through her existentialism. Robinson’s philosophers show that people cannot escape the ugly social realities of their historical context, while her ‘outcast’ characters share an affinity with the sense of artistic alienation and isolation experienced and conveyed by the Romantic poets. Chapter Four analyses the construction of Robinson’s authorial image within current scholarship and explores how it conflicts with her sense of artistic egotism as displayed through her usage of the concept of ‘victimised genius’ in the novels.

To conclude, in this dissertation I aim to complement and extend ideas put forward in previous studies to demonstrate that the insertion of a female writer within the Romantic canon should not be determined solely by her feminist ‘value’ but, primarily, by her literary achievements. By not taking into account the reductive and constraining influence of modern ideologies’ ramifications in the study of eighteenth-century female authors, their artistic capabilities and their individual agency may remain misunderstood. Feminist criticism should not merely strive to create ‘poster girls’ for a worthy cause, but, beyond bolstering gender theory, it ought to contribute towards re-establishing women’s rightful place within literary

history. That place should not be acquired strictly on grounds of gender and a 'victimised' past, but also on grounds of evidenced artistic capability.

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CHAPTER ONE

ROBINSON, SENSIBILITY AND THE FIGURE OF THE AMAZONIAN AUTHOR

Revolutionary politics and the problem of gender

But as in the times past are said to have been a nation of Amazons, who drew the bow and wielded the battle-axe, formed encampments and wasted nations, the revolution of years has now produced a generation of Amazons of the pen, who with the spirit of their predecessors have set masculine tyranny at defiance, asserted their claim to the regions of science, and seem resolved to contest the usurpations of virility.

(Johnson 1825: 110)

The figure of the Amazon, as described above by Samuel Johnson, gained cultural and political significance as the eighteenth century progressed, especially during the last decade of the 1790s, when tensions between Britain and France reached their peak.² The Reign of Terror, the execution of Louis XIV in 1793 and France's declaration of war served to fuel a lively ideological debate within British literary circles, which saw radical reformers, known as the 'Jacobins', pitted against the counter-revolutionaries or the 'Anti-Jacobins' (Barker-Benfield 1992: 360). This chapter will examine eighteenth-century responses to the concept of the 'Amazon' or the figure of the 'female philosopher', and explore its significance in terms of modern feminist scholarship. This may provide insight into the challenges which our own modern assumptions present in the evaluation of a late-eighteenth century writer like Mary Robinson.

English reactions to the revolutionary events in France stimulated what David Duff (1998: 24-25) describes as a 'pamphlet war' during the 1790s, whereby conflicting ideas, images and political discourses spurred British intellectual circles to debate issues such as the nature of society, the basis of government, political justice, the doctrine of rights, the definition of

² Throughout my discussion, I will use the term 'Amazon' concurrently with the terms 'female philosopher' and 'unsexed females', with close reference to Barker-Benfield's definition (1992: 351- 352) that 'in general, the term marked the revolutionary challenge in women's literacy' during the eighteenth century. Adriana Craciun (2005: 27) distinguishes between the terms 'unsexed' and 'female philosopher'; however, I would argue that they relate to the same stereotype of the 'masculine' woman writer.

‘reason’, and the relations between the sexes: all key concepts through which revolutionary attitudes were expressed. It was these same ideological debates which formed the intellectual background to English Romanticism, a well documented subject within Romantic scholarship; as Matthew Grenby accurately states, ‘a recognition of the immense impact of the French Revolution is nothing new’ (2006: 2-3). That Britain’s revolution in literature was partly inspired by the political revolution in France has been an acknowledged fact since at least 1816 (Duff 1999: 24).³

A perhaps rather blatant example of eighteenth-century awareness of the interconnectivity between politics and literature and, simultaneously, of the paranoia surrounding Jacobinism would be the conservative, Anti-Jacobin Thomas Mathias’ comments in his satirical poem, with additional notes, *Pursuits of Literature*:

Jacobinism in her natural, ferocious, and unsoftened features has for a season slunk away from the public loathing in Great Britain; but we may depend upon it, she yet ‘lies crouching head on ground, with catlike watch’, though in this country the Monster has lost many of her offspring whom true reason and sober philosophy have torn from her. But surely the most powerful light should still continue to be thrown on her secret caverns and skulking places; for the sleeping and the inactive will be her prey. (1808: xix)

Furthermore, after patriotically praising the glories and steadfastness of England and boldly declaring that he will fight to sustain the principles of her life, Mathias clearly locates the battleground for this particular struggle in the literary fields of Britain, because for him ‘Government and Literature are now more than ever connected; and the history of the last thirty years proves it beyond a controversy.’ (1808: 5).

Mathias’s terrifying depiction of ‘Jacobinism’ as a monster, waiting to pounce on its next unwary victim, coincides with what Grenby calls a sort of ‘communal psychosis’ permeating Britain throughout the 1790s (2001: 6-7). Grenby argues that the ‘Jacobin’ danger was actually far less threatening than the Anti-Jacobins portrayed it to be, when they linked the

² For further insights into the historical context of the French Revolution and its impact on the British political climate, and into the effects of war, patriotism and nationalism on literary style during the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century; see Shaw (1999: 48-60) and Scrivener (2004: 43-60), on the relationship between literature and politics in the period.

Jacobins to blood massacres, cannibalism, and incest. He explains that the perpetuation of the exaggerated menace of ‘Jacobinism’ in the public eye and the sense of crisis in Britain were further aggravated by propaganda of various sorts, which assigned events of catastrophic proportions to France.

Numerous individuals also exploited the perceived threat of Jacobinism to support their own personal campaigns. Essentially, Jacobinism was an imprecise term which was ‘simply a label for all that conservatives found detestable within society.’ (Grenby 2001: 8). In contrast, rather than accepting that the Jacobins were simply overwhelmed by the political force and propaganda of the conservatives, as Grenby (2001: 4-5) would have it, Gary Kelly attributes to the Jacobins a much greater *cultural* influence upon English society than Grenby is willing to allow. Kelly argues that the innovative ideas of Jacobin novelists such as William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Holcroft, Dr. John Moore and Robert Bage influenced even the Romantics (1989: 26-30).

The conflict between British conservatives and radicals over the revolutionary period, a subject of constant interest to Romantic scholarship, has gained even greater significance over recent decades in the light of efforts by feminist scholars to reaffirm the reputation of women writers of the 1790s (Grenby 2006: 2-3). Within the context of political-literary debates raging between conservatives and radicals, the figure of the Amazon, or female philosopher, reached a significant level of prominence, as eighteenth-century writers used the concept of the Amazon as a propaganda tool through which to assert their ideologies, be they conservative or radical. Modern feminist scholarship, on the other hand, has recognised the concept’s importance towards a re-evaluation of the place and representation of women writers within the Romantic canon. The ‘unsexed’ female writers of the late eighteenth century have proven valuable for a feminist investigation into eighteenth-century literature, because they reveal much about the gender issues of that period, as these writers are often vocal about women’s rights and a woman’s victimised place within a male-dominated society.⁴

⁴ These usually include writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson and Anna Barbauld, amongst others who are generally defined as ‘radical’. They are the writers

In the quotation above, Mathias deliberately portrays Jacobinism in feminine and monstrous terms; feminist scholarship often alludes to this representative strategy as characteristic of the politicisation of the feminine or sentimental discourse.⁵ Jan Wellington, for instance, asserts that a common propaganda tactic employed by British nationalism during the war with France involved a rhetorical framing of national character: the English were portrayed as reserved but also impassioned, serious, profound, artless, original and independent, while the French, in contrast, were depicted as effusive, light-hearted, shallow, changeable, artful and slavish (2001: 35-36). Wellington points out that

[t]he opposed clusters of national traits bear a striking resemblance to the prescriptive descriptions of male and female character used to construct and enforce gender roles at the time. Typically, men were characterized as rational, active, purposeful and dominant, and women as emotional, trifling, passive and submissive. (2001: 35)

Hence, according to Wellington, a common eighteenth-century literary tactic was to portray anything French with negative ‘feminine’ characteristics, whilst anything typically associated with Englishness was assigned positive ‘masculine’ characteristics.

Miriam Wallace (2001: 233) concurs with this view, but observes that the revolutionary debates offered female writers of the 1790s a unique opportunity, albeit only for a brief period, in the realm of writing, whereby they could actively participate, through different genres, in their own revolution; specifically, using *to their own advantage* the philosophical and political discourses widely circulating in England at the time in response to the French uprisings. Initially, this involved drawing upon French ideals about citizenship and French women’s public political actions, to support their own arguments against British women’s social oppression. However, as Wallace points out, women writers paradoxically often became entrapped by these same liberating French ideals, because their conservative opponents deliberately associated any ‘French ideas’ with uncontrolled sexuality and sensuality, and constructed female writers’ perceived potential for licentious behaviour (a consequence of their supposedly being corrupted by French influences) as a *greater* threat than their actual political arguments and demands (2001: 233-234).

typically mentioned in Polwhele’s poem, *The Unsexed Females*. However, feminist scholarship has taken an interest in *conservative* female writers such as Hannah More, Jane West, and Ann Radcliffe (see Stafford 2002: 1-2).

⁵ For further information on the politicisation of sensibility and feminine discourse see Todd (1986: 129-146), Craciun and Lokke (2001: 3-30), Craciun (2005: 1-13) and Kelly (1993: 3-29).

Unlike Mathias, who used feminine monstrosity to highlight a ‘French’ Jacobin threat, Burke employed a rather different method in his political use of sentimental language. His highly influential and much quoted treatise, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, provides a famous description of Marie-Antoinette’s terrified flight from the French Revolutionaries:

A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced, with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards, the bed from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment. (1790: 105-106)⁶

Burke marshals highly emotive language to demonize the revolutionaries as bloodthirsty, insatiable, lustful masculine rakes, while the queen is presented as a victimised sensibility heroine. Here Burke reverses Mathias’s tactics: instead of ‘monster-ising’ Jacobin politics in feminine terms, he eroticises and demonizes it within an overtly rakish, masculine linguistic context. Therefore, it can be concluded that either gender could be depicted as monstrous, the efficacy of the strategy being dependent on which rhetorical aspect would prove more effective to bolster the writer’s specific ideological stance.

In Burke’s narrative the aim is to evoke an emotive response based on horror, disgust, and anger at revolutionary politics, by depicting an innocent woman violated by lustful Jacobins. Mathias, on the other hand, prefers to emphasise a subdued, but rather feminine, cunning predator to illustrate the possibility of an ever present hidden danger, substantiating his call for constant vigilance and alertness in British society (1808: xix). David Bromwich persuasively argues that the object of Burke’s method is to gain sympathy for the British cause and that it would matter little to those who later interpreted his work whether the object of sympathy were the Queen of France or an idiot boy, for

⁶ The implications of Burke’s writings and the influence which his work exerted on eighteenth-century gender paradigms are a much discussed subject within feminist literature. Jones (1990: 3-8), sees Burke’s *Enquiry into the Beautiful and Sublime*, an influential treatise on aesthetics, as reproducing and reinforcing the dominant cultural values of sexual difference through which the discourse of femininity restricts women to the private realm. Both Ty (1993: 4-13) and Mellor (1993: 66-68) argue that Burke’s writings enforce patriarchal principles. Kelly (1993: 14-17) interprets Burke’s writing as advancing ideological middle-class values based on the domesticity of women. Generally, Burke’s writings are interpreted as reinforcing the ideologically patriarchal entrapment against which the female writers had to struggle. This perspective is clearly problematic for an evaluation of the women writers, as it requires that their work be defined and weighed in terms of its reactions against Burkean values.

[h]e [Burke] had constructed politics and morality as a scene of imaginative sympathy, with two characters, a sufferer and a spectator, and asked us to recognize, in the way we answer a cry of help or an appeal for loyalty, that in the response we give every ounce of our humanity is at stake. (1999: 120)

Susan Wolfson (1999: 389) observes that Burke was often ridiculed as being effeminate and unmanly because of his sentimentalized use of language and notes that it was a highly prevalent tactic of male political opponents to hurl charges of effeminacy at each other. Johnson follows the popular view that Burke used ‘chivalric’ sentimentality to further his own political agenda in his description of Marie Antoinette, who essentially represented the French Revolutionary threat to the British monarchy and to Europe’s established social order (1995: 6). Nevertheless, Johnson takes the argument further by seeing Burke’s sentimental-political portrayal of Marie-Antoinette’s plight as an endorsement of heterosexual and patriarchal values, where ‘the fate of the nation is understood on all sides to be tied up with the right heterosexual sentiment of its citizens.’ (1995: 11). Whether the strategy be the monstrous representation of the feminine to fuel political argument or the idealisation of the feminine heroine to evoke emotional and nationalistic loyalty, feminist and gender critics alike consider both as an endorsement of oppressive gender boundaries based on masculinity (Wolfson 1999: 388-390).

Yet, Wolfson acknowledges that, over this revolutionary period, an assigned gender role, centred on biological origins, was a far from stable phenomenon in literature and could be easily exploited and manipulated, as evidenced by the fact that numerous novels at this time were strewn with strong, egotistical women and weak, effeminate men. Against the background of this unique occurrence in literature, Mary Wollstonecraft has provided extremely important material for gender and feminist criticism in the field of Romanticism. Not only have her *Vindication on the Rights of Men* (a direct response to Burke) and her even more notable text, *Vindication on the Rights of Women*, been recognised for her politicised manipulation of eighteenth-century gender rhetoric, but also her questioning and criticism of masculine conceptions of gender, which mostly involve an attack on sensibility, have drawn particular attention (Wolfson 1999: 388-389).

Wollstonecraft's criticism of eighteenth-century gender as a constructed factor is one of the main reasons why she is highly valued by gender and feminist critics.⁷ Vivien Jones states that Wollstonecraft was 'very much aware that the characteristics ascribed to women are not natural but constructed, the result of limited education and expectations' (1990: 5), for Wollstonecraft was keenly conscious of the fact that women's role in society was confined to, and defined by, marriage. She saw that, inevitably, this confinement restricted their minds, forcing them into a state of excessive sensibility which disabled them from fully exercising their rational powers. A commonly shared factor in nearly all feminist approaches, according to Elizabeth Fay, is that

the biologically sexed individual is also socially gendered. Individuals must learn to be masculine and feminine, according to this concept, and it is this, rather than biological sex, that explains how an individual relates to her or his society and culture. (1998: 28)

Hence, Wollstonecraft's writing certainly offers interesting subject matter to feminist scholarship, as her approach to gender as socially constructed fits in with one of its fundamental underlying assumptions. However, this often tends to set up Wollstonecraft as the 'poster girl' for certain gender criticism, since most other female writers' works are judged against the standards and interpretations posited in her writings for what it means to be a 'woman'.

Fay insists that though feminist critics may use a wide variety of approaches, from psychology to historical materialism, and even mix theories together, they must always direct their attention to essential issues, such as gender difference, patriarchy and sexual politics (1998: 22-23). While such an approach to eighteenth-century female writers has been deeply insightful, most notably regarding their recognition and re-establishment within the Romantic canon, it does raise some concerns about how these women writers are evaluated by feminist scholarship. Wollstonecraft has been assigned such a privileged position within

⁷ It needs to be noted that while Wollstonecraft has been admired for her feminism and gender criticism, she has not always been received with equal enthusiasm by all feminist scholars, especially in earlier years, as Kelly (1997: 153) and Binhammer (2002: 671) indicate. Even Furnis (1993: 177-209) and Johnson (1993: 23-46), while commending Wollstonecraft for her challenging and questioning of gender boundaries in her *Vindications*, view her attempts as somewhat limited, because, they argue, even though she exploits language to criticise stereotypes of gender, her efforts still collapse into the overall masculine cultural domination of language. Wellington (2001: 34-35) advances a more positive assessment of Wollstonecraft, whom she sees as effectively challenging nationalistic propaganda efforts to effeminize the French and reworking eighteenth-century definitions of character to present it as a 'socio-historical construct open to change.' Readings such as Wellington's at least allow Wollstonecraft to escape the over-arching entrapment of societal discourse.

eighteenth-century Romantic scholarship partly precisely because she is extremely vocal about gender, sexual politics, and patriarchy.

It cannot be denied that there was a strong connection between gender and politics over the 1790s, as Barker-Benfield (1992: 369), Ty (1998: 5) and Johnson (1995: 4), amongst other numerous scholars, assert; yet, complications arise when eighteenth-century gender issues are given precedence over the political ones. It also becomes problematic when the politicised ‘masculine’ discourse on gender, which is usually associated either with the demonization of the feminine or the glorification of passive femininity, is perceived as an inescapable ideology, against which female writers must constantly struggle.

Jones (1993: 18) comments that the use of ‘masculine’ and ‘effeminate’ gender terms in eighteenth-century reviewers’ vocabulary had relevance to more than stylistic implications, and that the traditionally masculine virtues of courage and strength upheld an inherited patriarchal structure. The politicised gendered discourse of eighteenth-century language certainly would have had misogynist implications for women, as Jones implies; however, I would argue that it was, in equal measure, a *stylistic* strategy, a very conscious and deliberate one at that, which women themselves were not loath to use. The use of ‘effeminacy’ as a form of negative criticism to condemn oppositional politics and of ‘masculinity’ as a means of approval for one’s own ideas on politics, need not always necessarily imply that the participants involved in such rhetorical dialogue are caught in a dominant, ideologically patriarchal trap. I suggest that women writers could benefit from an interpretation which sees them as *exploiting* gender rhetoric to their own advantage to support *their own* political opinion, be it a conservative or a radical one.

Wollstonecraft herself was conscious of the fact that the manipulation of gender in language was a deliberate rhetorical strategy. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she in effect describes Burke as an impassioned, over-imaginative *woman*:

All your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility; and that, vain of this fancied pre-eminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the

sober suggestions of reason. It is not surprising that when you argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding. (1790: 7)

Wollstonecraft ends her statement with ‘Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, Sir, reason together’, which indicates that Wollstonecraft is aware that her use of language in emasculating Burke is part of a larger political-rhetorical game, played with the aim of showing up Burke as an over-imaginative sop, whose writing resembles a theatrical drama, as opposed to writing based on solid reason or fact. Catherine Macaulay in her *Observations* (1790: 44) also accuses Burke of possessing a lofty poetic imagination not bolstered by reason, as does Thomas Paine in his *Rights of Man*, when he describes Burke’s tragic imaginings of France as

theatrical representations, where facts are manufactured for show, and accommodated to produce, through weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect. (1791: 24)

Paine, Wollstonecraft and Macaulay look upon Burke’s *Reflections* as a piece of *imaginative* writing: they consider a man whose mind relies on rationality to be capable of writing *only* historical fact, but a man who possesses an impassioned imagination to be perfectly capable of writing historical fiction. Paine, Wollstonecraft, and Macaulay employ an astute strategy, whereby they imply that Burke’s *Reflections* may be interpreted as sensibility fiction, nothing more. I would argue that to depict Burke as a writer of political fiction is to question his politics altogether.

William Stafford’s highly influential work, *English feminists and their opponents in the 1790s* (2002), which forms a strong basis for my argument, poses an extremely important question for modern feminist scholarship on eighteenth-century women writers, namely whether female authors are actually imprisoned within a masculine discourse. Stafford challenges this perspective and contends that women writers were not as oppressed as some feminist scholars would perceive and portray them to be, especially in the discursive and generic realm of literature (2002: 221). According to Stafford, if these women did face oppression, the obstacles they encountered were generally posed by external factors, such as lack of financial independence, political power, and civil rights. As far as literature is

concerned, on the other hand, women writers of the 1790s had at their disposal a range of means to further the interests of woman. Stafford states that

[t]hey possessed cultural resources which enabled them to challenge constructions of gender, and to propose alternative ideals both for themselves and their male counterparts. (2002:221)

Stafford's argument proves useful in the assessment of eighteenth-century female writers, because it recognises in their writings a greater autonomy than is usually allowed, not letting it be subsumed unquestioningly by oppressive patriarchal discourses. While their level of feminist activism may not measure up to twenty-first century standards, this does not make their voices any less artistically valid. For quite a few, though certainly not all, feminists, an eighteenth-century woman writer's value is measured in terms of her ability to question or subvert masculine gender stereotypes of the eighteenth century. The entrapment ideology of patriarchal discourse often presents female writers as victims; certain twenty-first century feminist expectations do not often allow these writers to break free from the set vision of an overwhelming cultural dominance of men. Eighteenth-century female writers may have been more successful at 'escaping' patriarchal discourse than some are willing to allow.⁸

Gillian Beer (1997: 77-90) highlights the problems that the imposition of our own modern feminist values upon historical texts can create.⁹ She argues that we should not pay attention merely to the sexual difference between male and female texts, but should also take into consideration the historical difference between present and past ways of reading. As Beer

⁸ To offer an overall overview and criticism of the large body of feminist scholarship and its various approaches to eighteenth-century female writers is beyond the scope of this dissertation; my aim is, rather, to highlight a few problems which, I argue, may emerge from certain feminist assumptions. For further insight into this topic, see Stafford (2002: 35-73) and Toni Bowers (2002: 51-71). There is also the problem that this dissertation may be deemed guilty of the same reductionism it seeks to address in certain critical readings of Robinson. However, my objective is to direct attention to strains of reading which are unable to separate Robinson from her feminist cause. While some of these may be twentieth-century readings, most twenty-first century interpretations of Robinson's are still heavily reliant on these perceptions of Robinson. More reliance needs to be placed on critics such as Stafford and Pascoe. Furthermore, the works of eighteenth-century female writers needs to be recognised outside of academic realms, just like the male Romantic writers' are. This cannot be achieved if they are perceived to be exclusively a project of feminism.

⁹ Wilson (1994: 8), commenting on Romantic scholarship in general, especially the inclusion and re-evaluation of female writers, notes that '[w]hatever perspective one takes, the problem of how we read is just as crucial as which texts we choose to read and teach.' Most Romantic and feminist scholars are aware of the problems which the application of modern assumptions to past texts can entail. However, despite this recognition, interpretations based upon modern theories often tend to take precedence over readings which reach other possible insights into the texts.

explains, '[t]he cultural conditions within which we receive the texts will shape the attention we first bring to them'. That is why she emphasises the important role that the awareness of historical difference plays, because, she continues, 'the encounter with the otherness of earlier literature can allow us to recognise and challenge our own assumptions.' (1997: 80)

Beer cautions against an 'inquisitorial' reading of past texts, which involves judging a text for its correctness or error, as this places a critic in an unnatural site of authority and externality (1997: 81). To counteract this tendency, Beer suggests that, while it is impossible to completely identify with a past reader, we can re-learn lost skills:

We need a reading which acknowledges that we start from now, from here; but which re-awakens the dormant signification of past literature to its first readers. (1997: 82)

With regard to eighteenth-century writing, Beer observes that it is not easy to hold a single ideological focus and that we often find ourselves at the mercy of our own shared metaphors. Therefore, she stresses the need to remain alert to the existence and influence of our own ideologies, in order not to allow our consciousness to become embedded in them to the extent that they become deterministic. To avoid the possibility of determinism, Beer advises an approach of persistent recognition, which involves an understanding of the changing import of images (1997: 83). Such persistent recognition would entail a constant evaluation of the difference between a modern reader's twenty-first century expectations and those held by an eighteenth-century reader.

In view of Beer's arguments, the figure of the female philosopher can prove significant as an image which simultaneously represents our own modern feminist desire for eighteenth-century female authorship, whilst still revealing eighteenth-century female writers' own sense of the pursuit of philosophy, politics, authorship, womanhood, and sensibility. The figure of the female philosopher clearly evolved out of the politicised gender rhetoric surrounding the French Revolution, as Craciun illustrates in her discussion of the satirical depictions of republican 'Parisian Belles' appearing in British prints. These were generally drawn with distorted muscular features, and shown wearing French republican *female* peasant garb and brandishing weapons; these depictions influenced the masculine portrayal of certain female philosophers in Anti-Jacobin literature (Craciun, 2005: 46-49).

Craciun sees two main potential purposes for the emergence of this figure: first, early radical feminists used it as a means of identification in the defence of the rights of women and as a 'public political role for women with international ambitions.' Secondly, counter-revolutionary women (and men) demonized the female philosopher as unnatural and un-British, in order to discredit the secular and civic roles that female philosophers had claimed under the French Revolutionary tradition (2005: 27-28). Craciun's accurate description, therefore, implies that the female philosopher figure could either function as a piece of political propaganda aimed at criticising the opposition, often with misogynist implications, or it could be used as a political platform through which women could assert their opinions. However, I would argue that the figure of the female philosopher, or 'unsexed' female, could serve another function as well in a twenty-first century context.

As previously discussed, Beer calls for modern scholarship not to become embedded in its own deterministic ideologies and, therefore, to understand how the changing import of images such as the female philosopher's may assist in the recognition of the problems inherent in this interpretive approach. Beyond considering the ideological purposes that the figure of the female philosopher served for eighteenth-century writers, I would argue that we need to take into account what this figure means for feminist eighteenth-century scholarship in the twenty-first century. It is important to consider whether feminist scholarship judges an eighteenth-century female writer based on what they believe a female philosopher *ought to be*, a figure constructed according to twenty-first century feminist ideals, rather than what they were: women of the late eighteenth century.

The female philosopher and 'unsexed' female figures are significant precisely because of their symbolic association with feminist history. As Craciun notes,

[f]emale Philosophers had addressed an international political crisis with unprecedented boldness, visibility, and long lasting effects, laying the groundwork for so-called 'Anglo-American feminism'. Wollstonecraft has emerged as the central figure in this tradition, as her *Vindication of the rights of Women* is considered the 'founding text of Anglo-American Feminism'. (2005: 188)

The concept of the female philosopher is appealing not least because of the actual writers it represents, namely the radical female writers, who are most outspoken about politics and

women's rights, with Wollstonecraft taking the lead. As a central actor in the feminist tradition, Wollstonecraft inevitably sets the standard against which other female writers are weighed.

The female philosopher in its 'unsexed' or masculinised form is intriguing because of the implications it holds in terms of gendered discourse, an essential interest to feminist scholarship. In addition, it places in sharp relief patriarchal attitudes displayed towards female writers during the eighteenth century, as indicated by Barker-Benfield, who observes that

[t]o many male writers, the Amazon was a bogey, embodying their fears and intended as a warning to women who crossed the bounds of female authorship. (1992: 352)

For feminism the responses surrounding the 'female philosopher' can represent an important means to clarifying why many eighteenth-century female writers were excluded from the Romantic canon. Therefore, the female philosopher, as seen from a twenty-first century perspective, entails an outspoken 'Wollstonecraftian' feminist, an authorial voice suppressed by patriarchal discourse and conservative revolutionary propaganda, and, simultaneously, a political subject who exploits the masculine boundaries of gender.¹⁰

This is the image of the modern feminist philosopher which haunts some of the critical readings of eighteenth-century female writers, wherein, albeit unconsciously, the past author is measured against these modern expectations in terms of correctness or error. The more an eighteenth-century author conforms to these ideals of the modern feminist philosopher, the greater the literary value of the eighteenth-century writer is considered to be.¹¹

¹⁰ It must be observed that this can be regarded as too simplistic a representation of feminist ideals concerning eighteenth century authors during the 1790s, and rightly so, as it is not possible to encompass all the opinions expressed. The objective of such a representation is merely to highlight a few areas of concern and not reflect an entire field of study.

¹¹ Recently, there has been a far greater recognition of conservative writers and they are seen as less of the 'enemy' and recognised for their feminist potential. Angela Keane (2001, 109-134) provides an example of such writing: instead of seeing the conservative Hannah More's work as a mere reaction to Wollstonecraft, she analyses her political potential. Ty's (1998: 85-130; 131-161) work is also less critical of conservative writers for she explores their exploitation of the feminine to validate their voice in society. Even though such readings can be regarded as progressive, they still attempt to subtly construct women along 'liberal' feminist values, by either emphasising the writer's politics or subtle attempts to promote women.

Certain feminist perspectives are located in what Beer criticises as an authoritative or external position and therefore fail to fully acknowledge the historical difference of the text. The female philosopher must not only be evaluated in terms of her conformity to feminist ideologies, but must also be recognised in a way which allows her to challenge our own modern assumptions and historical difference. As Stafford astutely notes,

[p]resent-day judgments are all too likely to be swayed by present-day attitudes. Some present feminists will have difficulty sympathizing with attempts to conciliate and persuade late eighteenth-century men, and women, who agreed with them because their consciousnesses had not been raised. From such a stand-point 'proper' females will have the appearance of being imprisoned in 'patriarchal complicity', and Wollstonecraft's decidedly unconciliatory voice will win approval. (2002: 219)

Although Margaret Ezell's investigations in *Writing Women's Literary History* are applied to female writers earlier than 1700, her work asks important questions about feminism which can suitably be extended to eighteenth-century scholarship and provide an essential context for the argument of this dissertation. Ezell poses the important question:

is it possible to uncover and recognize the assumptions under which we as feminist literary critics have laboured in producing our analyses of the past? (1993: 2)

The work extensively explores this theme and, while not disclaiming the valuable advances made by feminist scholarship, Ezell emphasises how important it is for feminist scholars to re-examine their own accepted assumptions, just as they have done 'those of other critics' (1993: 6).

Ezell further argues that, by allowing current perceptions of the past to be shaped by unexamined ideologies, 'we may have infused the values and standards of those texts and theories in our constructions of the past' (1993: 7). While acknowledging that it is impossible to entirely escape the influence of adopted ideologies, she argues, like Beer, that by entering into a self-conscious study of the past we become alert to the shaping forces at work in our literary history and 'are aware of the presence of difference between past and present' (1993: 13). Ezell, therefore, considers the factor of historical difference to be all-important for scholars committed to writing an unprejudiced literary history of women writers. Why should

the need be felt to raise an issue which, apparently, has already been resolved in response to second wave feminism? For the trend in critical interpretation of Robinson is to amalgamate her writing and her feminism, barely distinguishing between the two. I maintain that Robinson's writing needs to be distinguished from a cause, and must be recognised for its own sake.

Sensibility and the problem of victimisation

I wholly concur with Beer's, Stafford's, and Ezell's arguments which call upon feminist criticism to re-examine the effects of its own assumptions and ideologies. These critics' writing is especially relevant when one encounters the problem of reading 'sensibility literature'. Sensibility literature confounds our modern assumptions regarding what makes 'good' literature, because it can easily be interpreted as being repetitive, clichéd, lengthy, contradictory, over-sentimental, emotional, and excessive. It is little wonder that Kelly's earlier work declared, perhaps somewhat rashly, that there were 'no great novels published in England during the 1790s', or that this was not a 'period of great advance in the art of the novel.' (1976: 1)¹²

Markman Ellis explains the reason for considering sensibility literature as an awkward compilation of amalgamated diverse discourses namely; moral sense philosophy, aesthetics, religion, politics, science, sexuality, and popular culture (1996: 8). He comments that

the history of late eighteenth-century sensibility is not itself an enlightenment discourse, but a philosophical nightmare of muddled ideas, weak logic and bad writing. (1996: 7)

Rather than dismiss sensibility literature as a 'bad' or 'muddled' form, it may be more fruitful to understand that eighteenth-century readers did not perceive it in the same way modern readers do, as Barker-Benfield (1992: 359) observes, when he reminds us that sentimental fiction continued to be popular throughout the rest of the century.

¹² Claudia Johnson (1995, 1-3) is highly critical of Kelly and of other critics who do not view sentimental literature in a positive light. She chooses to see sentimental literature of the 1790s as a 'commanding, imaginative response to a world riven with crisis' (3). I would agree with Johnson's comments, bearing in mind, however, that it is far from easy to overcome our own modern prejudices when reading sensibility literature.

Sensibility literature has attracted interest from eighteenth-century feminist criticism because it was a genre dominated by women (Barker-Benfield 1992: xix). However, some feminist critics, in their eagerness to expose it as the product of an engendering and oppressive patriarchal discourse, present female writers as ‘victims’ or locate them in a constantly subservient position to an over-arching, domineering male culture. If these writers are granted any autonomy within the patriarchal discourse, it is within the furtherance of ‘domesticity’ and ‘feminine values’, which itself is based on a ‘masculine’ view of the world.

Due to the complex and contradictory nature of sensibility literature, it is imperative to take into account historical differences and variances from our own modern values. A sensibility text can offer multiple meanings, and to privilege one meaning above others, because it supports an overall feminist goal, can detract from the complexity and richness of the text. This is not to say that writers did not convey any ‘feminist’ messages in their writing, but it is fair to note that feminist meanings should not be promoted at the expense of other ideas, even if those same ideas contradict our own feminist projection of the female philosopher figure.

Sensibility is a difficult concept to define precisely, as it is replete with fragmented ideas, often contradictory. Nonetheless, it plays a central role in our efforts to understand the significance of eighteenth-century women writers. Anne Sant gives a definition of sensibility as

[a]n organic sensitivity dependent on brain and nerves and underlying a) delicate moral and aesthetic perception; b) acuteness of feeling, both emotional and physical; and c) susceptibility to delicate passionate arousal. Though belonging to all, greater degrees of delicacy of sensibility - often to a point of fragility - are characteristic of women and upper classes. Excessive delicacy or acuteness of feeling produces an impaired or diseased state. (1993: 1)

Sant firmly contextualises sensibility as a key idea in eighteenth-century physiology, epistemology and psychology. It was a widespread cultural phenomenon, which progressed over the eighteenth century, reaching its height in the later decades and influencing social development, literature, and even philosophy and politics (Spacks 2001: 249).

Susan Manning notes that literary history defines sensibility as a transitional phase between the decline of Neo-classical ‘Reason’ and the eruption of Romantic ‘Imagination’ (2004: 81). Its identifying characteristics include: anti-rationalism; an emphasis on emotional responses; symptomatic physiological reactions, such as tears, swoons, deathly pallor; a prevailing melancholic mood; fragmentary forms and recurrent scenes of ‘virtue in distress.’ However, Manning does not recommend a stable definition of sensibility which is applicable to a specific period of time. Rather, she sees its characteristics appearing constantly throughout periods of literature from Shakespeare, Pope, and Dickens to Oscar Wilde, and approaches it as a ‘fluctuating but continued repertoire in emotional representation’ (2004: 81-82). This proves to be a particularly valid assertion when considering an approach to sensibility, as isolating and applying certain writing characteristics of sensibility to a restricted time frame can obscure the extended influence the concept exercised over several periods of literary history. As Jerome McGann (1996: 95) argues, the culture and style of sensibility have survived into modern times, though mostly within popular culture and the less prestigious form of paperback romances. Despite sensibility literature’s restoration to the realm of scholarly enquiry over the past couple of decades, its critical appreciation is still subject to the strong challenge of overcoming twenty-first century prejudiced perceptions.

Brissenden (1974: 128-129), Kelly (1989: 12), McGann (1996:1), and Curran (1996: 288), amongst other scholars, acknowledge (albeit to varying degrees) Romanticism’s debt to the sensibility movement’s emphasis upon the emotions, passions, eroticism, individualism, creativity, and social criticism.¹³ However, sensibility is regarded as a double-edged sword among feminist critics, especially with respect to its portrayal of women. The literature of sensibility has generated much feminist interest precisely because women, being the dominant contributors to this variety of literature, are viewed as having had a significant effect on the formation of gender roles (Curran 1996: 287).

Sant’s quoted definition of sensibility highlights delicacy, emotional and physical acuteness of feeling, passionate arousal, and fragility - features which came to be associated with

¹³ Spacks (2001: 250) disputes this point, for she sees the later Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century as distinct from that of earlier sensibility poetry. Janet Todd (1986: 9) also views Romanticism as a completely separate ideology from sensibility.

women. Victimisation became a central theme in the culture of sensibility, explored mostly through the figures of distressed women, whose virtue is continuously under threat from villainous men. A fact Barker-Benfield observes, when he states that it was ‘one of the best-known representations of the literature of sensibility’ (1992: xviii). He also notes that, although men had to cultivate a sense of sensibility as well, yet it was a far less pressing role for them, for they were still expected to appear in the public spheres of political and social life without being exposed as constantly vulnerable. As Julie Ellison notes,

the literature of sensibility is inconceivable without victims and its victims are typically foreign, low, or otherwise alien and estranged. (1994: 229)

One of the strongest feminist concerns regarding the figure of the ‘victimised heroine’, which permeated the literature of sensibility, is the passive role it assigns to women, depicting them as creatures of feeling rather than reason, and ultimately situating them firmly within the domestic realm. Susan Matthews argues that it was a characteristic of sensibility literature to represent women in semi-maternal roles, a sphere where kindness and caring were highly prioritised values; these images later came to be the source of image of the domestic woman who played such an important role within Romantic culture (1996: 102). For Matthews, the body of literature produced within the sensibility movement only *seemingly* celebrates feeling and femininity, for over the 1790s its conventions of feeling were labelled as self-indulgent and any positive characteristics it may have possessed were borrowed and labelled as ‘masculine.’

Vivien Jones identifies two dominant ideologies of femininity during the eighteenth-century: the natural association between women and the private sphere, domesticity and leisure; and the identification of women with feeling and sensibility rather than with reason (1990: 5-6). Janet Todd acknowledges that between the 1670s and the 1790s there was a

century of sentimental construction of femininity, a state associated with modesty, passivity, chastity, moral elevation and suffering. (1989: 5-6)

and further notes that while women writers during the eighteenth century were not able to break away from the cultural perception of women as passive, moral creatures, they emphasised these same qualities by creating a potent myth which usually involved a

great plot of female virtue, first in distress and then rewarded by a glamorous death or a hereditary mansion. (1989: 6)

Todd admits to women's dominance within the literary market during the latter part of the eighteenth century; however, she notes that the cultural impact they had over this time remained somewhat limited, as their writing is often tinged with patriarchal ideology stemming from the gender constructions of sensibility (1986: 21).

Anne Mellor (1993: 23) takes a similar approach when she notes that

historically, the realm of the emotions, love and sensibility had been assigned to the feminine gender; women might not be able to think rationally, but they could love passionately, faithfully, purely.

In fact, Mellor goes so far as to state that the Romantic poets effectively 'stole' women's cultural authority as the leaders in sensibility, by appropriating some of its values of delicacy and tenderness of feeling. Richardson, basing his arguments on the writings of Nancy Chodorow, argues that when male writers moved from the 'Age of Reason' to the 'Age of Feeling' (alternatively, sensibility), they drew upon fantasies of identification with the mother figure, to colonise the feminine domain of sensibility (1988: 13-15). Richardson analyses the work of Romantic male poets to discuss their strategies for 'absorbing the feminine qualities devolved by sensibility', and describes the Romantic poets and the men of feeling as 'coveting' conventionally feminine attributes to the point of 'figuratively cannibalizing their nearest female relatives' (1988: 15, 21). Dale Spender, although not referring specifically to the sensibility movement, accounts for the possible exclusion of women from the traditional canon by supposing that male writers observed women's creativity in their writing, appropriated it and claimed it as their own (1996: 22-23). These arguments tend to construct the Romantics as the 'villains' of literary history, who constantly pursue and usurp the 'femininity' of women.

Toril Moi regards feminism as 'a theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism' (1997: 104-105), and while her arguments can adopt a rather too rigid political bent, nevertheless she offers a relevant point on feminists who argue that male intellectuals 'steal' or absorb women's ideas for themselves, much in the way that Romantic

male poets are seen to ‘colonize’, ‘cannibalise’ or ‘appropriate’ sensibility. Moi’s objection to this approach is that it ‘casts women as eternal victims of male ploys’ (1997: 106).

Feminist criticism needs to move (and many of its exponents have done so) beyond casting Romantic poets as the villains of literary history: the ‘absorption’ theory of sensibility and the feminine by male writers perpetuates this misperception, modern narratives replicating to an extent the eighteenth-century sensibility plot ploys which depicted helpless heroines endlessly pursued by villainous rakes. Despite Mellor’s positive recognition of the female writer’s manipulation of sensibility gender characteristics to create a ‘feminine Romanticism’ (1993: 1-11), her theory still reinforces a theoretical hierarchy wherein the woman writer is forbidden from entering the sublime Romantic world of the male.¹⁴

More fruitful interpretations of sensibility literature are those which explore its political implications and view it as an ideology commonly shared by both women and men. Such readings avoid placing women in an entirely separate ‘feminine’ sphere and entrapping them within a masculine discourse, and, in turn, this allows for greater individual autonomy in their work and equal access to the public realm. The gap between male and female writers becomes less overt. Some such works include McGann’s *Poetics of Sensibility* (1996), which to a greater extent also explores the aesthetic literary side of sensibility poetry; Brisseden’s *Virtue in Distress* (1974), Jones’s *Radical Sensibility* (1993), Ellis’s *Politics of Sensibility* (1996), and Stafford’s *English Feminists and their opponents* (2002).¹⁵ Since they take into account the political implications of sensibility, these works form an important basis for my argument in this dissertation.

Barker-Benfield (1992) recognises the politics of sensibility, but also interprets it as a general feminization of culture brought about by the economic reforms and industrialization of

¹⁴ Judith Pascoe (1997: 5-6) offers a similar criticism of Mellor and notes that female poets might have actually more in common with their male peers than generally conceded. Isobel Armstrong (1995: 16) also warns against locking women too securely into their ‘feminine’ space.

¹⁵ None of these writers deny the negative impact that sensibility had on gender; however their views are less restrictive on the eighteenth-century female writers.

Britain. He points out the negative effects of sensibility on the formation of gender but does not note its benefits. Kelly (1993: 3-29) also explores the political side of sensibility, but sees it as the domination of middle-class cultural values, whereby the figure of the domestic woman becomes a prominent feature - which, however, women writers were easily able to exploit, for their own political ends. Johnson (1995) sees the political use of 'chivalric' sentimentality or sensibility as an attempt to affirm heterosexual values. This enforcement of values is achieved by the destabilisation of eighteenth-century gender definitions, through which sentimental expressions of female suffering are monopolized by men. This forces women into an extreme hyper-feminised state or into becoming an 'equivocal', a-gendered being. Sensibility, therefore, is regarded as oppressive; Johnson's views echo the 'absorption' theories of sensibility that I have mentioned above.

Sensibility played a pivotal role in the construction of the figure of the female philosopher, whose significance, ambivalent in the eyes of modern scholars, was equally problematic for eighteenth-century writers. The figure of the female philosopher was often used as a tool through which a writer could explore personal ideas on sensibility. Barker-Benfield argues that

the ambiguous values of sensibility to women and men, present throughout the century, became critical problems for many writers during its last fifteen years. The French Revolution intensified and popularized earlier apprehensions: the representation of Wollstonecraft as an exemplar of excessive sensibility and as an Amazon would crystallize them. (1992: 359)

As implied here, the female philosopher figure (such as Wollstonecraft) embodied two contradictory states in novels: the woman of excessive, indulgent sensibility and the masculine Amazon guided by Reason - an indication, perhaps, of eighteenth-century society's own **ambiguity** towards sensibility. The characterization of the female philosopher was a means of exploring and addressing these doubts and contradictions about sensibility (Barker-Benfield 1992: 359-362).

Regarding radicals and conservatives, Todd comments that

neither side wished to be left in possession of a now unfashionable sensibility, but neither side wanted to entirely abandon the power of emotive, sentimental language. (1986: 130)

Jones observes that the strong criticism sensibility faced over the 1790s was, mostly, not based upon aesthetic but political, social and moral motivations; moreover

the critics of sensibility in the 1790s were often ambivalent in their criticisms. Anti-Jacobin writers attacked sensibility as socially subversive, yet Burke, the greatest anti-Jacobin of them all, laid claim to a heart full of sensibility. (1993: 4)

Reacting to modern scholarship's attempts to impose a unitary interpretation upon sensibility, Jones correctly observes that sensibility was not a uniform concept, as it could be championed or attacked from so many different points of view. Similarly, Wallace notes that current critical debates struggle to clearly delineate the history of sensibility, because

sorting out the ideological implications of sensibility throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth remains extremely vexed. (2001:237)

As I noted, the challenges presented to eighteenth-century writers by the complexities inherent in the ideology of sensibility still confront modern scholarship, particularly feminist critics. Therefore, it is important to eschew prescriptive definitions of sensibility: arguments as to whether it had a completely negative impact on gender definitions, or functioned as an imprisonment discourse for women, or was used by women as a celebration of femininity, need to be carefully considered. Such interpretations sometimes encourage searching for signs of resistance or conformity in texts and Beer cautions that this approach can be problematic:

The danger is that we may begin to welcome positions ascribed to us, and then find ourselves unable to move from them. Proper resistance leads to the 'oppositional mode', to alternative readings and to a celebration of the periphery. The list of inhabitants of the periphery becomes a carnivalesque group - the mad, the poor, women and workers - who are idealised as outside the power centre. Such idealisation of the 'deviant' mode leaves its inhabitants powerless and may perpetuate exclusion. Even words like imagination and sensibility may prove synonyms for powerlessness, if too easily invoked. (1996: 86)

The woman writer then becomes evaluated in terms of her 'resistance' to oppressive sensibility discourses. If she is unable to sufficiently deviate from masculine views of sensibility, she is considered to have become a 'victim' of that discourse; if she 'resists' sufficiently, according to modern standards, she is celebrated for her exclusion. How we choose to interpret sensibility, according to modern feminist values, influences how we construct the image of the writer. Greater cognisance of this fact needs to be taken into consideration. To measure a writer's value in terms of her 'deviance' from sensibility or her celebration of it is problematic; how an eighteenth-century writer chooses to write about sensibility should not play a part in our judgement of her works' 'literary value'.

As a result of the French Revolution, gender, politics and literature became closely interrelated factors over the 1790s, rendering this a significant period for investigation by current feminist scholarship on eighteenth-century female writers. From an analysis of the critical writings of Beer, Stafford, and Ezell, it becomes apparent that feminism needs to pay due consideration to its own theoretical assumptions around the figure of the female philosopher. How we measure eighteenth-century female writers against modern projections of the 'female philosopher', in respect to gender and patriarchal oppression, may negatively affect a balanced enquiry into female writers' 'literary value'.

Similarly, the ways in which modern feminist scholarship chooses to interpret sensibility may contribute to the construction of eighteenth-century female authors as 'victims' of literary history rather than as its active participants. Sensibility literature specifically challenges modern perceptions, its ambiguity and distance from current sense of what makes 'good' literature rendering a single theoretical approach, which privileges one above other possible meanings, untenable. In addition, sensibility is an impossible ideology to reconcile to a single coherent argument as it is contradictory in nature, both for eighteenth-century writers and modern scholars. Understanding the techniques of sensibility literature allows for a better understanding of Robinson's artistic capability in her novels.

Mary Robinson and the complexities of being ‘unsexed’

The work of Mary Robinson, a prominent figure in sensibility literature and a member of the so-called ‘unsexed’ band of female writers active during the 1790s, offers a valuable point of investigation for the purpose of this dissertation. Robinson’s standing within the Romantic canon began to be a relatively accepted fact with the appearance of her poetry in an anthology of Romantic poetry alongside her male counterparts (Penguin edition of 2001), and was more firmly established by the publication of all her works by Pickering & Chatto (2009). The burgeoning of scholarship, which Grogan (2005: 305) accounted for at being at fifty-five books and articles a few years back, has continued. Jacqueline Labbe (2002: 4) notes that it was Stuart Curran’s 1988 article - ‘The ‘I’ altered’ - which reintroduced Robinson as a significant woman writer and that ‘slightly more than a decade later, we can see Robinson as a vital contributor to the formation of ‘Romanticism’’.¹⁶

Mary Robinson was theoretically born on 27 November 1758 (Robinson 1895: 3), as recent research disputes this date in favour of 1756 (Nathan 2002: 139). Robinson laments that

[t]hrough life the tempest has followed my footsteps, and I have in vain looked for a short interval of repose from the perseverance of sorrow. (1895: 3)

This is a theme which runs through much of her work. Mary Darby, daughter of an American merchant and of an English lady, was born into relative wealth, but experienced a change of fortune at the age of nine, when her father lost his money in a bad business scheme and emigrated to America with a mistress, leaving his family destitute (Robinson 1895: 14-18). Henceforward, her life became a constant battle with poverty.

Persuaded at the age of 16 to marry a man named Thomas Robinson, who lied about his wealth and incurred large debts, Mary was forced to accompany her husband to debtors’ prison, where she composed her first set of poems (Binhammer 2000: 1). Driven to earn an independent income, Robinson became a successful actress, and in 1779 became mistress to the Prince of Wales, earning the scandalous nickname ‘Perdita’. The relationship was highly publicised and became a constant source of bawdy humour and satirical caricatures

¹⁶ See Curran (1996: 279-291).

(Binhammer 2000: 2). Her extravagant lifestyle as mistress to the Prince created huge debts and, unable to continue her career as an actress, Robinson turned to writing to earn an income (Binhammer 2000: 1). Robinson had numerous affairs, her longest relationship being with Banstere Tarleton, a notorious soldier during the American Revolution, who eventually left her for a richer wife (Binhammer 2000: 1). In 1792, besides struggling with poverty, Robinson was struck with a crippling infirmity.

Robinson produced a large body of writing during the last phase of her life: she wrote six novels, two collections of poetry, plays, political tracts, poems, and essays for newspapers. However, she was still unable to earn a sufficient income (Pascoe 2000: 33). At the end of 1799 Robinson took over from Robert Southey the position of Poetry Editor for the *Morning Post*, and she also published her own poems in this newspaper under different pseudonyms (Pascoe 2000: 34). Robinson's significant literary friendships with writers such as William Godwin, Robert Merry, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, S. J. Pratt, Eliza Fenwick and, towards the end of her life, S.T. Coleridge, are often obscured by her reputation as a royal mistress (Pascoe 2000: 38). The radical literary circles in which she moved influenced the political turn in her novels and writing. She died on 26 December 1800, aged 42.

Robinson was certainly regarded in the eighteenth century as the transgressive or 'unsexed' female. Pholwhele's *Unsexed Females* (1798) is a much discussed text within feminism.¹⁷ Craciun, while noting that it has probably received too much attention, does acknowledge its usefulness for the 'politicised demarcations it established between appropriate and inappropriate female intellectual pursuits' (2005: 28). Pholwhele's poem describes the Unsexed females as Amazonian warriors who appear to be

With Honour, Virtue, Truth, announcing War;

Survey with me, what ne'er our fathers saw,

A female band despising NATURE's law,

As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms,

¹⁷ Polowhele's poem is a text commonly referred to by feminist scholarship as a prime example of patriarchal attitudes towards female writers who transgress social and political boundaries. See Barker-Benfield (1992: 375-382), Ty (1993: 3-30), Johnson (1995: 1-19), and Stafford (2002: 1-34).

And vengeance smothers all their softer charms.

I shudder the new unpictur'd scene,

Where unsexed women vaunt the imperious mien.

He lists Wollstonecraft as the leader of this 'unsexed' pack, the 'intrepid champion of her sex', followed by Anna Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Yarseley, Mary Hays, Angelica Kauffmann, and Emma Crewe (Polwhele 1798: 13). On the other side of the fence, Pholwhele lists Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Hester Chapone, Anna Seward, Hester Piozzi, Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe, the illustrator Diana Beauclerk, and the mother figure of all conservatives (as Polwhele implies), Hannah More (Barker-Benfield 1992: 379-380). Current feminist scholarship takes Pholwhele's political demarcations of the female writers with a 'pinch of salt', for, as Ty argues (1993: 4), they are over-simplified and exaggerated, as many other writers shared similar concerns.

Other Anti-Jacobins who regarded Robinson as 'unsexed' by her politics were William Gifford who, referring to her Della Cruscan pseudonym, Laura Maria, writes:

This wretched woman, indeed in the wane of her beauty, fell into merited poverty, exchanged poetry for politics, and wrote abusive trash against the government at the rate of two guineas a week for the Morning Post. (1811: 55-56)

and Mathias:

Mrs Charlotte Smith, Mrs. Inchbald, Mrs. Mary Robinson, Mrs. &c. &c., though all of them are very ingenious ladies, yet they are too frequently whining or frisking in novels, till our girls' heads turn wild with impossible adventures, and are now and then tainted with democracy, and sometimes with infidelity and loose principles. (1808: 56)

Robinson did not take such attacks lying down, yet she was not entirely immune to them. In a 1794 letter to John Taylor, she complains about the harshness of the criticism she receives and threatens to leave England and stop writing altogether, asserting that

[p]erhaps this will be no loss to the world, yet I may regret the many fruitless hours I have employed to furnish occasions for malevolence and persecution. (2000: 365)

That Robinson saw herself as victimised by society, there can be little doubt; however, she responded strongly to the abuse. For instance, she essentially ‘gave as good as she got,’ in her novel *Walsingham*, when she described critics as jealous pretenders to literary honours who

wield the pen with as little mercy as the sanguinary savage guides the blow of his death-inflicting tomahawk. (2003b: 216)

Robinson’s condemnation is rather courageous, given her awareness that she was provoking a critical backlash. The critics did respond. *The Analytical Review* 1798 chided her for lack of respect, and for unnecessary digressions and non-coherence, stating that

A negligence manifesting so little respect for the judgement of those, whose decision only can gratify the laudable pride of the possessor of genuine talent, is deserving of reprehension. From the perusal of *Walsingham* we were inclined to believe that the author had never considered it as a *whole*, so defective and incongruous are the parts, so desultory the manner, and so incredible the events, as to bear not even the semblance of reality. (2003b: 500-501)

Her *Letter to the Women of England* (2003 a) offers another instance of Robinson’s audacity in defending female authorship: clearly, this writer has formed a point of interest in feminist scholarship not only because she is one of the ‘unsexed’ females, but also because she is one of the most vocal defenders of the eighteenth-century female author. Yet, even considering Robinson’s boldness in regard to her writing, her reception has been somewhat mixed within feminist scholarship. Although Robinson was clearly viewed as an ‘unsexed’ female in the eighteenth century, some feminist scholars have remained somewhat uncertain about her inclusion in this category. The problem with the term ‘unsexed’ is that while it was used as a derogatory term in the eighteenth century, in current feminist scholarship it has taken on positive connotations when applied to a female writer. Ezell comments on the issue of merely ‘inverting’ past historical attitudes: while feminist scholars may dismiss the views of eighteenth-century critics on female character, nonetheless certain feminist debates re-engage those same terminologies which past critics used to categorise women, such as the ‘unsexed’ female:

We often have often simply inverted their stated values: earlier critics wanted a female role model who was domestic, passive and modest, and we have assumed that the women obliged; therefore we seek the outcast, the madwomen, the angry voice. (1993: 103)

Ezell also points to feminist scholarship's tendency to examine our literary forebears in the light of whether they are 'good' feminists (1993: 27). This is precisely where the figure of the female philosopher or 'unsexed' female comes into play, since, while it refers to past misogynist attitudes, it also represents some of current feminism's 'terms of measurement' for an eighteenth-century female writer. These are generally determined by analysing how the writer breaks down masculine gender codes, in what manner she voices her oppression, how she 'differs' from or subverts male Romantic ideology, and to what extent she reflects and responds to the outspoken Wollstonecraftian model. Robinson's doubted positioning within the class of 'unsexed' females is due to the fact that she is seen to be incongruent with these measurement standards. Robinson forms an interesting subject for the project of my dissertation precisely because she brings to light the underlying problems which influence the 'measuring' of a female writer in the context of modern feminist assumptions. Robinson's evolution within the Romantic canon highlights the need for feminism to become more aware of its underlying assumptions regarding eighteenth-century female writers.

Judith Pascoe's brilliant 2004 article brings Robinson and the problem of being 'unsexed' to the fore and it provides the foundation upon which I plan to build the argument of this dissertation, in the hope of taking further the views expressed into account. Although Pascoe's thoughts relate to Robinson's *poetry*, they can equally be applied to her novels with profit. Pascoe argues that, while feminism's attention to the unequal treatment of women writers has led to a renaissance of their reception within the canon, it has caused them 'to be read too exclusively in gendered terms, terms that have come to seem a little too repetitive' and continues:

If Barbauld, Robinson, and Smith were not female they would not be receiving as much critical attention as they currently enjoy; but it is also the case that if they were not female they would be getting critical attention of less restricted kinds. Polwhele, with his blinkered focus on the political self-positioning of women writers, unfortunately stands as precursor to, as well as the antagonist of, recent critics who dwell too exclusively on the political or feminist leanings of women poets. (2004: 213)

Because women poets are lumped together according to feminist and gender criteria, Pascoe notes, they are perceived to have more in common than they actually do. Their writing is sifted for feminist meanings, but Pascoe quite humorously shows that the infamous Polwhele

wrote a poem which could even be interpreted as having a feminist purpose. She implies that these writers' individuality is lost when their aesthetic and work are interpreted under an encompassing feminist banner, and their individual differences are lost within the larger 'women's cause' (2004: 211-224).

Robinson's own individuality may therefore be lost through the need to assimilate her writing to a larger feminist agenda which is insufficiently unaware of the effects of its own assumptions. The urgency is now no longer to re-discover Robinson and assign her a place in the Romantic canon: clearly, it is thanks to the efforts of feminist scholars that the academic debate around Robinson began and continues to grow. Their contribution in this respect has been invaluable, but the time has come to begin to re-examine upon what terms Robinson's position within the traditional canon should be maintained. To achieve this objective the focus of scholarship can no longer be placed only upon implications of gender and patriarchy; rather, the actual effects of feminism need to be taken into consideration. This does not mean that traditional forms of gender and feminist enquiry need be discarded; rather, that a greater awareness of our own ideological assumptions needs to be fostered and the ways in which we determine an eighteenth-century female writer's literary value may have to be extended beyond its modern 'feminist' potential.¹⁸ This would entail examining the unique individual characteristics of a female writer. What makes Robinson's writing different from her other female counterparts? A more formalistic approach will be needed in this regard.

Ty observes that

'Robinson's memoirs, essay, and novels show how women were not simply duped by patriarchal ideals or masculine representations, but also seduced into different culturally sanctioned gender positions. When these positions turn out to be inadequate or impossible to subscribe to, more often than not, they seek blame within themselves. Robinson's various self-representations illustrate the clamorous energies, frustrations, and desires of one late eighteenth-century woman and reveal the ways in which she dealt with competing, sometimes contradictory, constructions of woman.'
(1998: 35)

¹⁸ Fay (1999: 397 - 401) notes a similar point when she discusses how female poets are seen as contributors to Romanticism, instead of being read for conformity and revolutionary politics. I support Fay's view that 'Clearly, considering how we hold our value and in what terms, becomes a productive literary undertaking.' (400).

These observations point to the main threads which characterise some of the critical thought on Robinson. First, exposing how Robinson was oppressed by a patriarchal society and masculine gender definitions. Secondly, revealing her victimised position through her 'self-blame' and 'frustrations', and thirdly focusing on her 'self-representations', how she constructs her own identity to appeal to the needs of her audience, also referred to as her 'self-fashioning.' This focus on Robinson's 'self-fashioning' generally involves a strong cultural and auto-biographical element, which sometimes obscures the nature of her work.¹⁹

Mellor follows a similar strain, when she notes how Robinson becomes an example of

the way in which individual agency, and especially female agency, is necessarily subsumed into pre-scripted sexual and gender narratives. (2000: 297-298)

and relates (2000: 300) Robinson to the present celebrity fascination with Madonna, describing the writer as

the remote, alluring, fashionable, but forever inaccessible 'Perdita' - the woman who is always already constructed by the gaze of her admirers and the gendered scripts of nineteenth century England.

I would argue that Robinson emerges from Mellor's argument more as a figment of nineteenth-century imagination than an actual living author. Like Ty, Mellor tends to entrap Robinson within a gendered discourse, thereby depriving her of any sense of autonomy, and thus perpetuating a 'victimised' image of her.

Sharon Setzer's representation of Robinson's 'self-fashioning', in her *Sylphid* essays, similarly portrays her as entrapped in a patriarchal discourse:

¹⁹ Pascoe's influential *Romantic Theatricality* (1997) first brought to critical attention Robinson's ability to 'self-fashion', by exploring her use of multiple pseudonyms in her poetry to represent different poetic voices. Robinson clearly 'constructed' various poetic identities to manipulate her audience. For example, the pseudonym 'Tabitha Bramble' was used to perform a social critique, whereas 'Laura Maria' was the voice Robinson used to write her sentimental Della Cruscan poetry. Pascoe's ideas on Robinson's 'self-fashioning' are less restrictive than some later critics'. She extends the ability to 'self-fashion' identity as a characteristic of Romantic writing, one in which even Wordsworth was capable of participating. Pascoe does not limit the tactic uniquely to Robinson, who used it as a ploy to 'defend' her reputation and escape confining gender terms; however, she notes how women's performative use of poetic voices differed from that of the male Romantics (242).

Robinson offers a penetrating view into the forces with which she was unwilling, and perhaps unwittingly, complicit. Although her daring attempt to escape those forces does not fully set us free, it can help us negotiate the boundaries between literary periods, male and female authors, canonical and non-canonical texts, texts and cultural contexts. (1996: 516)

It is clear that these scholars read Robinson mostly in terms of *failure*, because of her supposed inability to adequately question masculine paradigms of gender, her ‘victimised’ position, and lack of direct female protest. She does not (this appears to be the argument) measure up to modern expectations of the eighteenth-century female philosopher. Instead, attention is directed primarily at how Robinson herself and late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century society constructed her identity, whilst largely ignoring how *modern* scholarship prefers to regard her as a ‘female philosopher’, thereby not taking into account the results of their own assumptions.

Claire Brock challenges these views and grants Robinson greater autonomy and control. Condemning feminist critics who deny women the ability to control their own public images, she states that ‘Mary Robinson has been depicted as a poor, defenceless victim, hounded by the press.’ (2002: 108). Anne Close, in her doctoral thesis, opposes the tendency of current scholarship to view Robinson merely as ‘an actress, a poet, a performer’, arguing that too much store has been placed upon Robinson’s ‘self-dramatization’ or ‘self-fashioning’, or performative abilities, which has led to an underestimation of her political ambitions (2003: 11-12).

To conclude this Chapter, I will attempt to gather together some strands of thought. The aim of my dissertation is to build upon readings of Robinson by scholars who have explored her political uses of victimisation, as well as those who have studied Robinson’s promotion of female authorship. Craciun’s *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003: 47-109) and *British Women Writers and the French Revolution* (2005: 60-94), Garnai’s *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s* (2009: 69-95), Close’s doctoral thesis on Mary Robinson (2003) and her article ‘Notorious: Mary Robinson and the Gothic’ (2004: 172-191), advocate the political nature of Robinson’s writing, while Cross (2001: 571-605), (2002: 53-68), Brock (2002: 107-124) and Rooney (2006: 356-372) pay particular attention to Robinson’s defence and promotion of

female authorship. These studies prove useful in challenging Ty's, Mellor's, and Setzer's portrayal of Robinson as a 'victimised' subject entrapped in a patriarchal discourse, as they grant her greater autonomy within her writing and do not allow her to be excluded from the realm of the Romantics, nor do they exclusively focus on Robinson's 'construction' of self.²⁰

However, while I will base my arguments on the work of the abovementioned authors, I will avoid contributing further discussion to Robinson's use of radical politics and defence or promotion of female authorship. First, because these are relatively well explored issues around her writing, and, secondly, because it is wise to be cautious when affirming Robinson's radical politics, as ultimately this impulse ties into a *modern* yearning to portray her as a radical feminist. Robinson certainly adopted a radical political stance in some of her novels, yet one cannot value her writing exclusively in terms of its political bent, however tempting this approach may be.²¹

Robinson was classed as an 'unsexed' female in the eighteenth century, yet certain feminist scholars have been reluctant to grant her that title, as, in their view, she does not effectively challenge masculine gender stereotypes, nor does she sufficiently 'vocalise' her feminism in the manner of a Wollstonecraft. Mary Robinson's perceived entrapment within masculine discourse has led to a somewhat distorted portrayal of this author as 'victim': critical focus on how she and eighteenth-century society may have constructed her authorial identity, reflecting her primarily as a historical and cultural product, has contributed indirectly to diminish due recognition of the level of autonomy she attained within her own writing. However, recent political interpretations of Robinson's work have largely challenged these views, acknowledging her considerable influence within the public realm of the 'masculine' Romantic.

²⁰ Craciun, (2003: 1-20) and Cross (2001: 574-575) dispute the gendering of genres and the establishment of a 'feminine' Romanticism, as Mellor views it. Political and occasionally Romantic interpretations of female writers generally dispute the idea of a gendering of genres (women were encouraged to write from the private realm of the novel, whilst men from the public realm of the poem) and special feminine way of writing. See Craciun & Lokke (2001: 8-9).

²¹ When reference is made to Robinson's politics, it is generally considered in the context of how she textually refutes common Anti-Jacobin literary propaganda tactics and not necessarily of how it promotes her as a radical.

In light of Pascoe's (2004), Ezell's (1993), Stafford's (2002), and Beer's (1996) arguments, which challenge us to pay greater attention to underlying modern assumptions of feminist criticism on eighteenth-century female writers, the following chapters will closely examine Robinson's novels - *Walsingham* (2003 b), *The False Friend* (1799), and *The Natural Daughter* (2003 a). I intend to argue that, by exploring Robinson's own portrayal of the female philosopher and author, as well as her manipulation of victimisation within sensibility literature, we may be able to better interrogate modern feminist thinking around the concept of the eighteenth-century female philosopher, and thus to begin to situate the value of Robinson's work within a firmer literary compass.

To evaluate Robinson primarily in terms of her (potential for) feminism has indeed provided valuable insights into a neglected author; inevitably, however, the intrinsic literary value of her work will 'collapse' under our modern expectations, as our historical difference becomes a greater problem than her sexual one. I propose that a closer understanding should be gained of Robinson's individuality as a writer. It is time to establish eighteenth-century writers as "single voices" and not only as a group behind a feminist cause, as integral to our understanding that cause may be, on occasion.

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CHAPTER TWO

ROBINSON AND THE PARADOX OF FEMALE VILLAINY

Indeed I have in my tedious journey through life found so few estimable women, (particularly where I beheld handsome ones) that I not only admire but value you excessively. If I do not enter into the true spirit of Friendship for my own sex, it is because I have almost universally found that Sex unkind and hostile towards *me*. I have seen the most miserable and degrading [reserve], the most contemptible traits of false delicacy, glaring through the thin veil of artificial value. I have found those women the most fastidiously severe, whose own lives have been marked by *private follies* and *assumed propriety*.

A Letter to Jane Porter, 27th August 1800 (Robinson 2000: 370-371)

Feminism and the predicament of female villainy

Robinson's rather critical statement in her letter to Jane Porter regarding her own sex calls attention to a controversy in the sphere of eighteenth-century female authorship, which current feminist scholarship has yet to resolve: the question of women's victimisation of women. In this chapter I intend to explore the paradox of women's oppression of women through Robinson's depiction of female villains. Specifically, I will discuss whether female villainy may originate from a reaction to patriarchal structures during the eighteenth century and whether the paradox of female villainy may help to reassess certain assumptions underlying critical scholarship on Robinson's novels, which perhaps ignore the Sadean references to the exploitation of power.

The feelings voiced by Robinson in the quotation above are echoed in her *Memoirs*, when she complains that

[i]ndeed I have almost uniformly found my own sex my most inveterate enemies; I have experienced little kindness from them, though my bosom has often ached with the pang inflicted by their envy, slander, and malevolence (1895: 119).

Her frankly critical attitude against the female sex continues to be expressed, quite methodically, through most of her novels and is given physical embodiment in her rather ferocious female villains, who dominate in works like *Walsingham*, *The Natural Daughter*, *The False Friend*, *Angelina* and *The Widow, or a Picture of Modern Times*.

We could account plausibly for these assertions by assuming that Robinson was merely fulfilling her own personal vendettas against other women in response to the cruel treatment they had meted out to her. Bearing in mind her rather dubious and widely publicised relations

with men, the most notorious being her affair with the Prince of Wales, a harsh reaction from women subject to eighteenth-century mores might appear to be hardly surprising. Pascoe (2000: 40-41) recounts that Robinson's friend, Jane Porter, the recipient of the letter above, records in her diary that, upon receiving news of Mary's death, she had to hide her shock and the fact that she had been acquainted with Robinson from her dinner party companions, as she was fearful of the negative impact the revelation of her friendship might have on her own reputation. Pascoe (2000: 42) further observes that Robinson's distrust of her female contemporaries could have originated in her encounter with Hannah Cowley 'who apparently suggested one of Robinson's poems was written by a man,'²² and the fact that Mrs. Siddons, a famous actress of the time and one of Robinson's idols, refused to meet with her, alarmed by the possibility that such a meeting might tarnish her own reputable name.

Binhammer (2000: 3) notes that Robinson was a rather incongruous figure, for her

writing shows that she was an early feminist but she did not feel a particular solidarity with women. Her contradictory statements only make sense if we understand the particular pain she suffered as a fallen woman.

For Binhammer, to understand Robinson's harsh criticism of women, one first needs to understand the pain she suffered as a result of the loss of her reputation. We can hardly doubt that Robinson's notoriety would have been a constant thorn in her side: Pholwele, in a footnote to his poem, calls for Robinson's repentance for the sake of 'public morality', and exhorts her to abandon the 'gloomy phantom of annihilation' and 'to communicate to the world a recantation of errors that originated in levity, and have been nursed by pleasure'. (1798: 17). Polwhele clearly felt Robinson had not been apologetic enough about her past in her writings; the 'gloomy phantom of annihilation', which he finds so distasteful, probably refers to the morbid and melancholy tone permeating much of Robinson's writing, a typical characteristic of sensibility literature.

The reason why Polwhele found such a tone inappropriate might be traced to its unapologetic nature. Robinson's morbid sensibility tended to show remorse at the evils of the world, rather than at her own behaviour. This emerges clearly in a later critic's review of Robinson's poetry, in the 1806 *Annual Review*, which states:

Sensibility is a most bewitching power, and when sensibility, under the form of 'lovely women,' complains of the perfidy of false friends, the ingratitude of fickle lovers, the nothingness of pomp and pleasure, and the variety of nameless miseries that assail from every quarter the generous and feeling heart - who but must melt with compassion towards the charming sufferer, and glow with

²² Robinson's resentment against Hannah Cowley could not have lasted, as she made specific mention of her in her *Letter to the Women of England*, a feminist tract which praised many women writers of her time (see Robinson 2003: 84, 86). While I agree with Pascoe that Robinson would certainly have been offended by Cowley's remarks, I doubt whether these would have been a significant source for her distrust in the female sex in general, as her attitude in the *Letter* would imply that she may quite easily have forgiven Cowley.

indignation against a base unfeeling world? But let us stop a moment, to enquire from what description of people these pathetic lamentations most frequently proceed. Why from the mistresses of colonels, captains, and ensigns - from that guilty, but much endearing class of women, who rashly bartering away the good opinion of world, the respect of friends, and the respect of legal protectors, receive nothing in exchange but some vague and ineffectual claims on the gratitude, tenderness, or pity, of the most base, selfish, and profligate portion of mankind! Such a one was poor Mrs. Robinson. (2000: 389)

This critic's comment on Robinson is even harsher than Polwhele's, but it echoes a similar sentiment about her, namely that she employed the language of sensibility to emphasise her situation as a victim of society and to hide the true nature of her promiscuous past. Robinson's *Memoirs* provide a clear indication of an attempt to portray herself as a victim wronged by the world, which some scholars have noted;²³ she laments that

I know that I have been sufficiently the victim of events too well to become the tacit acquiescent where I have been grossly misrepresented. Alas! Of created beings I have been the most severely subjugated by circumstances more than by inclination. (Robinson 1895: 83)

Therefore, though her critics' allegations were certainly unfair in many respects, their claim that Robinson used sensibility to play on the sympathy of her audience was not too far off the mark. One cannot but assume that Robinson's constant emphasis on herself as a 'victim of circumstance' stretches her claims of innocence beyond credibility. As Stafford correctly remarks about Robinson's *Memoirs*, it is a text which should be approached with caution as 'it reads all too like one of her racy novels, and raises the question of the extent to which art shapes the telling of life.' (2002: 85)

Even taking these *caveats* into account, Robinson's *Memoirs* offer a sufficiently coherent depiction of her life. Julie Peakman (2004: 162) in an article which examines the biographies of courtesans, observes that the literary tactics Robinson deployed to write about herself were common among courtesans who wrote their own memoirs:

the traditional ideal woman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was characteristically void of personality. Alleged 'virtues' included charm, modesty and sexual passivity.

²³ See Mellor (2000: 287, 292-294), who argues that Robinson portrays herself as the 'victim of Gothic romance', and later states that Robinson 'deliberately exploited this cultural construction of the female poetess as the one who has loved, suffered, lost yet lived to tell the tale in notes of melancholic sweetness'. Setzer (2003:10) argues that Robinson 'represents herself as the gothic heroine victimized by the duplicity of others' and the 'progressive evils' of her own 'too acute sensibility'. Ty (1998: 24-250) largely interprets Robinson's *Memoirs* as 'a defence of her reputation which was 'circumscribed' mostly by the 'public's perception of the author as a fallen woman' or adulterous who 'resists and inscribes herself as the figure of the repentant whore.' I disagree with Ty's observation that Robinson inscribed herself as the 'figure of the repentant whore', because she clearly describes herself as a victim and never truly acknowledges her actions as 'sinful'. Robinson gives very little indication of adopting a repentant or apologetic standpoint, an attitude which eighteenth-century society would have found appropriate, under her circumstances.

While courtesans strove to depict themselves as sexually interesting, they still attempted to conform in some manner to eighteenth-century conservative domestic imaging of women. To achieve this more acceptable moral position, Peakman argues (2004: 162), courtesans would defend their behaviour by condemning the sexual double standards of the time, in addition to feigning modesty in their texts, a tactic which often involved frequent castigations of other women's immoral behaviour. Robinson employed this strategy when she described her sister-in-law in very uncomplimentary terms: a 'Gothic' appearance, stiff deportment, clumsy and low stature, accompanied by an expression of 'sarcastic vulgarity' and an 'air of hauteur' (1895: 59). She adds that this evil sister-in-law, who also acted as mistress housekeeper to her husband's father, constantly 'observed her with jealous eyes' (61). Robinson later depicts her husband's mistress and courtesan, Angelina, as a vain, pleasure-loving woman, who seeks to 'build a gaudy transient fabric on the destruction of another' (119-122), clearly encouraging the reader to repeatedly compare the actions of the vulgar mistress with Robinson's own sense of purity and wifely demeanour. From these observations, I would argue, therefore, that Robinson quite blatantly portrayed the women in her *Memoirs* as villains with the aim to elevate and ameliorate her own image.

Jacqueline Labbe, in her analysis of Robinson's poetry (1994: 69-70), confirms the possibility that Robinson's representation of female villainy was employed as a means to lash back 'at the women she sees as willingly giving her up to her troubles'. However, Labbe (70) adds that

such a characterization of the women around her exaggerates and emphasises her need for protection and shelter from men and reiterates the self-display in the poems that makes her an attractive damsel in distress.

Labbe's arguments imply that Robinson calculatngly shaped her female villains to highlight her own vulnerability in society, highlighting the idea of the 'damsel in distress'. The immediate aim was to manipulate the male spectators in her audience, while the larger overall objective was to shrewdly market her poetry. While arguments such as Labbe's (1994: 68-71) and Binhammer's (2000: 3), with their emphasis on Robinson's personal motivation underlying her female villains, a motivation resulting from her sufferings as a 'fallen woman', prove extremely useful when analysing her *Memoirs*, they cannot be safely extended to her novels.

First, this approach might induce a simplistic reading of her fictional work and encourage a glossing over of other interesting complexities which may arise out of Robinson's usage of female villainy; secondly, they might foster a search for autobiographical revelations in Robinson's novels, which would seem an inappropriate course for a scholarly analysis of imaginative texts - no matter how tempting the possible correlations between historical reality and fictional accounts might be. Both Dawn Vernoooy-Epp (2009: 19) and Lisa Wilson (2008: 18), in discussing how they teach Robinson to their students, sound a note of caution against

biographical readings of Robinson's fictional works, because they believe that her historical persona might overshadow her art or that the more nuanced meanings of her texts might be sacrificed to attempts at reconstructing her life story.

Hester Davenport's biography of Robinson does little to heed these cautions when she comments on Robinson's novels, which generally she does not view with any great regard. She commends Robinson's ability to produce 'page-turners rather than pot-boilers,' and further adds (2004: 170) that they

engage the reader's attention biographically. All contain passages where Mary uses her novel to plead for understanding of her past, and they have central figures who represent herself.

Davenport's interpretation of Robinson's novels serves as an example of the problems which can arise when rigidly adhering to a biographical, and therefore reductive, interpretation; it is hard to see much literary value in Robinson's writing if it is considered merely as a reflection of her own personal turmoil. For instance, should Robinson's female villains in her novels *Walsingham*, *The False Friend* and *The Natural Daughter* be taken to be just shadows of the women who mistreated her on account of her 'fallen' reputation, this assumption could obscure the observations that Robinson was trying to make about the general corruption of human nature. Her philosophical attempts would become obliterated by aspects of her life story. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Davenport cannot find much of significance in the novels' fictional sphere, since her judgment is based largely upon the biographical one.

The purpose of my argument is not to deny the possibility - even probability - of the autobiographical element in Robinson's novels; rather it is to query the precedence given to her life story, an approach which, more often than not, negatively affects her construction as an artist. The question which generally is considered relevant to an exploration of Robinson's work is how her writing reflects the difficulties faced by a woman - and especially a woman of 'fallen' reputation - in a patriarchal society and to what extent this demonstrates her notions of gender and concern about a woman's position in society. This proves to be an important point of investigation for feminist scholarship. In modern feminist thinking, the female philosopher is expected to possess the will and the ability to expose and condemn woman's victimised position within eighteenth-century society. Robinson fits quite neatly into this category and such an approach has certainly been beneficial in reviving an interest in her work; however, keeping our sights firmly on literary merit, we should also consider why in the twenty-first century would we find the narrative of a fallen woman like Robinson appealing?

Ezell (1993: 61) offers insight into the matter in her discussion of anthologies of women's writings, when she observes that 'certain female experiences are not considered as valuable in constructing a tradition as others'. She argues that within a linear narrative of women's

literary history, which includes the search for ‘great women’ writers or ‘turning points’, various female writers inevitably are labelled as ‘winners’ or ‘losers’. The stated goal of such anthologies is to present the ‘best’ of women writers, and naturally the factors determining the ‘best’ are decided upon by the compilers. Ezell (1993: 61) contends that the

best are texts that provide a mirror for us to see ourselves, that is, a view of the past as being very like the present. Under these conditions, we are encouraged to read the selections as autobiographical statements about the author’s personal experiences as a woman, to evaluate her responses as if she were our contemporary.

Hence, Ezell argues that autobiographical interpretations of women’s writings tend to stem from our own desire to see the experiences of women of the past as similar to our own: the result is that those who stray the furthest from our present day conception of what a ‘woman’ should be tend to fall between the gaps.

Robinson’s narratives could be favoured for this very reason, since her experiences as a ‘fallen’ woman include more liberal views on female sexuality, coinciding with the fact that she may be presented as a victim of patriarchal culture. Modern feminism’s own yearning for greater sexual freedom for women and for the exposure of patriarchal oppression renders Robinson’s controversial life story extremely relevant for our own social environment. As Pascoe (2004: 216) wisely remarks, women poets (including Robinson) have tended to be marketed as

victims of a hostile literary climate or as plucky guerrilla girls launching acts of literary resistance, but almost always been characterized as women poets, as if that category had or has a fixed and knowable valence.

Ultimately, biographically inclined readings of Robinson’s work, while resonant with modern feminist expectations of eighteenth-century female writers, clearly hold the danger of valuing Robinson’s experience as a *woman* living in the eighteenth century above her literary skill as a female *writer* of that century.

If one avoids focusing on Robinson’s criticism of women for their lack of sympathy and on her vulnerable position within a harsh masculine environment, it leaves feminist scholarship’s suppositions about the female philosopher in a paradoxical situation when contemplating the issue of female villainy in her novels. The one option is to assume that she has been negatively imbued with predominant eighteenth-century patriarchal gender discourses and is trapped within a masculine ideology; another is to view the female villains as designedly iconic for the negative effects of patriarchy and of women’s limited education upon female behaviour.

Alternatively, Stafford (2002: 77) suggests that it was hard for women writers to depict a heroine who was wholly assertive, powerful and exempt from feminine weaknesses. It was therefore easier, he argues, to portray pure strength in a minor character or a villainess, citing Robinson and Charlotte Smith as examples of women writers whose novels contained a catalogue of ruthless and unconstrained women. He further observes that, while women writers were capable of constructing narratives around powerful female characters, cultural conventions put obstacles in the way of doing so. Consequently, it can perhaps be surmised that Robinson *deliberately* used her villains to illustrate, and indirectly celebrate, the existence of female aggressiveness. The least favourable assumption would be to accuse Robinson of outright misogyny.

Most of the approaches discussed so far would entail some manner of measuring Robinson's level of 'feminism.' As I have pointed out in the previous chapter,²⁴ gauging a female writer's 'value' by 'measuring' her level of feminism is problematic as it would entail sizing her views as expressed in her writings against the standard of modern liberal values - if such could be determined precisely. Naturally, the unspoken thought which underlies certain strands of eighteenth-century feminist criticism, is how correct are the writers' views and depictions of female characters according to our twenty-first century sense of what a female philosopher ought to be. In other words: is she a 'good' feminist? The difficulty for Robinson is that her writing does border on the 'misogynist', specifically when we consider her female villains. The dilemma for feminist scholarship is how we are to come to terms with such contradictions emerging from Robinson's texts. For Robinson is a woman writer who at times vehemently defends her own sex, yet, at the next turn, belittles women as skilfully and as fiercely as the most prejudiced of chauvinists.

One of Robinson's less noted (perhaps deliberately ignored?) poems (*Impromptu on Woman*) is to be found in the novel *Walsingham* (2003b: 311). The neglect may be due to its lack of poetic brilliance or to the fact that it conveys an unsavoury opinion of women;

O woman! Greatest friend or foe,
 Thou source of bliss or evil!
 To man, the certain weal or woe,
 An angel or a devil!
 Since mother Eve, the sex has been
 To wide creation given,
 To make this busy bustling scene
 A very Hell or Heaven!

The character Walsingham calls the poem a 'silly stanza' from his childhood, which he recalls when he is falsely accused by the evil Lady Emily Delvin of committing highway robbery. The novel (Robinson 2003b), is narrated by Walsingham Ainsforth, the central character. Sir Sidney, his cousin and apparently Walsingham's fiercest rival in matters of the

²⁴ See Chapter 1 p. 22-24.

heart, constantly steals Walsingham's lovers away, and the plot follows the latter's constant misfortunes and persecutions, mostly at the hands of women. It is at last revealed that 'Sir Sidney' was never born a boy, but a girl. Her sex was hidden so that she might not lose her rights to her estate, which otherwise would be inherited by her uncle. 'Sidney' herself is in love with Walsingham and does everything in her power to prevent him from marrying another woman. In the end, all secrets are revealed and the two marry with a sufficient income to support themselves.

While Walsingham's derogatory rhyme may not be the most artistic poem ever written, it displays wit and its message echoes Lord Byron's own, more sophisticated, critical poem on the subject (2005: 1). Byron's satirical ode, *To Woman*, emphasises feminine fickleness, deceptiveness and ability to push men to the very extremes of blissful, ecstatic passion or hatred:

Surely experience might have taught
Thy firmest promises are nought
All I forget, but to adore thee.
Oh memory! Thou choicest blessing
When joined with hope, when still possessing;
But how much cursed by every lover
When hope is fled and passion's over.

Byron closes the poem by affirming the instability of woman's passions and vows by stating 'Woman thy vows are traced in sand.' (2005: 2). Walsingham just as harshly condemns woman, when he recalls how he first became acquainted, as a child, with Lady Emily Delvin, who ordered her dog to be killed because she had acquired a new one:

The conclusion may be not be far removed from probability, that the bosom which can treat with cruelty an attached and faithful dog, would not hesitate to persecute a neglectful and offending lover with equal rancour, and equal perseverance. (2003b: 311-312)

Robinson's artistic affinity to Lord Byron's poetry is not the concern here, but rather the shared sentiment she expresses concerning a 'masculine' ideological position about women.

The context in which the poem is set clearly indicates that it was not intended as a representation of the 'masculine-biased' view of woman, as Robinson does with the eccentric, underhand character of Dr. Pimpernel, a physician who pours forth many fashionable but insincere sentiments, mostly to please the nobility and his female clients.²⁵ Dr. Pimpernel quite blatantly states his ill opinion of women:

²⁵ Tim Fulford (2002: 24-25; 32) argues that Robinson's character Dr. Pimpernel was a parody of a Dr. Graham who in the 1780s ran a 'Temple of Health and Hymen', featuring lectures on sexual health, complete with his 'electrified bed' meant to stimulate people's appetites. Pimpernel functions as criticism of the sexual commodification of women's bodies and beauty in the name of science and fashion.

Men should assert their rights - women grow saucy - must be taken down - only invented to amuse the lords of creation - no business to write. Arrogant husseys! Well! (Robinson 2003b: 241)²⁶

The infamous libertine, Mr. Treville, who constantly pursues, persecutes, kidnaps, and attempts to seduce the heroine, Gertrude St. Leger, as well as leaving a trail of other female victims behind him in *The False Friend* (Robinson 1799), also serves to embody men's mistreatment of women, as does Mr. Morely, Martha's husband in *The Natural Daughter*, who illustrates the oppression wives suffer at the hands of overbearing husbands:

Mr. Morley was one of those prejudiced mortals who consider women as beings created for the conveniences of domestic life. (Robinson 2003a: 117)

In Walsingham's case however, he is unjustly persecuted by a villainous woman. Robinson clearly shows that it is the woman who wields power and exploits it because she *can*, thereby legitimising Walsingham's harsh condemnation. Robinson's sympathy for Walsingham is proven when she does not openly rebuke his obvious sexism, rather she endorses it by displaying a male character exploited by woman.

Robinson clearly does criticise patriarchal systems within her writing. Her establishment as an important subject within feminist eighteenth-century scholarship would not have been possible had this not been the case. However, her monstrous females present an interesting contradiction, a point which has perhaps been overlooked in her novels in the search for more appealing narratives. The desire to see her 'expose' patriarchal ideology or deconstruct masculine gender ideas may be legitimate, the question which ought to be considered is whether we value her 'male' criticism above that of her 'monstrous' presentation of women. The paradox which Robinson poses for eighteenth-century feminist scholarship is whether it is possible to accept a 'negative' perception of women from a female writer, without necessarily linking it to an overall revelation about gender. Robinson's writings emphasise that power relations imply more than merely the exploitation of one sex by the other: more broadly, they reveal, rather, human beings' natural compulsion to dominate the weaker 'other'.

Misogyny, for a Romantic poet like Byron, may have had little effect upon his reputation as an artist, since he did not establish himself as a poet purely on what he wrote about the 'woman question', albeit good or bad.²⁷ The same cannot be said of Robinson. While there

²⁶ Another such character, Sir Edward Clarendon in Robinson's *Angelina* (2009: 28), performs a similar purpose when he declares to his daughter, whom he wishes to force into marriage: 'A pretty business, truly!, if daughters are to control their fathers' opinions. I suppose you are for love and a cottage: this comes of reading romances: women have no business ever to read - or to write either'.

²⁷ Byron's views on women are not uncomplicated. Although discussion on this subject is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would argue that his work can be read both for its patriarchal position on women, as well as for its feminist potential. Jane Stabler (1999: 248) states that '*Don Juan* is a rewarding text for feminist

are a few feminist scholars who deny her artistic capability, what should not be overlooked is that she has attained her modern fame mostly through feminist efforts to rework the Romantic canon (Byrne 2005: 3), and this naturally would entail focusing on what she had to say about the ‘woman question’. Inevitably, due to the very nature of feminist theory, what Robinson has to say about women affects her value and position: should her opinions be seen to coincide with a masculine ideological or cultural view, her status would decline below that of a Hays or Wollstonecraft. What eighteenth-century feminist scholarship possibly needs to take into consideration is that what a writer chooses to say about women should not be the main determining factor upon which her position within the Romantic canon rests. Female criticism of women needs to be allowed, without it necessarily always relating to the larger problem of gender, even if it ‘taints’ or alters our perception of what a female philosopher ought to think or be.

Robinson was not unique among women writers of the time in her use of female villainy and harsh criticism of the female sex; many, including Wollstonecraft, could offer her competition on that score. Elizabeth Inchbald’s novel *Nature and Art* (2005: 49-50; 148) portrays the vain, fashionable Lady Clementia, wife of the self-important elder brother William, and the adulterous daughter-in-law, Mrs. Norwynne, who abandons their son. Mary Hay’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1802: vol. 1, 41-48) includes the vindictive Mrs. Morton, Emma’s aunt, and her two jealous daughters, Sarah and Ann. In her other novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1998), while examples of female persecution of the heroine appear, none of the characters particularly stand out, as most of them are not even given names. Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Women* (2007: 67-68) is designed largely as criticism of male oppression, which aim the preface states quite clearly; however, the ferocity and cruelty of the step-mothers and jealous wives are quite shocking, particularly in the case of Jemima (Wollstonecraft 2007: 88-103), who is malnourished, rendered homeless and physically abused by these women. Their maliciousness easily competes with, and exceeds, that displayed by the men.

More conservative writers, such as Jane West, also exposed female villainy. Her *A Gossip’s Story* (1796: vol. 2; 67-74, 94-103) describes the sour, aristocratic Lady Clermont, the less-than-appealing mother-in-law of the satirised sensibility heroine, Marianne, who shares a friendship with an interfering, slightly feminist, nosy Miss Milton. West’s other text, *A Tale of the Times* (1799; vol. 2; 81-92), contains the fashion-obsessed, competitive lady Arabella, sister-in-law to Geraldine, the tragic heroine who is eventually duped by the philosopher villain, Fitzbourne. Ann Radcliffe’s classic gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1859: vol.1, 103-106; vol. 2;65, 181,182) contains a fair share of female villains: Emily’s shallow and opinionated aunt and guardian, Madame Cheron, who later becomes the arch-villain Montoni’s wife; although playing a minor role, there is also the seductive Countess Lacleur, who leads Emily’s lover astray. Finally, there is the passionate murderess, Signora

approaches’. For further insight into the feminist potential of Byron’s *Don Juan* see Caroline Franklin (1990: 603-631).

Laurentini, who conspires with the husband of the Marchioness de Villeroi, Emily's other aunt, to have his wife poisoned (Radcliffe 1859: vol. 3, 189-197). *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), by Elizabeth Hamilton, a writer whom Kelly (1993: 126) designates as taking an 'anti-Jacobin', counter-feminist line during the 1790s, depicts the main character as a caricature of Mary Hays (Kelly 1993: 145), rather than a typical villainess. However, the novel does contain characteristically ostentatious, noble lady-villains, such as Mrs. Villers and Lady Brierston (Hamilton 1800: vol. 1, 141-162; vol. 2, 47-68). Along with Emmeline - alternatively the 'goddess of reason' -, a philosopher villainess who does not feature prominently within the text, but is arguably the most evil character, even more so than the rake criminal, Vallaton (Hamilton 1800: vol. 2, 295-297). Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1850: vol. 11, 217-226) provides a more detailed example of a philosopher villainess, whose figuration serves as criticism of advocates of women's rights in the character of Mrs. Freke.²⁸

Therefore, the criticism of women through the depiction of female villainy in eighteenth-century writing was not a singular event. The paradox arises with the *coexistence* of feminist sentiments and masculine misogyny, a factor which both Susan Gubar (1994) and Barbara Taylor (2003) explore in the writings of Wollstonecraft. Gubar (1994: 3-5) commends Wollstonecraft for her understanding of womanhood as a social construction in *Vindication of the Rights of women*, but she expresses concern over how some of its passages share common ground with male satirists. Taylor (2003: 13) also alludes to the contradiction, arguing that

the rhetorical weight of Wollstonecraft's attack falls so heavily on her own sex as to make the reader begin to wonder whether the aim is less to free women than to abolish them.

Gubar (1994: <http://search.ebscohost.com> § 28) explains the contradiction by implying that the problem lies within the nature of feminist discourse itself: 'As a genre, feminist expository prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynist tradition it seeks to redress.' According to Gubar, the philosophical debates and tensions between feminism and misogyny are what shape feminism. The threat of misogyny is what brought feminism into existence, therefore it is through these different modes of thought whose constant historical opposition to one another creates their evolution and direction. Gubar (1994: § 44-45) comments that we are caught up in a cultural spiral which we, even in modern

²⁸ Barker-Benfield (1992: 388-389) argues that the feminism of Edgeworth's character, Mrs. Freke, functions as political criticism of the feminism of Wollstonecraft, while Binhammer (2002: 682) cites it as being 'explicitly lesbian.' Deborah Weiss, (2007: 442-443, 446), condemns the approach taken by Barker-Benfield, amongst other scholars, on Edgeworth for labelling her as too conservative in her feminism. Instead, she states, 'Edgeworth uses Freke not to assail Wollstonecraft and condemn her ideas, but rather to lampoon the idea of Wollstonecraft that circulated in the culture.' Weiss sees Edgeworth's use of the female philosopher villain as a means of judging patriarchal ideas of femininity, which promotes gender as a natural attribute, whereas Binhammer interprets it as being a socially constructed phenomenon. I would dispute both Binhammer's and Weiss's assertions about Edgeworth's Freke character. Their assumptions provide an example of over-reading feminist objectives into an eighteenth-century text. Weiss's desire to construct Edgeworth as a 'liberal' feminist induces her to ignore the blatant political criticisms of radicalism she produces in her writing. As Grenby (2001: 3) states, 'the majority of politicised popular novelists manifestly did not seek, nor achieve, any degree of ideological ambiguity in their fiction, but rather attempted exactly the opposite.' As for Binhammer, I doubt whether Edgeworth, a rather conservative writer, would have used a lesbian character even as a villain: it would have been morally compromising for her as a writer. Rather, she endows her Freke character with extremely grotesque masculine features, in order to highlight the distasteful appeal of women who display characteristically masculine ways of thinking.

times, cannot escape for ‘even as our own theorizing engages the social relations of femininity and masculinity, it is fashioned by them.’ Gubar further asserts that the contradictions found in Wollstonecraft’s life and works illustrates the continuous ability of discourses to fashion the struggle surrounding the vindication of the rights of women and men.

Taylor’s explanation of the paradox of misogyny to be found in Wollstonecraft’s work differs in some ways to that of Gubar’s. Firstly, Taylor argues that Wollstonecraft wrote in the language of enlightenment and radicalism and

[a]s the ideological impact of events in France reverberated across British radicalism, Enlightenment hostility to women as agents of moral darkness become welded to feminised images of elite power and corruption: a powerful ideological brew. (2003: 15)

Wollstonecraft’s lambasting against feminine frivolity and vice was not an attack simply directed at her sex, but it was more specifically targeting the women of the landed aristocracy and their new rich imitators. These women, argues Taylor (2003: 15), were not only demonised by Wollstonecraft, but by other 1790s radical writers as well (Robinson’s novels also dominantly feature “monsterised” lady aristocratic villains). Yet Taylor justifies Wollstonecraft’s aims to fill her texts with rich flirts and sluts, implying that their feminist goal, besides being symbols of aristocratic decadence, was to cite them as the debilitated products of male tyranny, ‘Wicked women and their invidious effects are men’s handiwork.’ (2003: 15).

Gubar and Taylor’s arguments concerning female misogyny can be only partially extended to Robinson. Both Gubar and Taylor allude to the fact that ‘female misogyny’ in feminist writings is perhaps an inevitable part of the ideology, a point which cannot easily be denied. However, Gubar’s assessment that the misogyny of eighteenth-century female writers and later modern feminists is evidence of an inescapable problem of patriarchal language should be disputed in the case of Robinson: if accepted, we should concede that her lady villains are nothing more than evidence of an entrapment within a masculine ideology. Taylor’s conclusions about Wollstonecraft prove more useful in Robinson’s context, because her writing was influenced by the radicalism and Enlightenment language of Wollstonecraft; therefore, it is plausible that Robinson’s reasons for ‘female misogyny’ could be similar.

Stafford (2003: 91) offers one of the most valid explanations for the problem of eighteenth-century female villainy when he states that ‘[i]t is not clear that women writers of the 1790s consistently think that one sex is inherently worse than the other. Individual women, they think, can be just as bad as individual men.’ He observes that in Robinson’s novels the heroines are done down just as often by wicked women as by men. Stafford further suggests that women’s perception of problematic issues was more sophisticated than merely

apportioning blame upon men would allow: they homed in on cultural and systemic factors such as the unforgiving application of rules for sexual propriety and the cultural assumptions which undervalued women. However, Stafford's arguments are still strongly linked to mostly feminist explanations of female villainy as reactions to oppressive practices. What such arguments fail to bring into account are the dominance and potency of Robinson's female villains within her novels, a feature which in many ways sets her apart from other contemporary female writers of the 1790s. Unlike Wollstonecraft or other women writers, Robinson does not always draw a clear causative line linking patriarchal, or generally male, tyranny to female villainy.

The repulsive callousness of Robinson's villains is frequently exposed when they are involved with the dead or dying. In the *False Friend* (1799), the female villain begins her life in the novel as Lady Emily Cecil, but later changes her name to Lady Arcot, once she marries the divorced, rich and devious merchant, Sir Hector Upas, who had acquired the title of Lord Arcot. Mrs. Ferret, a spy for the French government, had stolen some of Gertrude's property, jewellery and private documents, so the latter and her sickly friend, Mary Ashgrove, take the culprit and the case to the local magistrate, Lord Arcot (it is revealed later that he was playing this role on behalf of Treville, in order to kidnap Gertrude). Lady Arcot, on seeing Gertrude, refers to her as a maniac, demands her imprisonment and has the dying Mary Ashgrove evicted from her house (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 43-49).

More examples of this kind of cruelty occur in *Walsingham* (2003 b). The main character unwittingly becomes involved in a gambling scam, whereupon Lady Amaranth conspires with Lord Linbourne to extort money from him. Colonel Aubrey, Sir Sidney's uncle and Walsingham's loyal friend, rises to his defence by offering to take his place in a duel, which is ridiculously instigated by Lord Linbourne, an ex-lover of Lady Aubrey. Lord Linbourne is mortally wounded and brought to Lady Amaranth's house. Once the surgeon informs Lady Amaranth of his imminent death, she declares:

'Heavens!' exclaimed Lady Amaranth, 'he cannot die in my chamber: you must remove him instantly; I would not have a frightful corpse under the roof with me for all the universe. The bare idea makes me ready to faint with horror! - I hate the very thoughts of dying: he must be conveyed to his lodgings, and that immediately.' 'Instant death would be the consequence!' replied the surgeon.

'I cannot help that,' said Lady Amaranth. 'It is fitter that he should die, than I should be terrified out of my senses.' (Robinson 2003 b: 201)

Robinson uses some innovative black humour in this depiction of gambling aristocratic ladies;²⁹ however, the mood becomes even darker when Walsingham describes Lord

²⁹ The *British Critic* (1798, vol. 12, 610-612 in Robinson 2003 b, 508) found the description of Robinson's gambling ladies as rather shocking. While conceding the value of the moral caricature, they saw it as going a little too far: 'That *gaming* can transform lovely women into sort of *fiends* we can readily believe; but in the

Linbourne's funeral procession. He encounters some peasants carrying the coffin containing the body of Lord Linbourne who had not yet been buried, even though it had been three weeks since his death. Walsingham ironically discovers that Linbourne's remains had been placed under arrest, because of his outstanding debts at the suit of Lady Emily Delvin for six hundred pounds. But, surprisingly, it is Colonel Aubrey who discharges the debt and orders the body to be interred (Robinson 2003 b: 330-332).

In *The Natural Daughter*, while illustrating a less grisly instance of female cruelty in a deathly context, Robinson nevertheless uses the occasion of Martha's mother's funeral to expose woman's victimisation of woman. For when Martha arrives to attend the service 'she was refused admittance, by order of her unnatural sister, who had taken possession of the house according to the will of her departed mother,' even though it was Martha who had stayed with her parent during her last hours (2003 a: 252). Furthermore, Robinson uses the instance of Martha's father's death rather cruelly to expose the evil sister Julia's promiscuity (Robinson 2003 b: 125):

'Reader, lament not the death of Peregrine Bradford, but lend your ready tears to the tide of Julia's sorrows. Sir Lionel for a moment forgot his lovely Lady Pen, and Julia, from the day of her birth, will ever remember Sir Lionel.'

In addition, the father dies from eating a too delicious dinner given by Sir Lionel on Julia's birthday, and the irony becomes particularly dark when Robinson describes the wife, Mrs Bradford's sorrow (Robinson 2003 a: 125-126):

'Mrs. Bradford was not wholly inconsolable. She did all that a wife is expected to do on similar occasions - she wore weeds, placed an armorial lozenge over the door, thereby kindly informing the public that a rich widow was to be disposed of to the highest bidder.'

Robinson deliberately uses quite a dark cynicism when describing her female villains and their attitude towards death, more specifically in the case of *Walsingham* and *The Natural Daughter*. By placing the cruel mannerisms of her female villains within the horrific context of death, she effectively amplifies their monstrous attitudes. Not only does she expose their lack of morality and religious reverence, she ironically implies that their behaviour is more terrifying and horrific than death itself. Nothing is sacred when such villainy exists. Robinson uses Lord Linbourne's funeral in *Walsingham* to demonstrate the blackness of Lady Emily Delvin's soul, and ventures one step further by tactically manipulating the situation in order to emphasise and sanctify the goodness of Colonel Aubrey. It is one thing to criticise female behaviour, but to demonstrate the superior worth of a man most certainly serves as a counter measure to feminist objectives of highlighting the victimisation of women and gender oppression. When Robinson's literary tactics in illustrating female villainy are compared to

picture here drawn of female gamblers in high life, they are represented as basely *vulgar* and *unfeeling wretches*, even jesting over a man in the agonies of death.'

those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane West and Ann Radcliffe, her methods arguably come across as far more brutal. Robinson sensationalises her villains and takes their evil antics to further extremes than other female writers. Robinson may be trying to imitate, although on a much lesser scale, the Sadean characterisation of female villains: their desires know no limits and neither do Robinson's villains fear trespassing boundaries.

Several scholars - among them Ty (1993: 31), Johnson (1995: 47-48) and Kelly (2007: xxiv) - would agree that Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* is specifically designed to expose the systematic oppression of woman and the fact that evil in women results from the tyranny of men (Taylor, 2003: 15). For instance, Jemima recommends that the pregnant mistress of a potential lover be thrown out, and the girl later dies from the pitiless treatment. Jemima feels remorse and guilt for causing the girl's death; however her actions are explained against the background of her own exposure to male tyranny, social prejudice and poverty (Wollstonecraft 2007: 104). Jemima states: 'I was, in fact, born a slave, and chained by infamy to slavery during my whole existence.' (Wollstonecraft 2007: 95).

Radcliffe's murderess, Signora Laurentini, joins a convent to atone for her sins, consumed by a tormenting guilt for her actions. While she serves as a warning against the horrific consequences of submitting to one's passions, Radcliffe points to Signora Laurentini's spoiled childhood and the lack of good example as the causes for her evil nature (Radcliffe 1859: 181-190, 197). West comes closest to Robinson in illustrating her female villain's cold attitude towards death: when Geraldine, the heroine, is falsely accused of eloping with Fitzbourne, Arabella remarks that dying would be the best option for the imprudent lady; however, she later recants, once Geraldine's rape by Fitzbourne is exposed (West 1799: vol. 2, 352-356). Further, West parallels Radcliffe's argument when she links Arabella's villainy to her having been overindulged and having lacked a good example in her childhood (West 1799: vol. 1, 257-260).

Compared to Wollstonecraft's, West's and Radcliffe's representations of death and female villainy, Robinson's depictions are much darker and emphasise the morbid cruelty of her villainesses. She presents a far more negative perception of womanhood, as she refuses to allow her characters to display remorse for their actions; nor does she effectively link their bad actions to earlier exposure to male tyranny, bad education or poverty. If anything, Robinson much prefers to emphasise the corruptive effects of wealth and class, a common argument for most female writers of the eighteenth century, both conservative and radical.³⁰

³⁰ Barker-Benfield states that '[w]riters of sentimental fiction shared with early feminists an ambivalent response to commercial capitalism' (1992:198, 202); wherein he later argues that the 'women of the world' who were dangerously addicted to 'outdoor pleasures' became a type in sentimental fiction: 'The type affected 'feeling' as fashion, and she was absorbed in the urban consumer pleasures moralists warned could lead women to a disgraceful end.' Similarly, Kelly (1997:147) notes how Wollstonecraft condemned the 'courtly culture' or

The arch villain of *Walsingham* (2003 b), Mrs. Blagden, had an affair with Walsingham's father before he married, resulting in the illegitimate birth of her own son, Edward Blagden, who marries Lady Aubrey towards the end of the novel. Mr. Hanbury, after the truth is revealed about Sidney's true sex, explains the motivations behind Blagden's malice towards Walsingham and Sidney's reasons for hiding her true gender (Robinson 2003 b: 492):

The origin of her disguise was Mrs. Blagden's avarice, and her hatred of you as the son of her detested rival. Thus we see the dreadful effects of that treachery in our sex, which too often arms the female mind against the sensibilities of pity; while it urges the deluded victim on to every species of depravity.

It would seem here that, according to Hanbury, one could link Blagden's treachery to the evil of men and implicitly connect it to the overall oppressive patriarchal system which casts aside women of 'fallen' reputation.

Ty (1998: 54-55) advocates a similar understanding, as she concedes that the female arch-villains Lady Aubrey, Judith Blagden and Lady Emily Delvin play a powerful role in the transgression of the passions and notes that '[n]o male character is shown to wield as much power as these women' and that, for the most part, the male characters are rather 'ineffectual'. However, Ty encourages us to view these villainesses in a sympathetic light, and, while not condoning the base actions of the characters, she argues that they were victims. She compares Blagden with Julie, a young woman forced into prostitution by dire circumstances, explaining that the connecting link between these two characters is that they are both rendered desperate by the men who abandoned them and by a system which did not allow them to seek justice or fulfil their dreams of marriage. Ty implies that Blagden becomes an object of pity rather than contempt, '[s]ince power and economic security were not available to Blagden through the customary channel of marriage to a respectable man, she secures them, and a future for her son, by perverse means.' (Ty 1998: 55).

Binhammer describes Robinson as a feminist, but clearly states that she 'was no lover of women.' She attributes the failure of female friendship in Robinson's life to the impossibly high price placed on chastity, as women feared losing their 'market' value by associating with 'fallen' women, and acknowledges that patriarchy's sexual commodification influenced Robinson's friendships whilst she was still a courtesan (2006: 221-223):

court government system, associated with political and sexual intrigue, which itself ultimately swayed the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the country, largely determining social and domestic relations, as well as the character of individuals. It was this courtly corruption, according to Kelly, which Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, saw as being responsible for women's intellectual and moral trivialisation, and erotic subordination. For further insight into female Romantic poets' response to the problem of luxury and wealth see Diego Saglia (1999: 641-672), and, for an informative discussion of Robinson's treatment of luxury, see Saglia's (2009: 717-736).

When she [ie Robinson] describes triangulated relationships between women in this period, she figures them in terms of a jealous battle for a scarce income, propping up the power of the man and dividing, not bonding, the women.

Binhammer, moreover, links the motivation behind the evil deceptions of Lady Aubrey to gendered economics, or the ‘patriarchal economics of aristocratic primogeniture’, whereby only male heirs can inherit. Binhammer sees this as the predominant cause for Sidney being gendered as masculine and for the convention through which most of the female relationships function, while also motivating much of the action within the novel (2006: 227).

Setzer similarly asserts that Sidney’s gender positioning is determined not by nature but by the ‘economics of her father’s will’ (2000: 312). Setzer explains that the incentive behind Mrs. Blagden’s and Lady Aubrey’s dubious machinations was largely related to financial interests and notes that, despite Walsingham’s tendency to vilify Blagden as the arch-villain, ‘the text of the will itself certainly invites us to conclude that the real villain in this story is the sexual bias inscribed within the patriarchal domain of the law’ (2000: 313). Setzer further observes that Blagden, unlike other characters in the novel, receives no sympathy from Walsingham because she enacts forms of gender and class oppression in order to take revenge on the system which had victimised her by these same means in the first place. Therefore, Robinson condemns the character Blagden, because she became part of the oppressive system (2000: 314).

Shaffer (2002: 73) argues that Robinson’s vilification of gambling women,³¹ a type widely under attack in the period’s literature, helps to explain ‘the sort of behaviour Robinson delineates as improper, which in turn helps us identify the new form of acceptable femininity she constructs.’ Hence Robinson illustrates her disgust by characterizing the gamesters as ‘dissipated, selfish, predatory, dishonest, and vain.’ (Shaffer 2002: 74). Shaffer extends this line of thought to understand the blameworthiness of Mrs. Blagden, as she embraces interests and behaviours typically gendered as masculine, namely the pursuit of money and the attempts to control the circulation of wealth as well as aggressive sexuality (2002: 75). Shaffer, therefore, implies that Robinson uses her villains to display disgust at inappropriately masculine women and to propose her version of femininity, as she

differentiates between what women might acceptably garner from both masculinity and femininity and what they might not. Robinson disapproves of masculine type behaviour which promotes self-centred competition, be it sexual or economic and physical debasement. (2002: 77).

³¹ For a deeper analysis of the political significance of Robinson’s lady gamesters in her play *Nobody*, see William Brewer (2006: 265-273). For a more general exploration into the villainous depiction of upper-class gaming ladies, see Gillian Russell (2000: 481-504); she states that the activity of gambling ‘was widely condemned as a sign of the moral degeneracy of the times and irresponsibility of the fashionable classes’ and the anxieties surrounding the subject tended ‘to become more acute during periods of social and political upheaval.’ (2000: 481). See Bridget Marshall (2009: 9-18), for an analysis of the portrayal of male gambling villains in Gothic literature.

Sigler (2007: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016137ar> § 3) correctly points out that

recent criticism of *Walsingham* has instead focused on the novel's cross-dressing antagonist, the strangely insistent and menacing 'Sir' Sidney Aubrey, a trend which has produced a sustained and always fascinating discussion of the novel's progressive political commitments and especially its implicit feminist message.³²

I do not dispute the feminist interpretive possibilities which can be drawn from a text like *Walsingham*, yet I note that most of the interest is directed at Robinson's gender manipulation as depicted through the cross-dressing character of Sidney. However, these interpretations marginalise other approaches, which could reveal important theoretical concerns besides the gender one. The 'feminist' objectives in a text like *Walsingham* are far from consistent, especially when compared to the writing tactics employed by Wollstonecraft in her *Wrongs of Women*; yet this does not devalue any less what Robinson was trying to achieve in her writing, specifically when it comes to her analysis of human nature and the corruption of power. The very potency and ugliness of Robinson's female villains in her novels calls into question and undermines the 'feminist' consistency of Robinson's writing. It implies that she attempted to deal with an issue that moved beyond the boundaries of gender. While this may destabilise our modern conception of what a female philosopher like Robinson should be, in that her brand of feminism contains contradictory views on women and she can be considered as entertaining only a 'moderate' level of feminism as opposed to a radical one, this should have little effect on our consideration of her 'value' as a writer.

Setzer (2000: 317), Ty (1998: 55-56) and Binhammer (2006: 237) support the theory that it is the unjust property laws ruling Sidney's father's will and therefore, ultimately, the patriarchal system within which the characters exist, which drive the actions of the female villains and Sidney. The novel *Walsingham* should, therefore, function as a criticism or a revelation of the patriarchal economics of property law. The assertions made by Setzer, Ty, and Binhammer need not be interpreted as incorrect, but rather as over-extended in their application in terms of the novel, for to place such emphasis on the determining effects of a patriarchal system is

³² Julie Shaffer (2002: 69-85), Ty (1998: 42-46), Binhammer (2006: 221-240), Setzer (2000: 305-328), Arnold, (1999: 57-68) focus on the feminist implications of Robinson's gender manipulation of the character Sidney, indicating how gender is a socially constructed and performative phenomenon. Shaffer, Ty, and Arnold view Robinson's transgressions of gender stereotypes in a more positive light, while Binhammer and Setzer assert that, despite Robinson's innovation in her gender distortion of Sidney's character, its impact is limited in terms of feminism, for she ultimately had to conform to gender cultural norms. Binhammer rightly observes that *Walsingham* would prove 'frustrating to a contemporary lesbian reader' as 'female same-sex sexuality in the text is unleashed under the guise of heterosexuality' and female-female eroticism becomes possible only through the misinformed, jealous perspective of *Walsingham*, further noting that '[t]here is no certainty in Robinson's world that any kind of female bonding would present a feminist challenge.' (2006: 234, 235, 237-238). Binhammer's interpretation correctly disputes Shaffer's argument (2002: 72) that Sidney's relationships could be interpreted as lesbian. Shaffer commits an error of what Stafford (2002:136) accurately condemns as reading the 'eighteenth-century language of sensibility as a twenty-first language of sex'. Such evaluations according to Stafford, can only be created through 'imaginative readings beneath their surface or against their grain.' Sigler (2007 <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016137ar> § 3) rather concentrates its attention on the character of *Walsingham* from a Lacanian subjective approach, which sees the novel as less about 'gender subversion' and more about the 'gradual crystallization of conventional sexual identity.'

to value only those events which favour a gender analogy. The darker causes behind the behaviours of characters like Blagden, Lady Emily Delvin, Emily Cecil/Lady Arcot are muted and the suggestions Robinson was trying to make about human nature in general are underestimated.

For instance, one of the major concerns is the ending of *Walsingham*, where Robinson marries off all her noble characters, including Walsingham, in a convenient fashion, each receiving their allotted sufficient income, with Colonel Aubrey inheriting the main estate of Glenowen (Robinson 2003 b: 495-496). From a feminist scholarly perspective the ending of *Walsingham* can prove extremely disappointing, as it typically conforms to established cultural gender norms. For Binhammer the novel ends in an ‘ambivalent complicity, by preserving male privilege through marriage’ (2006: 237). Similarly, Setzer states (2000: 320-321) that the ending presents

nothing other than a hyperbolic conformity to the social and literary convention that marriage is the most efficient and satisfying means of closure,’ and a ‘stabilizing reiteration of gender norms.

While *Walsingham*’s ending may have been put together in a conventional manner, with a typical fairy tale conclusion, this should not be interpreted as merely automatic adherence to cultural norms. Endings are often a means for an author to convey a moral evaluation of the characters’ behaviour: had *Walsingham*’s ending been truly conventional, Robinson, as one eighteenth-century reviewer in the 1798 *British Critic* (2003 b: 509) remarked, would have married Walsingham off to Isabella. She also could have let Walsingham either die a tragic death in atonement for his illicit behaviour towards Amelia (like the infamous Treville in the *False Friend*), or even married him off to Amelia. Robinson eschewed such conventionally satisfying scenarios and chose to be sympathetic to the sinner, namely Walsingham. If she had truly disapproved of or found the property distribution of Sir Edward’s will so inherently oppressive, she would have found a much clearer way to manifest that message.

Robinson’s writing rarely spares those whom she feels deserve ‘heavenly’ retribution. The violent and horrific deaths to which she subjects her arch villains, sometimes invoking hellish imagery or the ‘wrath of nature’, are instrumental in exposing the corrupting force of the true ‘vices’ of the world. In the *False Friend*, Gertrude attempts to describe the society to which she has recently been introduced, after arriving at Denmore Castle, and argues that

it is the duty of impartial writers to place merit in the full lustre of its own brilliancy; and to shew the deformity of vice, in the clear, but faithful mirror of reflection. (Robinson 1799: vol. 1, 46)

It is possible to assume from this statement that Robinson intended to illustrate ‘evil’ in as an uncompromising and clear a manner as possible, leaving little doubt as to who was deserving

of sympathy and who was not. A comment Walsingham makes at the end of the novel would seem to support such an understanding:

I leave those trifling vicious reptiles whom you have met with during the progress of my disastrous story, to the infamy that will mark their names, till fate consigns them to oblivion. I have held them up as beacons, to warn the unwary: I have portrayed them, as they are; neither with a flattering nor a distorting pencil. (Robinson 2003b: 496)

Blagden, Lady Emily Cecil/Arcot, and Julia Belmont, the most wicked of Robinson's female villains in *The False Friend*, *Walsingham*, and *The Natural Daughter*, suffer extremely violent deaths along with their male villainous counterparts. Treville (who changes his name to Somerton) perishes along with Lady Arcot aboard a ship which is attacked by a French frigate. A fierce storm breaks out which seals the fate of the passengers trapped on the burning ship. Robinson comments that

'In a few moments the deep and stormy expanse was visible; as if the demons of revenge conspired to make the scene more dreadful (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 347-348)... the vessel burnt with resistless fury: the white foam was illumined by the brightness of the flames; and amidst the howling of the elements the cries of the unhappy sufferers were heard distinctly. On the deck stood the libertine Somerton, supporting on one arm the terrified and shrieking Lady Arcot.' (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 348).

Deliberately descriptive references to hell, 'demons of revenge', furious flames, howling elements and cries of sufferers leave little room for doubt as to what kind of eternal judgment the writer thought her characters should share.

Similarly, Robinson demonizes Martha's evil sister in the last scenes of her life in *The Natural Daughter*. Julia becomes Robespierre's mistress and Martha and her husband are caught in France and then imprisoned. The 'unnatural fiend' Julia, as she is called, proceeds to the dungeons to threaten Martha's husband into running off with her; the alternative being execution at the hands of Robespierre. When he refuses to comply, Julia aims 'a dagger at his breast'. He wards off the blow, but she

shrieked; accused him of the premeditated deed; and ordered him to a more close confinement. (Robinson 2003 a: 289)

Eventually, Robespierre is killed and Martha and Mr. Morley are set free. However, Martha later finds her sister's body on the bed of Robespierre, after the place has been ransacked and she has committed suicide:

Her blackening form declared the potency of that poison, which freed her soul from mortal, conscious misery to endure - Here let her memory rest. (Robinson 2003a: 290)³³

³³ Setzer (1997: 531-551) argues that Robinson's novel equates French revolutionary terrorism with the domestic tyranny in England, as depicted in the character of Julia and that the violent deaths of the main villains tie into Robinson's melodramatic usage of aesthetics to expose conservative domestic cruelty.

Robinson leaves Julia's eternal fate uncertain, inserting a blank pause after 'endure.' She ironically uses the phrase 'Here let her memory rest,' as she implies that whatever conscious misery Julia suffered here on earth, there was the possibility that she had gone on to endure a much greater eternal misery. For Robinson, the irony rests in the assumption that Julia would indeed find no rest.

Despite the fact that Martha's own villainous husband also endures a torturous, violent death which was the 'stern judgement of an offended GOD, exemplified amidst the grandest works of nature!' (Robinson 2003a: 294), in some ways his death is more sympathetically portrayed. At least Robinson allows him to confess and ask forgiveness for his crimes. While his body is 'fragmented' 'bruised' and 'lacerated', he divides his fortune between Martha and his illegitimate daughter, whom he unwittingly tried to kill, and 'as the bright dawn broke over the top of the mountains, closed his darkened eyes, in *death*.' (Robinson 2003a: 294-295). Martha even goes on to say that

I trust that my guilty husband's last hour of suffering has expiated his crimes, and that his fate will afford a lesson to the vicious. (Robinson 2003a: 295).

Mr. Morley's final moments are associated with the light of dawn, confession, and Martha's hope for the atonement of his crimes: they provide a significant contrast to Julia's 'blackening' form and the purposeful question mark left over her eternal fate. Hence, we see a slight impulse of compassion evinced for the male figure which is not granted to the female character.

The same strategy is used in the depiction of Blagden's death, who refuses to recant at all, and any sympathy is directed towards her illegitimate son rather than to herself. When Walsingham and Edward Blagden become involved in a scuffle, Blagden jumps out of a window in order to avoid capture, but falls in the attempt:

Almost every bone in her body was shattered by the concussion; - her arm and leg were broken - her skull fractured, and her flesh bruised, while the agonies of a violent death wrung her heart in every fibre. (Robinson 2003b: 483-484)

Walsingham shivers when he sees Blagden smiling with a 'ghastly and convulsive expression'; she curses him, wishing his name would perish and bemoaning the obscurity and shame in which her own son was forced to live. Walsingham quickly turns from the 'miserable wretch' and goes to Edward Blagden's chamber (Robinson 2003b: 484). Edward is given the opportunity to confess his crimes and hopes that his mother will survive to atone for her sins, but it is at this moment that Robinson intentionally denies Edward's wish for,

As he spoke, a piercing shriek issued from the room beneath:- I guessed the signal to be that of death. (Robinson 2003b: 485).

In spite of Edward's faults and crimes, Robinson intimates that he had potential good in him, for, as he draws his last breath, he entreats Heaven to pardon his mother and begs Lady Aubrey to remember him with pity. Quite sentimentally, Robinson highlights a last connection between brothers for Walsingham states that

[h]e had not power to speak; but, stretching forth his arms, he fixed his dying eyes upon me, while I leant forward to receive the first - last embrace of an expiring brother. (Robinson 2003b: 485).

Again, the sympathy appears to rest with the male figure rather than the female one, as Blagden neither seeks redemption nor is she given the opportunity to explain her and regret her 'sins'. While her son is permitted to die in a brotherly embrace, she leaves the world alone, with a 'piercing shriek'. When Walsingham later sees her body, like Julia she is a 'blackening corpse':

She had expired in agonies which mocked the powers of description; every feature was distorted, every limb lacerated and broken. (Robinson 2003b: 486)

Robinson's lack of sympathy could be related to a patriarchal attitude about women being the biblical origin of evil, an idea Hamilton alludes to when she notes that 'the wickedness of even the worst of men seldom equals the wickedness of woman' (1800: vol. 2, 296). However, this is unlikely as Robinson does display compassion for certain lady villains: namely, Lady Aubrey who actually does repent and reform her ways and Lady Denmore, the tragic, unhappy wife of Lord Denmore, Gertrude's guardian. I would dispute Shaffer's assertion that the violent displays of death in *Walsingham* demonstrate a 'disgust at the physicality of the defeminized and dehumanized female form' (2002: 74), nor are these villains' actions linked to Robinson's disapproval of an improper femininity. Furthermore, these female villains' evil behaviour cannot be persistently and distinctly correlated to the negative effects of the patriarchal economics of property law, which I suggest is merely a contributing factor to their actions, not a main driving force.

Had Robinson wished to clearly identify property law as the dominant evil of the text, she might have employed a more blatant strategy, like Wollstonecraft who goes to great lengths, in the *Wrongs of Women*, to portray the unworthiness of the male inheritors of property, such as Maria's husband and brother. Their incessant greed and financial mismanagement undoubtedly prove Maria to be the worthier successor to property wealth, though she is denied an inheritance on account of a biased legal system. Robinson, on the other hand, demonstrates that Colonel Aubrey is more than a deserving character to inherit the fortune of

Glenowen,³⁴ for after Blagden's death he distributes her fortune among her relatives. Walsingham praises him for this:

Is not this the perfection of philanthropy? Does it not prove the generosity of that noble disinterested nature, which has uniformly characterised the most liberal of mortals? (Robinson 2003b: 495)

Although Close (2003: 219) concedes that justice is done in the ending of *Walsingham*, she still sees the conclusion as a demonstration of the silencing and disempowerment of women, as a result of the ruling system of inherited wealth and male ascendancy. From a modern feminist perspective, *Walsingham*'s ending will always been seen as 'unhappy', especially for women; however, this does not necessarily mean that Robinson either saw or intended it to be that way. Robinson was concerned with the type of moral character which possessed wealth, property, and power rather than with the gender of those who held these.

The evil was not so much about the fact that a man inherited the property, but rather about how a person, man or woman, chose to utilise their privileged position. Lady Aubrey abuses her rank for personal gain, even at the expense of her own daughter, whereas Colonel Aubrey constantly places the interests of others above his own – thus, it was only just that he should gain Glenowen. Sidney is left none the worse for wear, as she inherits £30 000 and on marriage to Walsingham there is the addition of his own legacy of £20 000 from Sir Edward and a further £10 000 from his benefactor, Mr. Randolph (Robinson 2003 b: 469, 491). All in all, Walsingham's and Sidney's wealth amounts to £60 000. Since Colonel Aubrey's wife, Amelia, is 'conveniently' killed at the altar (Robinson 2003 b: 432), and taking into account the goodness of Colonel Aubrey's nature, Robinson does leave open the possibility that Walsingham and Sidney's own children might inherit Glenowen. Sidney may have been denied the inheritance of Glenowen because of her sex, but Robinson more than compensates her in terms of wealth and the probability that Glenowen could be restored.

Whatever hindrances the property system may have presented, Robinson ensures that it is *virtue* that is rewarded, for as Walsingham states (2003 b: 496), '*greatness* consists in VIRTUE!' Those women lacking in virtue, such as Blagden, Julia and Lady Arcot, are also amply rewarded - with violence, damnation and torture.³⁵ This does not sufficiently explain, however, Robinson's lack of empathy towards them in view of her slightly more considerate treatment of certain male characters deaths (excepting Treville/Somerton).

³⁴ I disagree with Shaffer's contention that Colonel Aubrey's suffering constitutes him as the true hero of the pessimistic novel, as opposed to Walsingham who is foiled by such a character as Colonel Aubrey who, according to Shaffer, 'wrongly presents *himself* as such a hero' (2002: 73). Shaffer's argues that the reader's sympathy is extended to Colonel Aubrey; however, this requires a rather sceptical perception of Walsingham's character, and I suggest that Robinson was more sympathetic to this character than Shaffer is willing to allow.

³⁵ The previous analysis may involve a more 'surface' interpretation of Robinson's *Walsingham*, which only contemplates the black and white moral implications surrounding the characters, therefore perhaps undermining the gendered and social significance of the work. While focusing on how Robinson attempts to reward good and evil may be limited, it does highlight how Robinson may have been more critical of the general abuse of power than the property system.

If Robinson's less than sympathetic portrayal and hellish punishment of her female villains does not point to a conformity with masculine ideology and gender norms or a personally motivated criticism of women, then what other possible alternative critical aim could Robinson have been hoping to accomplish? A revealing explanation occurs in Robinson's novel, *Angelina* (Robinson 2009: 333), when one of the characters comments on the death of the major arch female villain, Lady Selina:

Philanthropy will make allowance for the prejudice of education; reason can pity the being, who, nursed in error, and pampered in arrogance, beholds the child of humbler birth with fancied superiority; but indignation cannot sleep when it contemplates the vilest and most profligate wretches, lifting their unblushing brows, and censuring *those* whose minds, compared with theirs, are as spotless as the snow upon the mountain! Who, under the ermine of nobility, hide such hearts, as the veriest caitiff would redden to acknowledge; and yet there are too many in the multitude, who, deceived by the false lustre of a name, pay homage to the darkest infamy; and who believe that personal rank and nobility of mind are terms synonymous.

To criticise the rich aristocratic female was a common tactic for many women writers, and Robinson was displaying no unusual bias when she attacked their kind, as has been previously discussed. However, she eschews two explanations commonly made on behalf of their bad behaviour in other literature, namely a bad education and over-indulgence shown them as children. While Robinson admits to the harmful effects of these factors on women, for her these reasons can only be taken so far: for Robinson there is a villainy which is unforgivable and suffers no explanation, when 'dark infamy' in the guise of nobility dares to criticise or oppress a person or mind of genius. Robinson expresses great anger at the idea that noble birth should simultaneously be conceived as 'noble mind'.

This ties into what Craciun (2003: 92) explains to be a common theme of *Walsingham*, *The Natural Daughter* and a *Letter to the Women of England*, arguing that Robinson attacked distinctions based on the aristocracy of birth instead of celebrating the 'aristocracy of genius', which as Craciun (2003: 90-93) notes is drawn from the popular concept of untaught genius and radical political thinking. Julia, Blagden, and Lady Emily Cecil/Arcot are all characters who abuse and victimise the 'minds of genius', as symbolically represented in the characters of Sidney, Walsingham, Gertrude St. Leger and Martha Morely - an unpardonable sin for Robinson, which may at least partly explain the vicious and unsympathetic treatment meted out to them.

Robinson not only attempts to criticise the evils of the oppression of genius through her female villains, but she also endeavours to explore a darker side to human nature, which can be, albeit limitedly, affiliated to a Sadean ideology about man's susceptibility to the corruptive nature of power. Coward (2003: xxi) argues that Sade saw the universe as

indifferent to everything save its own flux and continuity, a never-ending blind cycle of change, decay, and rebirth. In it, human beings have no privileged status but are subject to the same natural imperatives as all other material forms.

Robinson would never carry the idea that man is a mere pawn to the omnipotent forces of Nature to the extent that Sade did, mostly because she was not an atheist and shared some belief in the civilisation process. She does, however, allude to what David Coward (2005: xxii) describes as Sade's belief that the 'domination of the weak by the strong is nature's way.' This is revealed in an interesting comment which Walsingham makes about Mrs. Blagden (Robinson 2003b: 102):

Mrs. Blagden was one of those mortals, who, living under the command of a tyrant, exercised a petty system of oppression on all whom chance had placed within the pale of her jurisdiction. Thus, despotism is the parent of despotism, and, from an instinctive love of sway, every human being is, more or less, the tyrant of his fellow. Though inclination to rule is unquestionably a vice, when inordinately exemplified it is certainly a vice inherent to every bosom that breathes. The beasts, the fowl, the scaly inhabitants of the waters, prey upon each other; and the first propensity of infancy proves, the little rage which bursts forth on the slightest contradiction, the longing to resist, and the inclination to vanquish.

Robinson implies here that tyranny will breed more tyranny and humanity is inescapably caught up in a flawed, despotic system; while she shows that villainy results from a defective social system based on class, wealth and injustice, she also suggests something darker, as she points to man's 'instinctive love of sway', whereby every human being is the tyrant of his fellow. She extends the natural instinct to prey on one another to human beings as well, referring to the Sadean concept that it is nature's law for the strong to prey on the weak.

Mrs Ferret, a political spy in the *False Friend*, expresses a similar philosophy when she steals personal papers from Gertrude, who, in an attempt to retrieve them, appeals to her humanity. Mrs Ferret's merely responds that:

What shall I get by my humanity?' replied Mrs. Ferret. 'These are not times for people to be prodigal of their favours. I have made a resolution not to do what is absurdly called good natured actions. I mean to live for myself alone, and to set both the opinion of the world, and the sneers of those who vaunt their finer feelings, at defiance.

'Do you not live for your fellow creatures?' said I. 'I live by them, which is a much wiser plan,' answered Mrs. Ferret. (Robinson 1799: vol. 3, 294)

Both Ty (1998: 51-52) and Setzer (2000: 318) comment on the gender reversal in *Walsingham*, noting that the male occupies the feminine role within the novel. Setzer goes even so far as to say the male fills the 'stereotypical position of the gothic heroine.' Ty (1998: 51) attributes this phenomenon to Robinson's attempts to rewrite the 'norms of masculinity.' Yet it can be suggested that Robinson's gender or role-reversal within *Walsingham* was not only a means of exploring the fallibility of eighteenth-century gender boundaries, but also of

investigating human nature's susceptibility to the corruption of power. Robinson believed that 'vice' in human nature was not a gender specific entity, in many ways it transcended it.³⁶ Sade also created villains of *both* sexes who were undeniably cruel and who recognized 'no limitations to the realisation of their desires', since winning was their only object (Coward 2005: xxvii).

Similarly, Caroline Franklin (1990: 627) points out that Byron's *Don Juan* also employed the tactic of 'role-reversal' where the hero played a passive role while the women pursued and seduced him, much like Walsingham who is pursued not only by Sidney (indirectly), but also by Lady Arabella, Lady Amaranth, Lady Emily Delvin, and Amelia. Franklin argues that Byron's Juan was vulnerable to seduction through his capacity for emotion, in the same way that women typically were; therefore the purpose in the sexual role-reversal was to show that men were 'equally capable of 'feminine' sentiment, as well as women not above showing 'masculine' appetite' (1990: 628). The object, Franklin (1990: 628) argues, was not to redefine gender norms but to celebrate the capacity of the individual to overcome such categorization. Likewise, Robinson's *Walsingham* and its female villains demonstrate that women are capable of having 'masculine' appetites and passions. However, unlike Byron, it was not to celebrate the individual's capacity to transcend gender categories but to illustrate the ferocity of the human passions and man's susceptibility to a lust for power whether it be in the form of wealth, social position, domination, or love. All Robinson's dominant female villains - Julia, Blagden, and Lady Arcot - are driven by fierce desires and stop at nothing to achieve their goals, whether it means sacrificing their own children and familial bonds, breaking all moral and religious codes, or even destroying their fellow female and male lovers.

Craciun (2003: 69-75) explains and establishes a connection between Sadean thought and Romantic-era women writers concerning the centrality of power. She links Wollstonecraft's conception of sex and gender to Sade's 'concept of social hierarchy in which power and not sex is the ordering principal.' (2003: 69). She argues that Wollstonecraft understood the Sadean view that evil drove human action, but was unable to fully acknowledge it, as this would mean a destabilisation of the virtuous and benevolent female body; whereas Sade's female libertines' excessive desires, cruelty and violence broke down sexual boundaries, permitting women to move into the class of masters and throw off the passive, proper

³⁶ It must be noted that this belief does not run consistently through all of Robinson's writing; however, it is a concept which she chose to explore. In her *Letter to The Women of England* (2003) she constantly emphasises the moral superiority of women and criticises the double standards imposed on them. She complains that it is acceptable for a man to give into the weakness of his human nature, while women cannot; women's poor education makes them susceptible to their passions, yet it is the men who are more easily forgiven for such crimes. Considering the feminist goal of the text, it is not surprising that Robinson would advocate the moral superiority of her sex, yet in her discussion on gambling she still poses the interesting question 'Has vice then a sex? Till the passions of the mind in man and woman are separate and distinct, till the sex of vital animation, denominated soul, be ascertained, on what pretext is woman deprived of those amusements which man is permitted to enjoy?' (2003 a:44).

feminine bourgeois body (2003: 70-73). To present woman as incapable of performing the 'masculine' action of violence is to construct an 'illusion' about the weakness of the female body, as Craciun (2003: 73) elaborates:

Wollstonecraft's works hinted at a Sadean world, one in which sex was more or less an effect of power, and in which women's Revolutionary violence revealed not so much that women's nature is inherently violent, but that it is nonexistent, or rather that it is a necessary illusion.

Craciun also points out that Robinson recognised that woman's nature was a 'necessary illusion', without which moral and religious order could not be maintained.

I concur with Craciun's observations about the Sadean connection with Romantic-era women writers and how their depictions of female violence question the concept of women as 'naturally' benevolent and virtuous, a subject Robinson explores through her female villainy. For Craciun (2003: 1-20), the existence of female violence in women's literature proves valuable in revealing the construction of 'natural' sexual difference in the female body. However, it proves more relevant in the context of this dissertation for evaluating how certain modern feminist scholarship at times wishes to deny the existence of 'female ugliness' in its own vision of the female philosopher represented in the Romantic female writer.³⁷ This chapter has discussed how Robinson's female villainy is mostly explained away in terms of its preoccupation with patriarchal oppressive structures, gender manipulation, and autobiographical references. Robinson's female villainy exists as a controversial paradox for twenty-first century feminist scholarship. However, the paradox arises not because of the assimilation of patriarchal language or masculine conceptions of gender, but because some eighteenth-century feminist scholarly literature is not always able to adequately come to terms with women's nature's co-existence with 'masculine appetites' and 'female ugliness'.

Craciun (2003: 8) brilliantly comments that feminist literary criticism on British women writers' unspoken aim is to demonstrate that women avert violence, destructiveness and cruelty except in self-defence or rebellion. The belief in the benevolence of women is foundational to many aspects of modern feminist Romantic scholarship; as far as Craciun is concerned, this merely replicates the bourgeois image of women endorsed by Romantic ideology. To envision new readings of women's relationships to power and violence, Craciun (2003: 9) suggests that we need to abandon certain assumptions that:

³⁷ 'Female ugliness' in this context refers to woman's capability of criminal action or ferocious desire for wealth, power and passion or 'appetites' typically associated with the masculine. I am aware that women have been negatively identified and affiliated with the concept of evil, and my argument can be seen as conforming to this theory. However, my intention is not to re-inscribe patriarchal values, but to illuminate how modern feminist scholarship on female Romantic literature can tend to see women as essentially good, any 'evil' action performed is generally attributed to a patriarchal cause. This can have negative consequences, because it can detract from a women's ability to act as an individual agent separate from any social system; it also creates an unrealistic picture of women. Craciun (2003: 8-10) makes similar observations.

Women are inherently nonviolent, that cruelty and mastery are in general unnatural (or at least culturally masculine, and will be eliminated once women revolutionize all social relations), and that feminist criticism should seek to show how women as a class, throughout history, do not or should not replicate systems of 'masculinist' power and violence.

These assumptions behind certain feminist ideals on Romantic writers do need to be reconsidered, as they deny the existence of 'female ugliness' in the construction of female character, a fact Robinson went out of her way to contradict in her novels. In the modern feminist desire to recreate Robinson in the image of its own female philosopher, who endorses her feminist ambitions and vulnerability to patriarchal cultural factors, Robinson's female villainy becomes a paradox as it does not conform to present day aspirations. The paradox exists, as Craciun argues, because feminist scholarship aspires to a benevolent reflection of womanhood, which encourages women to be constructed in terms of victimhood and passivity, excluding them from the role of oppressor and the position of power. Robinson destabilises the 'benevolent' figure of womanhood with her ferocious villains illustrating that the corruption of power and human nature is not gender specific. Perhaps Binhammer (2006: 239) states it best when she observes that Robinson 'was a feminist but she disliked women. As feminists we have to allow for that particular combination.'

*** **

CHAPTER THREE

MARY ROBINSON'S FALL OF THE PHILOSOPHER

If philosophy cannot enable us to brave the miseries of feeling, as well as the vicissitudes of fortune, what is it but an airy shield, mocking the vanity of human fortitude, and decorating that breast which it has not power to render invulnerable? (Robinson 2003 b: 41).

Reason is content to know, that man is gifted with the frailty of his kind; and Philosophy must deign to pity, what even Reason cannot conquer. (Robinson 1799: vol. 1, 292)

In the passages above, Robinson interrogates the ability of philosophy to control and regulate the power of the human passions. Several of her novels, particularly *Walsingham* and *The False Friend*, point to the inevitable destruction and doomed course which an individual is forced to follow under the influence of irresistible impulses, thus counteracting eighteenth-century idealism about human benevolence and the progress of human civilisation: the concept of both the civilisation process and of natural human benevolence proves to be illusory, an ideal which cannot sustain itself. In the previous chapter I explored Robinson's use of her female villains to illustrate the innate corruptive potential of human nature and its impulse to dominate. In so doing, she disrupts the 'benevolent' image of woman as constructed by both women writers of the 1790s and, later, by several eighteenth-century feminist scholars. In the present chapter I propose to investigate further Robinson's inquiry into the instability of humankind's 'natural goodness'; my discussion of her construction of the philosopher figure builds upon and expands Curran's (1994: 31-32) and Robin Mischelolcze's (1995: 206-219) observations on Robinson's poetic existentialism.

I intend to argue that the disillusionment, isolation, and victimisation expressed through the female philosopher figures within eighteenth-century literature need not only point to the frustrations experienced by women as a result of masculine ideological entrapment and patriarchal oppression, but also stem from what Brissenden (1974: 128) describes as a questioning of an impossibly idealistic eighteenth-century vision of an age which prided itself on being rational, liberal, and humane, yet was far from able to acknowledge its own harsh economic and social reality. Rather than separating eighteenth-century female writers from

their Romantic male counterparts, I would suggest that the two are to be seen as connected in their quest to understand the gap between idealism and the social realities of their existence.

Both *Walsingham* (2003 b) and *The False Friend* (1799) scrutinize the ability of philosophy to control the power of human passions. Ty observes that in *Walsingham* there occur a number of suggestions about the limitations of philosophy, and argues that Robinson believes that ‘life and experiences, including the disappointments from affection, are the best teachers of philosophy.’ (1998: 53). In *Walsingham*, Nature is linked to passion and impulse, versus studied culture or action, and passionate impulses often lead Walsingham into error. For Ty, this proves an interesting instance of gender displacement, as it was female behaviour that was generally associated with emotional, impulsive reactions. According to Ty, radical women writers at first aspired to the ideals of Godwin’s philosophy of reason, yet, by the end of the 1790s, the concept that one’s personal actions could be directed solely by reason began to be questioned; therefore, *Walsingham* could be deemed to reflect the current philosophical debates of the time (1998: 52-53). Ty, however, notes that French republicanism and Godwinian philosophy were expressed in Robinson’s work only indirectly, as opposed to Wollstonecraft or Hays, who conveyed their political opinions quite straightforwardly.³⁸ Ty suggests (1998: 53) that Robinson contests

Wollstonecraft’s recurrent tendency to degenerate the importance of ‘passion’, ‘love’ and the philosophy of sensibility that underpins those ideas and experiences.

Ty is correct in affirming that *Walsingham* is an exploration of the limitations of philosophy, yet I would dispute her assertion that Robinson criticised Wollstonecraft’s ability to undermine the role of passion, love, and sensibility. I would rather follow Craciun (2005: 34) who suggests that Wollstonecraft’s *supposed* rejection of sensibility and corporeality is often

³⁸ Claudia Johnson (1988: xxi) points out the problems arising from too enthusiastically categorizing eighteenth-century writers’ political loyalties: ‘Most novels written in the ‘war of ideas’ are more complicated and less doctrinaire than modern commentators have represented. It does not suffice to denominate writers as ‘conservative’ or ‘radical’ according to whether they were ‘for’ or ‘against’ the French Revolution.’ Johnson (xxi-xxii) goes on to show that labels such as ‘radical’ vs. ‘conservative’ or ‘Jacobin’ vs. ‘Anti-Jacobin’ result in generalisations of personal political belief systems. Consequently, writers are placed on the extremes of the political spectrum, whereby some are assumed to be either conservative or radical, over-simplifying their political viewpoint. Indirectly, feminist scholarship at times measures the value of writers on the grounds of purported political affinities: the more enthusiastic their appreciation of French Radicalism and Godwinian ideals, the greater their potential relevance in terms of modern literary history. Ty is somewhat guilty of this, as she sees Robinson failing to measure up to the Wollstonecraftian model of political expression.

over-emphasised by modern scholars. I would argue, on the other hand, that Robinson's criticism of both reason and sensibility is under-emphasised. Her novels, *The False Friend* and *Walsingham*, reveal an underlying disillusionment with the ability of both philosophy and sensibility to bring out the grand potential of human nature, while passion is described as an uncontrollable force which faces little to counteract its destructive power. Indirectly, this may refer to a Sadean tactic upon which Coward (2005: xxix) comments:

It is as if the true villain of the piece is always Love, not these heartless lovers: the predators are doomed, for they are ruled by their urges; and those they prey upon are condemned, for they cannot abandon the virtues that make them weak.

In Sade's allegorical tale, *Rodrigo, or the Enchanted Tower*, when a mythical lion chastises Rodrigo for his excessive and irrational cruelty,

‘Prince of creatures,’ said Rodrigo, ‘your words are pleasing to my mind but find no response in my heart. I was born to be the plaything of the passions you tax me with. They are stronger than I am... they carry me along. I cannot fight my nature.’

‘Then you shall die.’

‘Such is the fate of all men. Why do you think the prospect should frighten me?’

(2005: 149)

At the beginning of *Walsingham*, Robinson (2003 b: 41-43) depicts the protagonist's struggle to pursue the ideals of philosophy, showing how he studied and followed the precepts of Truth (Reason), but still failed to live up to the expectations of its idealism. Walsingham comes to a conclusion which echoes Rodrigo's:

There is an evil power which attends the actions of some men, so undefinable, so like the potent hand of destiny, that resistance is baffled by the despair to vanquish; and they yield to its influence merely because it has hitherto been triumphant: that power has long assailed me: I sought to oppose, I endeavoured to destroy it: a combat, fierce and determined, has not diminished its strength, though it has left my mind feeble and exhausted: I yield from the dreadful conviction that --- I must *perish*. (Robinson 2003 b: 42).

Like Rodrigo, Walsingham recognises the idealistic truth of reason and benevolence, but finds himself unable to combat his innermost passions. He is forced to acknowledge the possibility of inevitable destruction in their wake.

Shaffer comments on Walsingham's failure as a man of sensibility and notes (2001: 10):

Human nature is revealed as *not* benevolent, not rational, not based in emotions that connect humans to one another, but based instead in self-centred pity and in querulous and harmful passions.

Shaffer adds that Walsingham disputes the very meaning of Nature, which he previously believed to be the guide to truth and human benevolence, but later regards as untrustworthy. However, like Ty, Shaffer links Walsingham's philosophical quest to the 'natural' construction and truth of feminine identity and argues that Walsingham's idealistic misjudgement of human nature and instincts reflects, in turn, the misconceptions of the 'unnatural' truths about women's gender identity. The novel, therefore, provides a critique of the biased masculine view which endorses the biological two-sex system (2001: 10-13). Shaffer certainly offers insightful comments on Walsingham's disillusionment with nature and sensibility; however, she does link Walsingham's philosophical quest to an over-arching revelation about the nature of gender identity. Thus Robinson's attempts to understand and come to terms with the human condition in general are partially obscured when certain modern feminist criticism places a central focus upon gender issues.

Most eighteenth-century female writers dealt with a variety of topics in their novels which correspond to subjects treated in Robinson's own works; some took a conservative angle, while others moved towards a potentially revolutionary one. While the subject matter they engaged in may have been similar in nature, their points of interest and emphasis were not. These writers were divided not only along political lines, but also by their own individualistic tastes and experiences, religious view points, personal interests, social and economic positions, as well as by their own reading into the fields of history and education. Pascoe (2004: 216, 224) points to the same problem in the study of poetry, when she writes that

[c]ommentators on eighteenth-century and Romantic women's poetry tend to extrapolate from particular poems by women writers a shared female aesthetic, an exercise that invariably results in generalizations so broad as to practically compel the finding of exceptions.

Inevitably, as Pascoe later argues, this detracts from the writers' own individuality and personal experience, as it portrays women as sharing far too many aspects of thought and development.

Ty's and Shaffer's assessments of Robinson's novels focus primarily on what her views on sensibility may accomplish for scholarly exploration of gender issues; within this perspective, her individual philosophical goals for sensibility are sometimes exploited and often gleaned for elements which may reveal a common female experience in a culture dominated by patriarchal values. Like Pascoe, Ezell (1993: 163) also expounds on the complications which feminist critical writing meets when attempting to create a homogeneous presentation of women's writing, as I mentioned in Chapter 1.³⁹ Ezell notes that feminist scholars are particularly drawn to the *estranged* female model and the angry voice, therefore for her

the twentieth century has focussed its attention on the outlaw figure, treating with sympathy those women whose times rejected their life-styles or literary creations. (1993: 162)

Ezell further argues (162-163) that a defining characteristic of feminist writing - the expression of anger - is sought in works which commonly reflect this aspect, thus constructing a false sense of continuity throughout literary history. The definition of 'female' is therefore devised through a process of exclusion. Content is selected and rejected on the basis of what constitutes an 'ideal' vision of womanhood portrayed in literature, which maintains a stable 'tradition' through literary history. This selective process ignores the implication that certain female experiences are valued over others whose material would not quite fit the desired 'formula'. Ezell (1993: 163) states that

this method gives the impression that we have a much better grasp of the materials than we actually do - it imposes order on an admittedly confused picture.

In Chapter One I mentioned the possible complications surrounding the favouring of specific readings or interpretations of sensibility, and surmised that prescriptive interpretations of sensibility should be avoided, as they tend to oversimplify a complex cultural phenomenon, an ideology already replete with contradictions and incoherencies.⁴⁰ Ezell's arguments can be extended as a criticism of Ty's and Shaffer's readings of Robinson's sensibility, as both these scholars seek a more or less Wollstonecraftian understanding of sensibility, namely that

³⁹ See Ch 1, 19, 31-32.

⁴⁰ See Ch 1,19-27

gender is constructed through nurturing and educating the mind, as opposed to the idea that certain sexual characteristics are attributed naturally to men and women.⁴¹

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex. (Wollstonecraft 2004: 5)

Chris Jones (1993: 106) describes Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* as a

sustained attempt to redefine the terms of conservative sensibility, like delicacy, chastity, and modesty, in ways which suggest equality, self-respect, and independence, rather than following the code of feminine propriety.

Some strands of modern feminist criticism on eighteenth-century writers seek a consistent ideal of the female philosopher in sensibility literature: one that would generally reject masculine perceptions of womanhood as synonymous with chastity, modesty, and delicacy, and instead would rally for the outlaw figure, with a yearning for independence and equality. The further one moves from a 'passive' or masculine interpretation of sensibility, the more the female writers are seen to question the natural constructs of gender. The measure of frustration which a female philosopher character displays towards the patriarchal entrapment of sensibility language is often a determining factor in evaluating the value of the author's writing. Clearly, it is a Wollstonecraftian interpretation of sensibility which gains the greatest momentum, as it is the desire to epitomise the out-law figure, as Ezell argued, which creates a consistent view on sensibility. I suggest that Ty and Shaffer do not take into account the

⁴¹ Rivkin and Ryan (2004: 765-769) present a brief overview of the development of feminist scholarly arguments from the early 1960s: the early emphasis on women's experiences under patriarchy and the dominance of male rule (1970s) to the rise of French Feminism and its revolutionary consequences in the mid-1980s. The effects, according to Rivkin and Ryan, was the establishment of two irreconcilable perspectives formed within feminist critical discussion. First, the 'constructionist' viewpoint, which supports the idea that gender is formed by culture. Secondly, the 'essentialist' argument, which states that natural differences - psychological, linguistic and biological - do exist between men and women (766). Rivkin and Ryan further argue that 'Feminism was suddenly feminisms' (767). Both of these approaches can be seen to generally influence the interpretation of sensibility, from different angles: the 'constructionists' tend to endorse a rejection of the feminine subjectivity commonly found in sensibility literature, thus often favouring a Wollstonecraftian standpoint; while the 'essentialists' argue that sensibility concepts of femininity were used and manipulated for the advancement of a female cause. Robinson often falls within this latter field of discussion, as she is seen to promote the values of sensibility.

illusionary stability which is created when attempting to prescribe specific gender-based meaning to sensibility.

Eighteenth-century female writers found sensibility to be an ambiguous condition for women in their novels. Barker-Benfield (1992: 361) relates that, towards the end of the 1790s, both conservative and progressively liberal writers became more critical of the indulgence of the passions; especially after the French Revolution, this feature became epitomized in the figure of the woman of excessive feeling, whose indulgence in her own passions brought about her destruction. The woman of excessive feeling, prone to ruin, was fondly portrayed within Anti-Jacobin literature, as the ideals nurtured by Jacobinism often encouraged such a woman to overindulge her passions. In this type of literature we find either representations of female philosophers themselves or characters led astray by what Grenby (2001: 104) calls a ‘vaurien’, a person who makes dupes of others, be they male or female, by exploiting the new philosophy, Jacobinism, for personal gain. We note a typical instance in Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), where the ‘vauriens’, Valloton and Emmeline, lead the passionate Julia astray, and in West’s *Tale of the Times* (1799), where Geraldine is seduced by the selfish philosophies of Fitzbourne.

Barker-Benfield (1994: 361) argues that sensibility manifested itself in a popular plot form through which writers attempted to engage in the debate about what constituted a ‘good’ sensibility as opposed to a ‘bad’ one. This entailed presenting the lives of two hypothetical women: one brought up to develop excessive sensibility and the other a sensibility checked by reason. Classic plot examples may be found in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, while an earlier version would be West’s *A Gossip’s Story* (1798), where the fates of Marianne, the sister of excessive sensibility, and of Louisa, who remains faithful to her domestic duties, are deliberately compared. West (1798: xii) states that the purpose of her novel is to go about ‘meliorating the temper and the affectations.’ Robinson, in *The Natural Daughter* (2003 a), employs the same approach as West, albeit with vastly different objectives in mind, as she compares the fate of two sisters, Julia and Martha, in order to advance her own views about

sensibility.⁴² Brissenden (1974: 131, 274) observes that, at the end of the eighteenth century, the dangers of excessive sensibility had become a literary commonplace, with the result that

the device of two sisters with contrasting characters, one of whom is distinguished by her sensibility, appears to some extent to have been conventional.

Barker-Benfield (1993: 361) points out that most sensibility literature written by women ‘upheld the notion that sensibility was a positive female characteristic when it was combined with mind and with will’, and argues that the personification of sense and sensibility in characters who might influence readers’ minds, reflected a widespread conflict which existed within women between a sensibility governed by reason and a sensibility dangerously given over to fantasy and the pursuit of pleasure. Even Wollstonecraft’s stand on what constituted a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sensibility suffered from ambiguity over what it meant to be a woman of finer feeling or a woman governed by reason (Barker-Benfield 1993: 362). In her *Letters* (Wollstonecraft & Godwin 1987: 97), she expresses anxiety over the education of her daughter, revealing the anxiety she experienced about maintaining a balance between her sensibility and her reason:

I reflect on the dependant and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard - I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit - Hapless woman! what a fate is thine!

Wollstonecraft here reveals that while she acknowledges that she cannot completely divest her daughter’s education from the values of sensibility, she fears that her child’s exposure to them will result in her inability to function in the real world, namely that she might become

⁴² It could be argued that Robinson’s novel was a response to West’s *A Gossip’s Tale* (1798). West used the typical plot, setting up a comparison between one ‘bad’ sister (Marianne Dudely), who possesses an acute sensibility and over-indulges her feelings, with the ‘good’, humble and submissive one (Louisa Dudley). The ‘bad’ sister earns an unhappy lot as a result of her selfishness, while the dutiful one is rewarded with a happy marriage. Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* (2003 a) assimilates this plot, but replaces the ‘dutiful’ daughter character with a female philosopher figure. No doubt Robinson was attempting to refute the Anti-Jacobin propaganda, which typically vilified these characters, by converting Martha into a saintly heroine.

isolated by her sensibility.⁴³ Wollstonecraft is anxious that the education of her daughter's mind will expose her to the realities of a patriarchal society and that, through encouraging her daughter's sensibility, which will enable her to 'feel', she will expose her to such emotional suffering that she will not be able to tolerate it: therefore, sensibility is both a liability and necessity.

The temporal relations between reason and the passions form a central theme for most eighteenth-century female writers; however, how these writers chose to explore and attempt to resolve the tensions between reason and passion varied individually. The falls of heroines or female philosophers, such as Hay's Emma in *Emma Courtney* or Wollstonecraft's Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*, not only elucidate the real dangers inherent in excessive sensibility, but also provide some feminist scholars with evidence for the negative effects of an eighteenth-century woman's entrapment within masculine language, or, alternatively, with an illustration of a means of rebelling against that language.

Robinson's interpretation of sensibility in her novels is varied and complex, as, like Wollstonecraft, she was ambiguous about its effects on women. Scholars either see her as a promoter of sensibility or debate how she attempts to achieve a balance between reason and sensibility. In his analysis (1996: 102) of Robinson's poem *Sappho and Phaon*, McGann sees her representation of sensibility as a source of feminized prophetic power:

a pre-eminent intellectual force, and the emblem of whatever social and philosophical advancement the present age can claim for itself.

He goes on to argue that Robinson's *Sappho* questions Wollstonecraft's refutation of the usefulness of the passions and defends them as a necessary *philosophical* force, as it is only through suffering that true knowledge can be taught and spread (105-107). Pascoe (2000: 48) describes Robinson as a 'poet of sensibility', for her 'work makes apparent Romanticism's debt to a cult of sensibility that advanced by the works of women authors.' Pascoe agrees with McGann that Robinson 'insists on coupling passion and reason, sensibility and political consciousness.' (51). Morgan Rooney's (2006: 356) argument concerning Robinson's

⁴³ Todd (1986: 140) observes that while Godwin viewed sensibility in a negative light, he still associated his wife, Wollstonecraft, with sensibility and himself with rationality, when he wrote his biography of her.

Natural Daughter casts sensibility in a negative light, since it prescribes a script of femininity which promotes a

fundamentally different, natural, unalterable identity based on gender and rooted in the body - which, in the case of women, is construed as a lack or shortcoming.

Thus, according to Rooney, Robinson's novel suggests an escape from the culturally constructed and assigned role of passivity, obedience, and chastity to hail a different female identity, one grounded in women's authorial capacities. Mellor (2001: 297) comments that Robinson associated genius with sensibility; it was the capacity to enter into the feelings and into the characters of other people, an attribute of genius which, Mellor implies, Robinson gendered as distinctly feminine.

Cross (2002: 54) also proposes that Robinson, while agreeing with the Wollstonecraftian emphasis on reason and female intellectual equality, could not abandon the values of sensibility. Instead, she

sought to reconcile this conflict by turning sensibility and philosophy into reciprocal strengths and thus signs of women's genius.

Therefore, like McGann and Pascoe, Cross interprets Robinson as attempting to achieve a balance between reason and passion, like many other female writers of the time. However, I would argue that, when the texts are examined closely, it may be observed that philosophy and reason hardly ever sit comfortably together in many of Robinson's characters - Martha, in the *Natural Daughter*, perhaps proving to be one of the few exceptions. More often than not, Robinson's central characters demonstrate the frustrating inadequacies of philosophy, as the force of human passion proves to be an undefeatable foe. Nowhere is this as clearly shown as with the characters of Walsingham, Ainsforth, and Gertrude St. Leger. Cross (2002: 54) attributes Gertrude's demise, at the end of *False Friend*, to her inability to sustain a balance between reason and passion, thereby failing to become a 'female philosopher'. Yet, the question remains whether, for Robinson, a balance between passion and reason is ever even achievable.

Ty's interpretation of the novel *The False Friend* focuses on how Robinson uses sensibility to highlight women's vulnerability in a patriarchally dominated society; yet she alleges that Robinson's feminist stance is somewhat 'muted' (1998: 58). The feminist limitations of the novel stem from the fact that Robinson fails to demonstrate how 'women are artificially made subordinates of men in her society,' and, therefore, she 'still subscribes to the cultural construction of woman as the weak and frail being who must look to men for protection.' (62). Ty (60) admits to Gertrude's sensibility being the means to her own destruction, for Robinson explores both the powerful capacity of women to feel and their inability to be able to act upon their insights and emotions:

Robinson demonstrates how sensibility can make women painfully aware of their own conditions without necessarily being able to alleviate their domestic problems.

Therefore, in *The False Friend*, Robinson paints eighteenth-century romantic ideals about domesticity as a false illusion for women, in reality a patriarchal nightmare. Ty (72-73) argues that, in *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson attempts to redefine the traditional scripts for women found in the sentimental fiction of the day, notably redrawing the typical heroine of sensibility. Moreover, she recuperates

the positive effects of female sensibility at a time when anti-Jacobins were levelling virulent attacks against what they perceived as negative effects of excessive sensibility (73)

A sense of patriarchal victimisation and a representation of gender as a 'constructed' factor constitute two very important criteria for certain modern feminists' conception of the 'female philosopher'. Ty's comments fall into this typical argumentative framework, as they analyse Robinson's capabilities purely as a feminist, not as a writer. Even as feminist texts, Robinson's novels fail, because they do not sufficiently illustrate how gender is a 'constructed' phenomenon. The most enduring characteristic that Ty appears to admire in Robinson's novels is their ability to depict tyrannical, patriarchal monsters and desperate, victimised women. Robinson's use of sensibility is mostly commended for exposing the 'horrors' of eighteenth-century female domesticity. However, I would argue that most writers of sensibility literature - both male and female -, since Richardson's *Clarissa*, could be commended on these same points; Robinson hardly achieves anything revolutionary as a writer through merely exposing female victimisation.

Setzer (1997: 1-12) and Zunac (2009: 111-113) offer an intriguing perspective on Robinson's political portrayal of sensibility in *The Natural Daughter*. Setzer (9) observes that

Robinson presents a feminist riposte to this masculine discourse, as her novel exposes the monstrous affinity between the ideological fathers of the Terror in France and the biological father of Fanny. Despite their obvious differences in nationality and politics, Robinson emphasizes that the opposing parties have both abandoned the legitimate goals of the revolution.

The false sensibility fostered by Julia can be seen as a product of and close associate to British domestic tyranny and French Revolutionary rule; therefore, Robinson draws political similarities between French dictatorship under Robespierre and British conservative ideas of family and society. Zunac (2010: 111) elucidates further Robinson's political criticism of British conservative views on feminine sensibility, by noting that Julia

takes on the symbolic form of a nation personified, not only possessing what had become French characteristics of the feminine ideal, but also serving as a reminder of the incalculable cost to the nation of the continued subjugation of British women.

Julia's embodiment as both the radical French Revolutionary and the standard of British femininity serves to reveal a 'congruity of two idealist constructions and symbolizes the destructive power of each.' (112). Zunac points out that Robinson connects eighteenth-century British conceptions of female sensibility and education to the radical oppression occurring in France. Setzer's and Zunac's interpretations of Robinson's sensibility emphasise that she politically affiliated it to a form of gender despotism present in both British and French Revolutionary societies. While illuminating, however, these interpretations still focus exclusively on how sensibility reveals Robinson's disillusionment with British conceptions of *gender*.

Stafford (2002: 192) argues that Robinson's attitude to sensibility may have altered as a result of critics' attacks on her novels during the late 1790s, causing her feelings towards sensibility to become somewhat ambiguous.⁴⁴ Stafford adds that *Walsingham* and *The False Friend*

⁴⁴ Robinson was certainly attacked on account of her portrayal of sensibility in her novels. One reviewer of *The False Friend*, Dr. Bisset wrote: 'That which Mrs Robinson presents may be called a morbid sensibility; a constitution, or state of mind, rarely to be found among the virtuous and wise. If we once open a door to feeling

were intended to be critiques of excessive sensibility, but somehow the moral of the texts is subverted by the tendency to reveal the power of sensibility and, to a certain extent, even to praise it. It was only in the *Natural Daughter* that Robinson came to a decision about sensibility, as she was not willing to give it up despite the criticism it received from conservatives; she would use it to illustrate a sharp contrast between the depraved, false, self-conscious sensibility of Julia, and the true benevolence and heroic sensibility of Martha. Stafford further notes (192) that there was common agreement amongst women writers of the late eighteenth century to denounce a sensibility that was affected, used as an accessory or as a means of fashionable self-presentation. Most women writers also opposed a sensibility which was so excessive that it became self-destructive; in certain instances, this would refer to an overwhelming sense of irreparable grief and inability to be firm and face the disappointments and realities of life. There can be little dispute with Stafford when he argues that Robinson's views on sensibility were ambiguous and that the *False Friend* and *Walsingham* were certainly meant as critiques of that ideology; whether these works arose in response to conservative criticism is debatable, but I would infer that Robinson was more successful in her denunciation of sensibility than Stafford is willing to admit.

More interesting accounts of Robinson's sensibility and writing for the context of my discussion are those which explore her darker, existential side. There, Robinson is not merely disillusioned and disappointed with the world because she lives in it as a *woman*, but is dissatisfied, and even at times pessimistic, about society and the forces that shape it. These interpretations do not always refer directly to her use of sensibility, but do provide perspective on her world view. Curran's analysis of Robinson's poems in *Lyrical Tales* provides one of the earliest insights into Robinson's existential perceptions (1994: 17-33). He notes that

[t]he common theme of Robinson's pathetic poetry is a sudden and total displacement of the stabilities on which existences depend... a metaphor for the grotesque patterns by which society reduces the vulnerable to the status of victims.' (31)

The vision which Curran here presents of Robinson's world is a dismal one for it

as the excuse of every action which it *may produce*, we may bid farewell to morality, to order, and to everything valuable in society.' ('Review' in *Anti-Jacobin* 1799, vol. 3, 39-42)

is a sad world, one that witnesses constant abuses of power, where armies do no one any good, where class conflict is systematic and cannot be wished away by liberal compromise, and where not perspectivism, but insanity and stark alienation seem the logical end of interiorizing social conditions.

Curran conducts an insightful enquiry into Robinson's sense of alienation and social pessimism; however, he traces the roots of this state of mind in her isolation and victimisation specifically as a *woman*. He sees Robinson as a 'deeply victimized woman' who views suffering

as the normal condition of life, stressing either the anarchic or the existential, depending on the timbre of her tale (30)

and describes her poems in *Lyrical Tales* as a 'tonic', whose purpose was to serve as a relief mechanism against the evils of patriarchy, since the issue for Robinson is

female sexual repression, an internalised male control she refused, to her social disgrace and dishonour, to accommodate. (32)

Curran further argues that Robinson is different from Southey and Wordsworth, because she lived on the fringe, a position and experience which they, as male writers, never had to endure:

She observes the outcast and marginal from a participant's standpoint. Her poverty and her collapsing health in 1800 immerse her in an existential limbo, only exacerbated by the incessant demands of her pen. (32)

I would argue, on the other hand, that it is incorrect to annex Robinson's creativity exclusively to her pitiful situation: it unjustly strips her of merit and credibility as a fictional writer and poet, and does not sufficiently take into consideration her philosophical and ideological influences. While I do not wish to reject Curran's claims that Robinson's victimised past and gender oppression were influential on her writing, I would insist on the inference that these were not the central source from which sprang her existential philosophy.

Lisa Vargo (2002: 37-52) compares Robinson's *Tabitha Bramble* poems, found in her *Lyrical Tales*, to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and surmises that Robinson's poetry forces a reader

to acknowledge that it is 'social ugliness' that forms common social bonds, whereas Wordsworth attempted to 'transcend' ugly social realities through the appreciation of beauty. Vargo argues that Robinson takes a keen interest in revealing the uglier side of human society and that she succeeds in rendering her poetry distinct from Wordsworth's, rather than imitating it, by critiquing the views he held about beauty:

while Wordsworth's poems and tales attempt to transcend social struggles for a higher form of kindness, Robinson would call her reader to consider the nature of our relations as social beings as a first step towards a more equitable form of social transformation. (49)

Miskolcze's article contributes substantially to the debate. It examines Robinson's *Poetical Works*, showing that

Robinson's exiles and fugitives embody many of the contradictions present in Robinson's late eighteenth century world and provide historically and artistically valuable representations of the earlier Romantic movement itself. (1995: 207)

Miskolcze (209) makes an important point about Robinson's writing, defining it as 'paradigmatically Romantic', while the world she tries to portray is 'one marked by alienation and exile.' Miskolcze's (213-214) analyses Robinson's poem, 'The Fugitive', which explores the mortality of humankind and nature, as both are at the 'mercy' of God and inevitably must come to an end. In the poem Robinson ironically suggests that the fugitive finds a sympathetic companion in 'Nature' because it, too, decays. Miskolcze notes:

For how can one be consoled that she is as mortal as anybody else, either humans or nature? Furthermore there is no suggestion in the poem that mortal life will ever be free of misery, for there is no allusion in this poem to consolations bred of transcending Nature and ascending to eternal peace. What makes us all kindred is that we are all mortal - a truly existential if not morbid conclusion. (214)

As Miskolcze (219) observes, not all of Robinson's poetry is existential and neither are all her novels; for instance, *Walsingham* and the *False Friend* have a much greater existential bent than *The Natural Daughter*, as the former do not offer a potential solution to the tyrannical power of the passions, but lean towards exposing the futility of existence. Robinson's most passionate poems

display the morally, ethically, and emotionally contradictory nature of problems and solutions, of contentedness and despair. Robinson's vision is an honest one, sounding more like the realistic, dissonant notes of forthright internal dialogue than a harmonious symphony of dogmatic statements. (219)

What Miskolcze's study of Robinson's poetry implies here is her refusal to escape the 'ugliness' present in both nature and society. A Romantic poet such as Wordsworth, as Vargo (2002: 37-52) suggests, avoids confrontation with humanity's cruelty by redirecting attention towards beauty and nature. Radcliffe offers a similar type of escape for her character, Emily, in *Mysteries of Udolpho*, when she is separated from her lover and forced to travel through the Alps on the way to Montoni's castle:

She seemed to have arisen to another world, and to have left every trifling thought, every trifling sentiment, in that below; those only of grandeur and sublimity now dilated her mind, and elevated the affections of her heart. (Radcliffe 1859: vol. 1, 152)

Ty recognizes that Robinson's approach to nature is much harder to conceptualise than Wordsworth's, who regards himself as a 'worshipper of Nature.' Ty surmises that in *Walsingham* 'while nature is frequently invoked, it is not always with hope or faith in its power' (1998: 44). In contrast, in his *Prelude*, Wordsworth expresses 'a never-failing' joy and faith in nature, despite his disillusionment with human society:

... if in these times of fear
This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown,
If, 'mid indifference and apathy,
And wicked exultation when good men
On every side fall off, we know not how,
To selfishness, disguised in gentle names
Of peace and quiet and domestic love,
Yet mingled, not unwillingly, with sneers
On visionary minds - if, in this time
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet
Despair not of our nature, but retain
A more than Roman confidence, a faith
That fails not, in all sorrow my support,
The blessing of my life, the gift is yours

Ye winds and sounding cataracts! 'tis yours,
 Ye mountains, thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed
 My lofty speculations; and in thee,
 For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
 A never-failing principle of joy
 And purest passion. (2001: 291; vv 432-460)

Both Wordsworth and Robinson saw their epoch as chaotic, a site of fallen ideals, revolutionary and otherwise, where benevolence and the progress of humanity seemed stunted by the lust for power, oppression, and wealth. But they responded in different ways.

Although much of the Romantic movement sought to restore lost faith in mankind and in many regards is considered as being infused with hope, it is also a form of escapism which tends to divert attention from the realities of life (Brissenden 1974: 128). Romanticism is described as being

a valuing of the emotion, of imagination, a belief in human potential taken beyond its ordinary limits... an aspiring hopefulness - an exalting, and exulting, of the imagination.'

(Wordsworth & Wordsworth 2001: xxiii).

Intense communion with Nature enabled Wordsworth to move beyond the limitations of humanity, through his poetic imagination, with a 'faith that fails not': it was Nature which inspired his 'Roman confidence' in human potential. Nature similarly allows Radcliffe's Emily to 'arise' to another world where all trifling thoughts and sentiments are disregarded, where her heart's affections are 'elevated' and her mind is filled only with 'grandeur' and 'sublimity.' Nature offered no such consistent transport or escape for Robinson. Brissenden (1974: 128) observes that

'[e]ven the romantic revival, in many ways a re-affirmation of faith in man, is in many others an acknowledgment of defeat: escapism came to be regarded by the poet [ie Wordsworth] not merely as an inevitable but as a valuable function of literature: consciously or unconsciously he yielded to the belief that it was safer to contemplate old, unhappy far-off things, where distance lent enchantment to the view, than to keep one's gaze fixed on the realities of contemporary life, which were equally unhappy, but embarrassingly close at hand.'

What Brissenden emphasises here is that Wordsworth's, and even Radcliffe's, faith in the sublimity of Nature may have functioned also as a form of escapism, albeit unconscious,

from social realities.⁴⁵ Nature allowed an author or poet to distance themselves from life's actualities; in contrast, Robinson's idea of nature often brought the ugly truths of the world to the forefront of her imagination.

Gertrude St. Leger in *The False Friend* can find no comfort in her natural surroundings, for she concludes that

[t]he calm reflections of retirement, to minds congenially tranquil, are pleasing even to felicity: but I, who know no happiness, who linger out existence in one dream of mournful ruminations, can taste no joy, can feel no delight, however fascinating the object, or luxurious the scenery with which I am surrounded. (Robinson 1799: vol. 3, 99)

Gertrude reflects that only one possessing a calm, serene mind can appreciate the solitude of nature; a mind deeply tormented by self-conflict, suffering an all-consuming passion can find no solace in natural external factors. Even when is she exiled by Lord Denmore to reside with the Pews at the castle parsonage, her attempts to attain reason and tranquillity in the country are only temporary (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 230-244). Gertrude is unlike Radcliffe's Emily, who is able to elevate her mind and contemplate the sublime beauty of nature and leave behind her 'trifling' thoughts. Instead, Gertrude is conscious only of her turbulent passions, and comes to the morbid conclusion that they are a permanent part of her existence, to which she must become accustomed, accepting it rather than escaping it. Gertrude is unable to attain a resolute Wordsworthian faith in Nature's restorative capacity to uplift what is good in one's inner world.

When Walsingham (2003 a: 220-221) in a feverish temper writes a poem on Nature's deceptive beauty, he comes to the conclusion that the depravity and deception of mankind are reflected in the laws of Nature:

'A Reflection'

The loathsome toad, whose mis'ry feeds
On noxious dews and baneful weeds,
Disgusts the startled sight:

⁴⁵ This naturally does not imply that Wordsworth's poetry ignored the social realities of existence or that he was in some form of denial; indeed, his work is known to perform many a social criticism. However, the point to observe here is that, while Romanticism might express a faith in human potential and the exultation of the imagination, it simultaneously can register disappointment in mankind's nature and progress. Romanticism is as much about exploring mankind's failures and emotional contradictions as it about appreciating the creative power of the imagination, and it was this aspect which Robinson was particularly interested in investigating.

Yet when the sultry vapours low'r,
 He drinks the poison, from each flow'r
 Shook by the wings of night.

Behold the dazzling speckled snake,
 Writhing amidst the leafy brake,
 Gilt by the beams of day!
 Mark, as the wondering victim's eyes
 Fix on the beauteous orient dyes,
 The traitor stings his prey.

Trace but the moral, simply true,
 There nature's pictures varying view,
 Whose outward forms deceive;
 Where worth in loathsome garb we find,
 While pride and vice, with pow'r combin'd
 In splendid baseness live!

The first stanza describes the 'loathsome toad' which 'disgusts the startled sight', yet harmlessly 'drinks the poison, from each flow'r', while the 'dazzling speckled snake' bemuses and hypnotises his prey with its 'beauteous orient dies.' Robinson strongly hints that the toad may be the snake's prey. Her luxuriant description of the snake alludes to the rich and powerful in society, whose duplicity is hidden by opulent appearances. The reviled and 'ugly' poor, embodied by the toad, naturally become prey to the greedy appetites of the rich. Therefore, the predatory instincts dictated by nature, and disguised by its deceptive beauty, are reflected in the structures of society. Nature generally is regarded as a benevolent force, which fosters benevolence and progress amongst humankind; Robinson, however, alludes here, more realistically, to its darker sides.

Walsingham does not look upon nature as a refuge; in fact, when he remarks on its beauty, he is quick also to mark its decay. When travelling to France with his tutor, Mr. Hanbury, he describes his reflections on nature:

I studied in the school of nature! I saw the softest flowers invigorate the opening buds
 of spring; I beheld them bursting forth to imbibe the ethereal distillations. I remarked

them as they unfolded their leaves, exhaled their perfumes, flaunted their variegated colours, and, by progressive warmth, were nourished to perfection. The lofty forest trees seemed like lords of the vegetating world; and yet I saw them levelled to the dust, and wither, like the most obnoxious weed or simplest flower.’

(Robinson 2003 b: 81)

Young Walsingham is enraptured by nature’s beauty, yet, while drawn by its sublimity, he is able also to observe its decay and cycles of withering death. I relate the passage above to Miskolcze’s (1995: 213-214) and Vargo’s (2002: 37-52) interpretation of Robinson’s poetry, which infer that writer did not allow Nature’s beauty to transform the quotidian through transcendence, but rather encouraged her readers to become aware of the ugliness of social reality and of one’s sense of mortality. Nature is a vivid reminder that mortal life offers no compensations and that one has to come to terms with that knowledge rather than escape it. Hence Walsingham’s perception of nature reveals that, while it may temporarily delight the soul, it cannot provide either an escape from temporal decay nor liberation from the imperfections of the world. As Gertrude St. Leger rather existentially observes:

The happiest moments are but the delusions of a summer dream; they glide away, and the dark, the gloomy hour returns, to convince us that we are mortal.

(Robinson 1799: vol. 3, 185)

Robinson displays an even darker view of nature when she implies that it is an arbitrary administrator of power and judgment.⁴⁶

In his analysis of Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, Edward Bostetter’s (1962: 241-254) seeks to demonstrate that, though Romantic poets displayed great faith in human nature and the progress of human civilisation, they were not averse to exploring also its chaotic, violent, and irrational elements. These darker aspects, he argues, exist in the nightmarish world at the centre of Coleridge’s morally incoherent poem. For instance, when the Mariner is punished for killing the albatross, the death of his shipmates and his own survival depend entirely upon chance, making the sinful judgment seem arbitrary in nature. This raises the question of the extent to which the Mariner is responsible for his act of evil or whether his action was simply an echo of a universal pattern of action (Bostetter 1962: 244). Bostetter

⁴⁶ I discussed briefly in Chapter Two, 61-22 how Robinson would employ natural elements in her narratives to bring down heaven’s wrath upon her villains.

(251) interestingly observes that Coleridge was plagued by a guilt complex which could be associated with his opium addiction.⁴⁷

it was hard for him, consumed by so great a desire to live righteously, not to see himself as a helpless victim of forces beyond his control, forces that were part of the universal pattern of things. What he wanted to believe in, and increasingly devoted his intellectual energies to asserting, was a universe of order and benevolence in which man possessed freedom of will and freedom of action to mold his own destiny; what he feared was a universe in which he was at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces. The *Rime* envisioned such a universe.

Robinson may not have been hounded by the guilt complex that afflicted Coleridge; in fact she appears to have had a talent for displaying herself in a rather self-righteous manner. What these two authors did share was that although they yearned for a universe motivated by benevolence and reason, where one could shape one's own destiny and exercise uninhibited freedom, they found themselves in a world where they were propelled by forces beyond their control. The problem of being at the mercy of compelling forces, deprived of the means or power to challenge one's fate, engaged the artistic attention of both Robinson and Coleridge, yet notably it also revealed a gap between their artistic vision of the world and its chaotic reality. The gap between the writer's philosophical idealism and disillusioning actuality forced Robinson, and possibly Coleridge, to confront the flaws in human nature. When Robinson acknowledged that human nature was inherently undermined by the domination of the passions, she began to doubt the civilisation process.

The first-generation Romantic poets had to come to terms with the disappointment of the revolution and quell their disillusionment 'by finding an apolitical basis for confidence in humanity and hope for the future.' (Wordsworth & Wordsworth 2001: xxix). At first, Godwin's faith in reason seemed to provide an answer, but the Romantic poets were drawn rather to feeling and the imagination (Wordsworth & Wordsworth 2001: xxix). However, it was nature which provided the Romantic poets with a solution to their political dissatisfaction. Kitson (1989: 202) argues that Coleridge's poetry illustrated

⁴⁷ Robinson also was guilty of using opium. Mary Levy (1992: 159-166) provides interesting insights into both Coleridge's and Robinson's shared use of the drug, a connection which may have influenced Coleridge to allow Robinson to see his poem, *Kubla Khan*, before it was published.

the importance of a process of inward and individual restoration achieved through the awareness of the divine in the natural landscape.

While Robinson may have shared Coleridge's anxiety about humanity and one's inability to control fate, she did not find any restorative potential in the world of nature. For Robinson, nature simultaneously represented mankind's potential for good and its powerlessness to shape its own destiny. Wordsworth and Coleridge withdrew into nature to find an individual inner restoration when their social and artistic idealism came into conflict with political realities; however, Robinson employed representations of nature to reflect a character's own inner turmoil.

In *Walsingham*, Amelia dies at the altar on the day of her marriage to Colonel Aubrey, a wedding which Walsingham attends, inadvertently causing her demise. He wanders around, after escaping from the terrible scene, and expresses his torment:

I had outraged the very laws of Nature, and her dreadful artillery was pointed at the devoted wretch who had been her pupil, and was destined to become her victim. (Robinson 2003 b: 432)

Walsingham had been devoted to a belief in the benevolence of nature; now, his faith and hopes prove futile, especially when he recognises flaws not only in mankind and society, but also in himself. As a 'pupil of nature', as he calls himself, he should have been a champion of nature's ideals, but he is inevitably subjected to nature's punishment. What Robinson conveys here is that no matter how hard Walsingham tried to emulate nature's benevolent values, contribute to the betterment of humankind or maintain moral standards, he would still end up a victim of the arbitrary workings of nature. Robinson subtly hints that to deliberately pursue virtue is a futile attempt, for, whether one is good or bad, one will still end up as a victim to the cycles and impulses of nature.

Mr. Hanbury often lectures Walsingham on the ways of the world, but what he projects is far from a comforting prospect. He remarks to Walsingham, then a child, that

There are events, which being inherent in our natures, mock the powers of resistance, and convince the wisest of their own fallibility... Here we are exposed to wild beasts, and there to men more savage than the beasts: and if we escape the inconveniences and dangers of the air and earth, there

are perils by water, and perils by fire. This established cause of things it is not in our power to change; but it is in our power to assume such greatness of mind as becomes wise and virtuous men; as may enable us to encounter the accidents of life with fortitude, and to conform ourselves to the order of Nature, who governs the great kingdom, the world, by continual mutations. (Robinson 2003 b: 95).

Robinson concludes here that man's greatness of mind is proven when he develops fortitude amidst the turbulent cycles of nature. One must reconcile oneself to the idea that life is filled with trials and tribulations, and that the weak will fall prey to the strong and to natural elements. Robinson sees as the only reward of a virtuous mind the ability to develop the strength to 'encounter the accidents of life' and conform to the order of nature. This is not a heart-warming prospect, when compared to the Romantic poets' staunch belief in nature's capacity to arouse the creative imagination. Robinson seems to insist that nature functions in an arbitrary fashion, and one could randomly be blessed or cursed by it merely by passing through its various 'mutations.' I would argue that Robinson's depiction of nature is therefore similar to Sade, as we may note when Sade (2005:17) describes nature as:

[u]nchanging in her designs, erratic in her manifestations, she is never at rest, and resembles the crater of a volcano which one moment shoots forth precious diamonds for the use of men, and now hurls balls of fire to destroy them.

When observing something on the ocean's horizon while travelling to France as a child, Walsingham engages Mr Hanbury in a philosophical conversation about the Deity or The Supreme Being;

'Wither are they going?'

'Far beyond the edge of yonder horizon,' replied my tutor.

'Will they never return? Have they no home? Who will take care of them?' were the next questions.

'That Supreme Being,' replied Mr. Hanbury, 'who can command the winds and waters! Who can lift the waves like mountains, and quell the loudest howling of the tempest! He, who harmonizes the varying seasons, regulates the planets. And gives the wondrous faculty of thought which animates the mind of man!'

'Where does he dwell?' said I, with fearful veneration.

'Everywhere,' replied my tutor. 'He knows the secrets of all hearts. His power is infinite; his will, omnipotent! We are but creatures formed to obey him; - yet there are those who dare rebel, and - '

‘How can we offend him, since he has power to command our actions and our thoughts?’ interrupted I. Mr. Hanbury made no answer, but changed the subject.

(Robinson 2003 b: 75-76)

This particular passage appears to have caused some concern amongst readers. In *The Monthly Review* of 1798 a critic opined that what Walsingham means by a ‘pupil of nature’ is that:

his opinions, his knowledge, and his principles, are derived rather from an immediate consideration of things themselves, than adopted from established systems. (Robinson 2003 b: 498)

Mr Hanbury’s method of education is seen as inappropriate by the critic, as his lessons appear to lack forthright moral character:

It was not kind in Mr. Hanbury to leave his pupil in the dark respecting the important point - ‘How can the Deity be offended,’ &c. We suppose that the writer intended to insinuate that it is an enquiry not easily solved in an orthodox way. (Robinson 2003 b: 499)

We might observe that Mr Hanbury’s silence on the subject of the Supreme Being reveals a rather unorthodox religious approach on Robinson’s part.

Walsingham’s controversial question of how anyone could offend the Deity if He were indeed omniscient and omnipotent, reveals Robinson’s scepticism about certain conservative religious assumptions. She implies that no one could reasonably be considered to be responsible for their sins, if they were committed while under the sheer rule of an omnipotent Being. If the Supreme Being has given man ‘the wondrous faculty thought’, a faculty which enables free will, then punishes him when his thoughts or actions exercise such free will, Robinson sceptically surmises that heavenly judgment is, in some respects, illogical. To endow man with a freedom which he will more than likely abuse, appears to place man in a hopeless situation. Thus, the gift of free will is both a blessing and a curse. Mr Hanbury’s noteworthy silence on Walsingham’s questions signifies Robinson’s doubt as to the benevolence of the Supreme Being: He has both blessed man with a free will and passions, and cursed him because he is doomed to err, and to be punished for it.

Gertrude also displays scepticism about the benevolence of the Creator and criticises the logic behind religious judgment when she complains that

[r]eligion tells that we are chastised for some unknown purpose; and that our reward will be proportionate to our submission. Ah, Frances! If I have deserved the punishment that has been unceasingly inflicted, why do I behold wretches, tenfold deep in crimes, exulting, prosperous, and happy? Let the theologian solve this problem. I fear it is undefinable. Reason shrinks while it attempts to explore the mystery; and, as long as it continues inexplicable, the poison of scepticism will never be extirpated. (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 293-294).

If the world were indeed ruled by a ‘Divine Will of Judgment’, then, Gertrude assumes, justice and order should prevail and the wicked be punished for their crimes; however, this does not appear to occur. Through Gertrude’s doubts, Robinson displays her own: she insinuates that, as long as justice and judgment function illogically, scepticism is perfectly natural. Robinson recurrently scrutinizes the arbitrary distribution of power, in both societal structures and the universal realm, and she even casts some doubt upon the goal of living a virtuous life.

In another conversation with Mr Hanbury, Walsingham tries to understand the structure of the class system:

‘Shall I ever be as great as Sir Sidney?’ said I.

‘Greater, if you are more wise and virtuous,’ replied Mr. Hanbury.

‘Then he will not govern me?’ said I, smiling.

‘That does not follow,’ answered my tutor. ‘The most deserving are often under the control of the most vicious.’

‘Then what are the advantages to being good?’

‘The reward will be beyond the reach of oppression: it will centre on the mind!’ replied Mr. Hanbury.

‘Then the virtuous mind is sure of happiness?’ said I.

‘Not always,’ replied my tutor, sighing; ‘the world is swayed by powers, which consist in many evils; inordinate wealth, ambition, pride, and arrogance frequently triumph over the most transcendent virtues; yet they find their votaries, whilst modest merit is condemned to pine in anguish; scoffed at by the ignorant; and persecuted by the vicious.’ (Robinson 2003 b: 82).

Mr Hanbury cannot satisfactorily answer Walsingham's question 'Then what are the advantages to being good?' The point that Robinson encourages her reader to reflect upon here is that there is no guaranteed reward in being virtuous, and that the best one can hope for is to possess a strong mind able to resist misfortune. It is interesting to compare Robinson's sceptical view with a passage in Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which displays quite a different outlook:

O! Useful may it be to have shown, that the vicious can sometimes pour affliction upon the good, their power is transient and their punishments certain; and that innocence, though oppressed by injustice, shall, supported by patience, finally triumph over misfortune.

(1859: vol. 3; 206)

In her novels, Robinson consistently counters Radcliffe's belief in the possibility of good's triumph over evil; indeed, the theme which constitutes a common thread through much of her work is to question why the virtuous suffer while the wicked prosper. Gertrude bemoans this particular point:

why should the good suffer, the guilty triumph? What is virtue, if it is not the passport to happiness? Is it an airy phantom, which leads to nothing? - Impossible! And yet we see the noblest of the human race oppressed, afflicted! The base and the sordid prosperous! We behold a Denmore wretched; a Upas, revelling in all the joys and luxuries of life. Are not such examples chilling to the soul? Do they not palsy the energies of reason, make virtue feeble; strengthen the power of vice, destroy the bonds of social intercourse and undermine the source of moral rectitude? Unquestionably. (Robinson 1799: vol. 3; 24)

Mr Hanbury realistically points out to Walsingham that innocence, virtue, and goodness will not unfailingly ensure happiness; Robinson thus repudiates Radcliffe's moral claim that virtue is rewarded with the Sadean perspective that to be human is to suffer. Robinson never carries Sade's materialism to the ideological extremes that he did, nor is she as outrageously atheistic, yet she does allude to Sade's conception of nature. Coward (2005: xxi) observes that Sade's

universe is indifferent to everything save its own flux and continuity, a never-ending, blind cycle of change, decay, and rebirth. In it human beings have no privileged status but are subject to the same natural imperatives as all other material forms.

Robinson, like Sade, sees Nature moving to its own established course (Robinson 2003 b: 95), while man does not possess the power to change this natural cycle or combat it, but must merely adjust to it. Therefore, if mankind holds no privileged position within nature's cycle, there cannot be any assurance that good will be rewarded over evil, because the universe is indifferent to both. In his *Essay on Novels* (2005:12) Sade praises both Richardson and Fielding, and argues that, if an author wishes to write in the novelistic genre,

[h]e must catch nature, he must capture the heart of man, that most singular of her creations, and not virtue, because virtue, however fine and necessary it may be, is only one of the manifestations of that astounding heart which every novelist must make his deepest study, and because the novel, if it is to be the faithful mirror of the human heart, must of necessity reflect all its crests and troughs.'

Akin to Sade, Robinson accedes to the idea that a writer ought not to explore only the triumphs and benefits of virtue, but must delve into the truly dark depths of the human heart to understand its corruption: man is born into an imperfect world and it is unavoidable that he will be contaminated by it. Robinson's writing is often torn between belief in the progress of human civilisation and the disturbing **notion** that man cannot escape his mortality and passionate nature; he is doomed to follow natural cycles beyond his control. Robinson admires Godwin's theories and much of his philosophical thought permeates her work; however, she seriously questions his assumption that the love and pursuit of virtue must unavoidably result in happiness.

Robinson, as I noted earlier, held an ambivalent view on nature, most likely arising from her questioning certain aspects of Godwinian philosophy. In *The False Friend* Gertrude states that 'the law of nature is sociability; and by uniting the interests of the heart, we cement the bonds of society.' (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 284). This thought echoes Godwin's views on the nature of human corruption:

From these reasonings it sufficiently appears, that the moral qualities of men are the produce of the impressions made upon them, and there is no instance of an original propensity to evil. Our virtues and vices may be traced to the incidents which make the history of lives; and if these incidents could be divested of every improper tendency, vice would be extirpated from the world.

The task may be difficult, may be slow of progress, and of hope undefined and uncertain. But hope will never desert it; and the man who is anxious for the benefit of his species, will willingly devote a portion of his activity to an enquiry into the mode of effecting this extirpation in whole or in part, an enquiry which promises much, if it do not in reality promise everything. (1793: vol. 1, 18)

Godwin does not believe in the concept of original sin; rather, he argues that evils are rooted in the errors of the mind placed there by society and mis-education, as it is innate in man's nature to desire the greater good of the species and to constantly enquire into the manners and means through which this may be accomplished. To trace human vices to their sources, it is necessary to investigate life histories and single out the incidents which may have developed 'improper tendencies' in individual characters.

Walsingham attempts this type of investigation when he composes his 'autobiography', addressing himself to Rosanna. He explains the purpose behind the detailed account of his childhood, namely that he wishes to

extenuate the errors of a more advanced age, by proving that the miseries of this sublunary journey in a great degree depend on our commencement of it. (Robinson 2003 b: 68).

Walsingham intimately explores his childhood to discover what early distortions may have given rise to immoral conduct in his adult years, such as his sexual interlude with Amelia and refusal to marry her, his betrayal of Colonel Aubrey through stealing his potential wife (Amelia), his deliberate seduction of Lady Arabella, his (albeit indirect) responsibility for Lord Linbourne's death, and his numerous attempts to revenge himself on Sir Sidney. Walsingham acknowledges that Nature's laws do encourage benevolence and he asserts that

We do not create ourselves; Nature is a liberal parent; and were not her children the slaves of prejudice, or the dupes of their own passions, the circle of enlightened humanity would enlarge, till vice and folly would be extinguished in its lustre. (Robinson 2003 b: 70)

Like Godwin, Walsingham believes that human beings are not responsible for their own moral flaws and that Nature instils benevolence in man. It is the morally wrong 'impressions' to which a person is exposed early in life which create vices, uncontrollable passions, and

prejudices. Could these be eradicated, humanity would become truly enlightened. Godwin's philosophy places great faith in the process of investigating one's own history to discover and eradicate 'vices'; he believes success can be painfully but gradually achieved. Walsingham, being innately a lover of virtue, attempts to slowly banish his 'vices' through self-scrutiny in his narrative. His endeavours, however, prove futile, as he comes to realise and acknowledge the irresistible power of his passions and the inability of philosophy to control and conquer them. In the letter to his father which opens the novel, Walsingham declares the horror of his overpowering passions arouse in him and the image of himself he is forced to look upon:

Truth! Thou hast been my guide, my monitor, when the lucid moment of reason triumphed over the dark gloomy passions: thou hast wrung my soul to agony, when I beheld the horrid retrospect; where hatred, pride, revenge, and madness moved on in terrible succession! Yet I have studied thy precepts; I have practised them. (Robinson 2003 b: 41-42)

Despite Walsingham's desperate enterprise to live according to the principles of benevolent nature and the precepts of truth, the ideal to which he aspires is consistently at odds with the impulses of his own human nature.

In his *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793: vol. 1, 363) Godwin insists that

No man therefore, so far as he is virtuous, can be in danger to become a prey to sorrow and discontent,' for 'The man, who is accustomed upon every occasion to consult his reason, will speedily find a habit of this nature growing upon him.

Godwin argues that, as long as a man desires to be virtuous, the troubles of existence should not overwhelm him, as he can rely upon the power of his reason. He even goes as far as to say that

Those evils which prejudice has taught so great a part of mankind to regard with horror, will appear to his understanding disarmed of their terrors. Poverty, obloquy and disgrace will be judged by him to be trivial misfortunes. (Godwin 1793: vol. 1, 363)

Even bodily pain will become insignificant when one achieves a mind of

conscious rectitude, rejoicing in the good of the whole, and perpetually exerted for the promotion of that good. (364)

Through the character Walsingham Robinson sets out to explore the challenging question that misfortune, passions, and prejudices are not easily conquered, though a man may be bent on

virtue: they are, indeed, ultimately a strong determinant, since reason is not always able to subdue and improve upon the flaws of human character - as Godwin would have it. Though Walsingham may be regarded as virtuous since he desires mankind to prosper, he easily succumbs to sorrow and discontent, something which Godwin asserts ought not to occur. Walsingham's prejudices and exposure to 'poverty, obloquy and disgrace' do not become trivial misfortunes, rather they are magnified into 'hydra assailants', as time passes:

You know that my misfortune is not to be meliorated; all the vaunted resolution of man cannot reverse the dark unerring mirror, which shews me what I am! Ignorance might have veiled the gloomy colour of those features, which knowledge has, too late, instructed me to contemplate. Were my griefs remediable, I might, by progressive efforts, subdue their magnitude, but they are the hydra assailants which revolve with every hour; time sickens as they pass, which perspective they leave only vanishes to return again with accumulated horrors. (Robinson 2003 b: 42).

When Walsingham uses his reason to ponder upon his actions, reflection only increases his terror at what he has become; insight into his errors comes too late to rectify what he sees as permanent character flaws. By depicting Walsingham as helpless prey of his passions, Robinson argues that man can exercise far less power over his destiny than Godwin assumes. Philosophy and reason have not enabled Walsingham to become what he desires to be: a benefactor of mankind. Reason and the attributes of a philosophical mind merely have made him more aware of the human monster that he is and that he holds little power to change that.

The natural attributes which Robinson subjects to the most critical scrutiny are those of benevolence and sensibility. In the development of the philosophical characters of Gertrude and Walsingham she questions whether their 'natural' sensibility and benevolence are a curse rather than a blessing; more precisely, whether their psychological and philosophical torments reveal that sensibility, the ability to feel deeply for oneself and for others, can enable them to attain 'virtue' or rather inevitably cause their destruction. In his *Enquiry* (1793: vol. 1, 13) Godwin defines virtue as

that species of operations of an intelligent being, which conduces to the benefit of intelligent beings in general, and is produced by a desire of that benefit.

The obstacle most likely to be encountered in man's progress towards the attainment of virtue would be corrupt social and political structures, for Godwin (1793: vol. 1, 4) contends that vice depends for its existence upon the existence of error:

May not a good government by taking away all restraints upon the enquiring mind hasten, and a bad one by its patronage of error procrastinate the discovery and establishment of truth?

Robinson generally adopts Godwin's view that corrupt political and social structures are the source of much of human character's flaws and evils, yet she is clearly critical of his underestimation of the power of innate corrupting passions.

Robinson disputes the power of reason to control, or ultimately reform, human behaviour. In her view, unfavourable circumstances and social prejudices form a too imposing imprint on the human emotions and mind, which were designed by nature primarily to *feel*. It is man's ability 'to feel', or his sensibility, which enables his desire to act benevolently towards others and play a role towards the greater benefit of mankind. For Gertrude St. Leger asserts that 'None but the sordid and the selfish live for themselves,' and she argues that were

it not instinctive to feel; to cherish the affections of the soul, we should not nurse unnumbered, hopeless sorrows, linger round the scene of departed visions, shiver at the apathy of indifference, and rather choose to love without a prospect of return.' (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 284).

Walsingham despairingly asks whether sensibility is just a device used to bring affliction to the mind:

Alas! Why are we born with feelings that destroy us? Why is the human breast so sensitively organised, only to cherish sorrow, and to shrink with torture from the touch of persecution? What is that pleasing, painful, undefinable spell, which fastens around the heart, and presses to the palpitating fibres, an unremitting sense of misery? Is it virtue? Is it nature? (Robinson 2003 b: 80)

Similarly, Gertrude disputes the benefits of sensibility and a 'feeling' mind; she envies nature because it has seasons of renewal and joyful fruitfulness:

Why, why am I condemned to buffet, with the rude storm; - to shrink from the strong giant of fancy? If the inanimate works of nature are alone allowed the powers of renovation; if nothing, but

the senseless part of creation is to have its season of delight, - why is virtue, why is sensibility ordained to the object and effect of superior organisation? (Robinson 1799: vol. 1,162)

Gertrude and Walsingham struggle to understand the purpose and benefits of sensibility. For Gertrude, it lures her to cling to emotional turmoil and is a constant source of mental torment; for Walsingham, it is a compulsion towards passionate, self-destructive behaviour which he cannot control.

Characters like Gertrude and Walsingham, who possess a strong sensibility, are prone to falling in love; since they allow their affections to fully take hold of them, they prove that man's desire to love is what drives him to annihilation because it breaks down his reason and his ability to control his own actions. Gertrude and Walsingham resent nature because, by bestowing sensibility upon the human mind, it has also created the capacity to feel for others for the greater benefit of humanity, yet has ill-equipped human beings to deal with life's turmoil. Indeed, Walsingham and Gertrude see themselves in some respects as Nature's victims, because their minds have been endowed with sensibility. Walsingham exclaims,

Oh Nature! Amidst thy infinity of changes, thou hast not one hour of consolation in store for a wretch whom thy stern laws had propelled into error; thy sensibilities, thy fatal sensibilities to guilt! (Robinson 2003 b: 434).

In the battle between reason and the passions, it is the latter which succeed, as philosophy is ineffective in suppressing turmoil in a mind possessed by uncontrollable desire. As Walsingham reflects:

Alas! From the period that reason begins to shoot, the mind of man is a chaos of perpetual warfare; the affections of our early days combat with the propensities of nature, and struggle with the fetters of contradiction. The passions succeed; the stormy passions! Pride, ambition, *love*! (Robinson 2003 b: 83)

Walsingham rebels against the fact that he cannot overcome the power of his own illicit passions; they always conquer his rational inclinations, specifically when it comes to love, and desire turns out to be his greatest enemy. Gertrude experiences the same dismal realisation, when she futilely attempts to combat her obsessive passion for Lord Denmore;

The delirium of love is scarcely curable. We cherish it in silence; and we nurse it with false hopes, till it masters our resolution, and sets philosophy at defiance. (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 113).

Philosophy is an inadequate remedy for the ‘disease’ called love, which is incurable for Gertrude and Walsingham, and Robinson, disillusioned with the ideals of reason and philosophy, affiliates her conception of love to a Sadean one.

Walsingham’s love, or rather lust, for Isabella, is a demon which drives him into villainous behaviour, whereby his philosophical idealism is constantly deconstructed as his physical urges force him to act in a contrary manner. Robinson quite humorously pokes fun at Walsingham’s attempts to attain a philosophical demeanour. Walsingham takes a position of tutor to Lord Kencarth, which gives him the opportunity to lecture the youth at length on the evils of impulsive behaviour. Lord Kencarth quite brazenly responds to Walsingham’s lecture by doubting that his tutor indeed behaves according to the precepts expounded in his long-winded sermon. Unable to deny this accusation, Walsingham honestly replies:

That I am the most erring of Nature’s children I readily acknowledge,’ said I; ‘but we are all eager to preach what we are slow to practise.’

‘Why that’s honest, dash my jasey!’ cried his lordship; ‘and in order to please both parties in the present case, you shall continue to preach, and I to practise.’

(Robinson 2003 b: 378).

In another rather humorous scene, Robinson illustrates Walsingham’s ambivalent views on love and chivalry. During a conversation with Isabella, Walsingham is unable to control himself, grabs her and claims her as his property. When Lord Kencarth walks into the room, hearing her shriek, Isabella desperately implores to be saved from the ‘monster’ Walsingham, only to find out that her would-be rescuer attempts to seduce and force a kiss from her himself, declaring that the only thing he wants to know about Isabella is that she is ‘d---d handsome.’ (Robinson 2003 b: 394-395). As Walsingham watches the scene, he ludicrously states:

I began to fear that some new insult would be offered her; for though I had violated the laws of propriety towards her myself, I could not permit another to follow my example. (395)

Robinson amusingly reveals that Walsingham's 'love' is no better than Lord Kencarth's lust; though he himself is a firm believer in women's right to chivalrous behaviour, when it comes to love/lust, propriety will go out the window. Robinson often emphasises, albeit even jokingly, the distance between man's aspirations to civilised conduct and the ugly reality of his ungovernable human nature.

Gertrude, Amelia, Mary Ashgrove, Lady Denmore: all are lovers of despicable men (Lord Denmore, Walsingham, and Treville), all are pure and faithful in their devoted love; but Robinson, similarly to Sade, demonstrates that their love is a virtuous weakness which causes their suffering and eventual destruction. Sade's short story, *Eugenie de Franval* (2005: 239-303), tells the tale of a villainous father who manipulates his daughter into an incestuous relationship and so creates a monster who kills her own mother. Madame de Franval is a stereotypically virtuous heroine who is destined to suffer and die; it is her virtues which are her greatest weakness and cause her demise. Despite the atrocities which her husband, Franval, commits against her, she still devotedly loves him and forgives him:

Can we hate what we have loved? With a soul so fine and delicate as hers, could this remarkable woman turn an unfeeling eye upon the man who meant everything to her and now lay at her feet weeping tears of remorse? (Sade 2005: 287)

Madame de Franval's compassion and love for her husband seals her fate. Sade ironically asks at the end of the tale:

For indeed, what creature could be more precious, more commendable in the sight of men than this woman who had cherished, respected, and cultivated all the virtues of this world only to find unhappiness and suffering at every turn? (Sade 2005: 303).

The same question may be posed regarding Amelia's devotion to Walsingham: despite her faithfulness and her willingness to do anything for him, she is rewarded with death (Robinson 2003 b: 294-299, 431-432), as is Mary Ashgrove, Gertrude's friend, who falls in love with the villain Treville (Somerton). She refuses to betray his true identity to save his life from her brother (Robinson 1799: vol. 3, 118-119; vol. 4, 77). Gertrude observes that the moment one yields to one's sensibility in the name of love, ruin is at hand:

that woman who would preserve her heart immaculate, her mind uncontaminated, should not step beyond the frigid barrier of indifference; the moment she admits to her bosom, those specious inmates, pity, sympathy, and friendship, she approaches that precipice from which she will inevitably fall - to perish. (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 22)

Gertrude's mother, a married woman who had an affair with Lord Denmore, perishes because of her passion for him. In a letter addressed to him she writes:

Why do I vainly imagine, that I am safe from peril at the very moment when I rashly throw myself upon your mercy? Misguided woman! thou art thy own destroyer! The confidence of virtue leads thee, step after step, to the margin of destruction, and there abandons thee, either a prey to the artifice of others, or the hopeless victim of a disappointed passion. How torturing is the conflict which my soul is destined to endure! How difficult is the struggle betwixt reason and affection.

(Robinson 1799: vol. 1, 82)

Gertrude's belief in the virtue of her love drives her and her daughter to ruin. Nature's erratic flux and flow does cater for the virtuous, yet her faith in goodness and the virtue of her passion is an illusion which leaves her, as a woman, vulnerable to the evils of the world.

Gertrude fails to fathom the way of the world of nature, and insists on the purity of her love for Denmore and her own innocence:

My life has been a life of innocence. I have never meditated to deceive; or deceived to vanquish. If I have acted erroneously, my errors have been those of inexperience: if there is a shadow of criminality in my affection for Lord Denmore, it owes its origins to the noblest sensation - to gratitude - pure, instinctive gratitude! (Robinson 1799: vol. 2, 96)

Gertrude does not recognise that it is her 'pure' passion that is, in fact, corrupt and that her dependence upon her innocence is futile in a debased world where suffering is a certainty. Brissenden (1974: 130) argues that the notion that innocence is its own worst enemy was not an idea unique to the sentimental novelist, particularly in the last decades of the eighteenth century, when the theme was developed in quite a morbid fashion. Robinson, like other sensibility writers, knew that 'it is the good qualities themselves that leave the delicate and sensible character open to corruption' (Brissenden 1974: 130). Gertrude and Madame de Franval are sensibility heroines who are ill-designed to stand up to evil in society, a trait

which Sade often emphasises in his female characters (Coward 2005: xxvii- xxviii); they are not rewarded for their love but destroyed by it. Gertrude instinctively senses the possibility of destruction when she admires a bust of Lord Denmore:

I am frequently fascinated by its magic, and feel as if it had something destructive in its influence over my senses. How pliant is the human mind, when superstition rules it! How unaccountably are we under the control of the passion, at which reflection is taught to shudder.(Robinson 1799, vol. 1, 152-153)

In *The False Friend*, Robinson repeatedly alerts the reader to the destructive nature of the passions, first through the fate of Gertrude's mother, then Lady Denmore's, Mary Ashgrove's, and finally of Gertrude herself. What Robinson strongly implies is that as long as women are lovers, they cannot be philosophers.

Labbe's *The Romantic Paradox* (2000) examines how Romantic poets disputed romantic ideology through their depictions of violent imagery in their works; among the writers discussed are Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans. Labbe (2000: 134) argues that Robinson and Hemans wrote

[r]omances in which romance itself - as an ideology, as a lifestyle - is shown to be corrupt, where reliance on romantic love only leads to catastrophe, and where the violence suffered, by women and men, reveals the emptiness of behavioural stereotypes. True love does not conquer all; the prince will never come no matter how many 'somedays' there are; hero and villain are not easy to distinguish; the hero will not protect you; self-sacrifice is all too often literal.

Labbe adds that Robinson's violence is expressed through fantasy, not so much to reveal her hatred against men and patriarchy, but especially to

kill off stereotypes of behaviour that harm both sexes; mainly, the violence figures the desire to destroy the romance. (134)

and communicates Robinson's dissatisfaction with a genre mostly aimed at female readers. Labbe (1999: 163, 172) states that

Robinson's gothic romances portray a world wherein controls - chivalry, honour - give way before the forces of self-indulgence, greed, hate, and lust, all figured by the Gothic.

According to Labbe, Robinson's was one of the leading voices in the 1790s in the problematisation of the romance genre, which she did not admire and which she distorted in her novels through violent fantasies; she also confirms Robinson's disillusionment with the concept of true love and 'happily ever after' conclusions. However, I would add that Robinson was not only disputing oppressive stereotypes entrenched in the romantic genre, but also expressed her dissension with the optimism of the age and questioned the existence of the progress of civilisation.

Daniel Robinson (2011: 126) provides applicable material in his analysis of Mary Robinson's poem, *Sappho and Phaon*. Regarding her views on sensibility, he disagrees with McGann's argument that the poem is a 'central document' to the tradition of Sensibility; rather, he suggests that Robinson

was attempting to overwrite the feminized and *sensible* Petrarch in late eighteenth-century popular culture with a masculine hetero-erotic denunciation of the destructive emotions that she associates with her namesake, Sappho, the pre-eminent woman poet.

Moreover, he does not interpret the poem as being a validation of Sappho's sensibility, as he argues that, on the contrary,

[t]he dangers of sensibility are a consistent theme in Robinson's later work. Indeed, Robinson's subsequent novels - *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter* - all develop around the dangers of 'excessive sensibility,' a phrase she frequently employs.

(Robinson, D 2011: 139)

I concur with Daniel Robinson's opinion on Robinson's critical attitude to sensibility. As I have discussed earlier, many scholars, such as McGann, Pascoe, and Craciun, argue either for Robinson's celebration of sensibility or for her attempt to achieve a balance between sensibility and reason. Although I would not deny the insightfulness of some of these perspectives, I maintain that Robinson's critical attitude to and disbelief in sensibility are thereby underestimated, especially in a work like *Sappho and Phaon*. Not only do D.

Robinson's arguments confirm the existence of Robinson's censure of passionate love, but they also elucidate how she often argued that reason and passion are indeed incompatible.

It is tempting to see Robinson's negative representation of love as a criticism of heterosexual desire, much like Johnson (1995: 67) reads Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Women* as 'representing heterosexual sentiment as corrupt beyond the possibility of recovery.' The endless mistreatment of romantic females at the hands of libertine males and their frustration in love not only literalises women's physical and cultural mistreatment, it also demonstrates their constrained gender identity where sensibility enforces them to play out gender-specific roles. *The False Friend*, *Walsingham*, and *The Natural Daughter* are indeed a goldmine replete with countless nuggets to satisfy any feminist literary scholar. Certainly, Robinson made pertinent observations about female mistreatment in her time; nevertheless, the classic 'distressed female' scenario, so common in sensibility literature, implied much more than just female victimisation. The young, chaste, beautiful yet vulnerable women making their entrance into the dangerous yet fascinating society world

are representatives of a whole constellation of social and moral values which include but transcend the merely sexual. (Brissenden 1974: 278)

Brissenden (278) further remarks that female seduction, rape, and exploitation in sentimental literature are about 'fundamental and metaphysical issues' and therefore prompt the question about the status of all human beings:

are they free, are they fallen, are they good or innately evil, have they inalienable rights? - the question whether there is or is not a God - these questions are discussed at the theoretical level by lovers, or by rapists and victims, and the conclusions they reach are often given a practical demonstration by the way in which the sexual relations between these people are brought to a conclusion.

If the female victimised condition conveyed more than a commentary specifically on the abuse of women and the construction of gender, as Brissenden implies, then making feminist preoccupations the focal point of an exploration of Robinson's work excludes the multifaceted nature of her literary enterprise, sidelining its philosophical and theoretical

aspects.⁴⁸ Daniel Robinson (2011: 114-115), preferring Robinson's skills as a poet to those of novelist, states that her novels were written for money, 'unwrecked by any serious literary pretence', put together in haste, and 'they suit her only insofar as they can sell.' Close (2004: 173-172) argues that Robinson did not write in the popularized Gothic fiction only for financial gain; rather, she participated in the literary public debate by

exploiting the public's taste for Radcliffe's fictions and turns it into an appreciation of principles that validate her own work... [she] deliberately rewrites the significance of sexual virtue in women's lives.'

Despite Close's admission that Robinson did not write sensational novels only for profit, the inference that Robinson's novels suit her only insofar as they can sell her brand of feminism remains clear.

I would argue that if Robinson did write for profit, this would be a point hardly in need of defence. Women writers were generally forced into an economically vulnerable position, stemming from various social and circumstantial pressures; however, this need not necessarily implicate a negative 'quality' of their novels. Todd (1989: 218) describes the less than attractive prospects which a female writer faced: in general, she would be middle class and took up the writing profession as all other employment opportunities were closed to her; might be married but separated, with a family to support, hence:

She wrote in other words possibly for enjoyment and satisfaction, certainly for money.

Todd (223) also notes that Robinson, a paralytic for 17 years, alone and indigent, turned to novels, her first being *Vencenza* in 1792, which sold out on its first day of publication thanks to its supposed titillating connection to her own liaison with the Prince of Wales. Todd gives the impression that women wrote novels only to earn an income; a female writer could cover a broad spectrum of genres such as poetry, plays, tracts, yet

⁴⁸ The concept of literary value is a complex matter and thorny issue: not only does it entail examining what we perceive to be literature, but also questions what modern society deems to be 'good' literature. The determination of literary value is influenced by various factors, such as culture, history, personal subjectivity; therefore, the standards by which we measure literature's value are far from being objectively established. The problem is discussed further in Chapter Four. In brief, while I do not propose to disregard the value of a text as a feminist testimony, I strongly suggest that its status as such should not be the only determinant of its value when judged as a literary artefact.

as literature emerges as a method of earning a living or as circumstances begin to press on her, she turns towards the novel.

Desperation is what drives women to writing, especially novels. While feminist scholars might hesitate to make such a blatant claim, some of their arguments indirectly support the image of a victimised female author, driven to subsidise her income in a cruel, harsh, patriarchal world. The implied deduction that women were driven to write novels by financial need makes it difficult to accord much literary importance to novels such as Robinson's and to escape the perception that these works' value consists primarily in their capacity to voice the female plight. Close (2004: 172-191) needs to almost defend Robinson's participation in the gothic fiction popular market on the grounds that she had a 'greater' aim, ie politics and gender.

I would argue that 'financial need' is an equivocal factor: while it amply demonstrates women's dire economic position and oppression within a masculine culture which motivated them to voice a protest against their subjugation, it also affects judgement on the 'quality' of the work they produced. While Romantic scholarship has called for changes in determining the literary value of Romantic works and some eighteenth-century feminist scholars advocate that women should be favourably included, the fact remains that no matter how one adjusts the formative standards in judging Romantic literature, these standards are influenced, be they subjective or theoretically based, by the application of modern ideologies. Any evaluation of an eighteenth-century text, as discussed in Chapter One, will inevitably be infiltrated by modern ideological and theoretical systems. Pure objectivity is, of course, unattainable. We can only be aware of the systems which influence our interpretations.

The need to investigate and substantiate the 'worth' of a writer will form a part of any scholarly literary project. Originality, rebellion against the status quo, political struggle, and the affirmation and search for authenticity are some of the concepts which may linger in our minds, consciously or unconsciously, when evaluating a writer. A common criterion by which quality is negatively assessed is the author's appeal to a wide market for monetary compensation; this motivation appears to 'devalue' the authenticity of a writer's work, for such writings are automatically considered to be formulaic and part of popular culture. The assumption is legitimate in many cases; nevertheless, it does taint the reputation of an eighteenth-century female writer who wrote novels under financial stress. Sometimes, to

counteract this stigma, certain feminist scholars will gloss over aspects like the quality of plot and style, and promote a text merely on the grounds of its ability to voice the female position.

Isobel Grundy (2000: 184-185) laments that eighteenth-century women's writing cannot be championed on account of its literary qualities and, while these works may be delightful to read, she affirms that a less stringent standard of literary quality ought to be adopted in order to promote them. If judgement on the literary quality of a work is impeded by the incompatibility of subjective judgements, the argument from a literary standpoint needs to be substantiated by an argument for the value of knowledge. In other words, Grundy proposes that women's work cannot be appreciated or promoted on its literary quality alone, but it must be supported by its ability to reveal knowledge about the past. Women's texts offer

insights into the historical condition of women (and therefore obliquely our own situation) which are unavailable from other sources. (Grundy 2000: 186)

Grundy makes some valid observations on how problematic establishing literary quality for women's writing can be, yet some feminist scholarship on eighteenth-century female writing seems biased, in that it appears to mostly value work on the basis of what it can reveal about the historical condition of women. Mary Robinson's reputation as a poet is accepted, but the quality of her novels is considered somewhat dubious, because she supposedly wrote them 'in haste', to earn an income. Viewed from such a narrow perspective, clearly the only approach left is to appreciate her writings for their documentation of the female condition and their political radical appeal. If Robinson was not what we conceive to be a 'female philosopher' in today's modern scholarly terms, would her novels be of any value?

Writers such as Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Richardson, William Godwin, Louis Monk, Marquis de Sade, Robert Bage, and Walter Scott have stood the test of literary quality over centuries without a 'special understanding'. Surely it is condescending to assume that women could not produce work of a certain literary standard due to their past discriminations. I suggest that a question which feminist scholarship needs to consider is whether eighteenth-century female writers like Robinson should be valued only for what they reveal about gender and the female condition. By valuing these female writers primarily on such terms, we automatically imply that their work is legitimate only as long as it has a feminist 'crutch' to lean on.

I would suggest that greater flexibility is needed in evaluating the literary value of Romantic women writers. However, this does not point to a need for a special feminist understanding of eighteenth-century women's writing, rather for an acceptance that a more stringently *literary* skill evaluation should be conducted. It is, of course, important to attain an understanding which incorporates historical style, audience, and personal philosophies of the author as far as they can be surmised. I have discussed earlier that it is impossible to wholly regain an eighteenth-century viewpoint on literature; but it is achievable to be more open to variations in taste and examine our modern standards which determine what 'quality' literature is and be less rigid in their application. To be able to ascertain our own standards, we need to be aware of the moral tendencies which we are searching for within a text.

Despite modern scholarship's avoidance of moralistic claims, in whatever form they appear - religious, ideological, or otherwise -, its aspirations for objectivity are unattainable. There will always be a pervading desire to find a 'moral'. In present day Western society, liberalism forms a strong ideological basis and may inform many of the moral value judgments made on texts. While any imposition of moral values should be questioned, it is admittedly easier to be drawn to texts which reflect our own 'morals'.⁴⁹ Feminism is no different; as it will always tend towards investigating the mechanisms inherent in women's ill treatment or rebellion against it, texts are constructed in such a way as to provide support for a discussion of these aspects.

In *The Enquirer* (1797: 135, 141) Godwin discusses the nature of reading and makes a valid statement, equally applicable in the eighteenth century as it is today:

It seems that the impression we derive from a book, depends much less upon its real contents, than upon the temper of mind and preparation with which we read it... Everything depends upon the spirit in which they are read.

In essence, we draw the moral we wish, or need, from a text. The arguments presented on Robinson within this dissertation are prone to be constructed along the lines of how I choose to read her work. The subjective opinion of the analyser will always infiltrate the presentation of any writer's work. The problem does not arise with bringing our own subjectivity to a work, although it is a factor which should be treated with caution, but by allowing only

⁴⁹ See Chapter One, 17-19, where the imposition of modern ideologies is discussed.

certain singular types of reading to take place. Some strains of feminism often encourage a singular type of reading of eighteenth-century texts; I suggest that the spectrum needs to be broadened.

Brissenden (1974: 135) argues that in judging the worth of a sentimental writer during the popular era of sensibility literature, we must bear in mind that

their greatness as novelists depends on the way they expose, criticise, and evaluate the very sorts of sentimentalism to which they are themselves most attracted. It depends, in fact, on the extent to which their work can be described as anti-sentimental.

This adequately describes Robinson's writing in her novels: her attraction to sentimentalism and sensibility is undeniable, yet simultaneously she is extremely critical of sensibility and crosses the line into the anti-sentimental stance. Her critique of sensibility does not limit itself to the fact that it is inhibiting in women because of its biased gender definitions, one of Wollstonecraft's main criticisms. Robinson disputes sensibility's philosophical assumptions about the benevolent nature of mankind and she conveys her scepticism about the purity of feelings by blurring love with lust and thus illustrating sensibility's destructive effect upon the human mind. She also interrogates whether man is the master of his own will or the puppet of greater forces, be they Nature or God. When describing the essence of a good novel, Sade states:

The novelist's pen, on the other hand, captures his inner truth and catches him when he puts his mask aside, and the resulting sketch, which is far more interesting, is also much truer: that is the point of novels. (2005: 14)

Robinson set out to realistically show men and women at their unmasked worst; hence her novels are littered with eccentric villains and her main characters, such as Walsingham and Gertrude, have little to boast in terms of heroic and saintly fortitude. According to Sade, Robinson definitely fulfilled the novelist's role in showing human nature in its most imperfect state.

Monetary interest as a motivation for Robinson's writing should not be too quickly assumed as a good reason for devaluing her skills as a novelist; neither should her novels be credited

merely for the historical insights they can offer on the condition of women in her time. Writing for money brought no shame, as it was a factual condition for most writers; even for the great Wordsworth, who is famously known for not liking to write for commercial reasons. As one of his biographers, Hunter Davies, relates:

He never wrote for immediate fame, though he might have written for immediate money.
(2009: 128)

With the advent of mass market publishing and the changes in the industry in the late eighteenth century, as Stephen Behrendt (2009: 295) notes, poets began to struggle with the problem of personal artistic independence. Writing verse may have first sprung from personal pleasure in private expression, but as soon as poets decided to publish they sacrificed the illusion of spontaneity, for their work must now be prepared for the press, and address paying consumers whose expectations must be satisfied. Behrendt states that

[i]f the poet is in fact aiming at both financial gain and literary reputation (which were increasingly perceived as one and the same), then he or she becomes unavoidably conscious in the process of the extent to which he or she modifies the form, content, and rhetoric of the poems in ways that better suit them to the tastes and expectations of the intended readership. (296)

Behrendt indicates that to be involved in publishing, be it poems or novels, means to automatically cater for the needs of an audience, an individual's sense of artistic independence will always be compromised by entering the literary market, even for Romantic male poets like Wordsworth. The commercial motivation behind Robinson's writing of novels need not be a negative factor, detracting from the literary quality of her novels.

Not every novelistic production of Robinson can be deemed a work of genius. *Vancenza*, her first novel published in 1792, is set in medieval times and explores an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister, who are not aware that they are blood relatives; the novel ends with their tragic deaths. Shorter than other novels, it exploits the popularized sentimentalism of Gothic literature, is imitative, and lacks the philosophical depth which was developed in Robinson's later works. It is in *The Widow* (2009), published in 1794, that Robinson's voice as a writer begins to develop, through her ironically humorous revelations of English noble society's mores, as a villainous widow attempts to manipulate everyone's love lives for mere amusement.

Angelina (2009) was published in 1796, and represents, in my opinion, one of Robinson's first admirable works; while it is more politically engaged and outspoken about women's rights than her previous novels, this is not its only recommendation. Robinson's irony and dark witticisms begin to mature, her female villains gain a much stronger presence and her depiction of cruelty becomes more extreme. While *Hubert de Savrac* (2009) is recommended for its revolutionary politics and feminist concerns, it is criticised for being a rewrite of Radcliffe's *Udolpho*.⁵⁰ Byrne (2005: 347) argues that the novel was written in great haste and was a 'money-spinner': she considers it Robinson's worst novel. *Hubert de Savrac* certainly should not be classified as Robinson's worst novel; however, it does imitate Radcliffe and lacks the philosophical depth and character complexity which became a characteristic of Robinson's last three works, *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter*.

The 'genius' to be found in the novel *Walsingham* is mostly attributed to the character of Sidney and what she signifies for feminism and gender construction. Walsingham is the spoke in the wheel: while he may be regarded as 'feminine', blurring the boundaries of gender, one cannot ignore his malicious behaviour towards women. Had Robinson been more 'feminist' in her message she would have sufficiently punished Walsingham for his violation of Amelia. Shaffer (2002: 81) finds this a disappointing part of the novel and states that its real drawback is the fact that

no character seems to see through Walsingham's real selfishness as we do: why should Sidney love this self-regarding morose rapist?

Setzer (2002: 318) sees Walsingham's debauchery of Amelia as a most disturbing event, likely to undermine a reader's sympathy for the character. Binhammer (2006: 230) also describes Walsingham's sexual relations with Amelia as rape, but interestingly she does note that this is an action which breaks all the genre's rules and has a disturbing originality as it turns away from the conventional opposition of good and evil. However, for Binhammer (2006: 231) the rape symbolizes 'a sexual act committed by a man upon another man' and highlights the homosocial relations between males.

⁵⁰ For illuminating comments on the political themes in Robinson's *Hubert de Savrac*, see Close (2004: 172-191), and Brewer (2006: 115-149).

Sigler (2007 <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016137ar>: note 6) offers a Lacanian interpretation of the sexual act between Walsingham and Amelia and implies it may have been consensual. Amy Garnai (2009: 117) describes the act as a 'seduction,' rather than a rape. It is hard indeed to decide whether the writer wants the reader to interpret the sexual act as consensual, or not; this ultimately depends on the argument which one is trying to make. If one sees Walsingham's sexual relations with Amelia as a 'rape', this generally indicates a stronger feminist interpretation. However, whether rape or seduction, the incident does provide an ambiguous situation for feminist scholarship to resolve and clarify. As Shaffer (2002: 81) pointedly asks, what does Sidney see in a villain like Walsingham, and how *can* Robinson, a writer who champions the cause of women, allow him to get away with his sexual violation of Amelia?

The rape incident somewhat mars the feminist moral of *Walsingham*, unless one chooses to understand Walsingham's attitude as an exposition of the patriarchal perspectives on eighteenth-century women and Amelia's violation as a symbol of all women's victimisation and tragic fate. Walsingham's character is deliberately constructed as ambiguously ambivalent towards women: one moment he is portrayed as a sympathetic advocate of their cause, as when he assists Julia de Belmont who was exploited by the infamous Lord Linbourne, and the next he behaves no differently from the libertines he harshly condemns. Robinson (2003 b: 293-295) illustrates this paradox when Walsingham, soon after having sexually possessed Amelia, holds a conversation with Dr. Pimpernel, who offers his customary misogynist opinions both on Amelia's disappearance and women in general, while Walsingham defends the female sex. When Walsingham first encounters Dr. Pimpernel he ironically observes that

I was no less confused at meeting the person from whose power I had so recently rescued the very woman whom I had since robbed of peace and reputation. (Robinson 2003 b: 293)

Walsingham exclaims in feminist fashion when he sees the withered Amelia:

'For what does the lover in these enlightened times seduce his unsuspecting victim? -
For vanity of conquest! Whom does he consider in the triumph of sensuality? -
Himself! What breast will condemn the libertine in the circles of congenial depravity?
- None! Then where is the woman to seek for that oblivion of thought which can

alone render her existence tolerable? - Either in a daring round of dissipation, or in the grave!' (Robinson 2003 b: 366).

Walsingham decries his libertine behaviour and acknowledges the deep suffering of women at the hands of men such as himself; yet he does not admit to being wholly responsible for Amelia's seduction or rape. To both Isabella and Colonel Aubrey (Robinson 2003 b: 306, 394), Walsingham describes himself as an 'involuntary seducer' and considers Amelia as being just as responsible as himself:

'She was, in fact, the victim of her own fatal curiosity; on the eve of marriage which her heart abhorred, and too tenderly prejudiced in favour of one who was unworthy of her affection, she became almost a voluntary sacrifice. I do not hope to extenuate my conduct; I do not seek to stigmatize Amelia, - yet reflection soothes me with the conviction, that we were equally culpable.'
(Robinson 2003 b: 296)

Walsingham feels guiltier about his seduction of Lady Arabella than he does of Amelia, because this time he deliberately calculated to take advantage of a woman in order to make Isabella jealous (Robinson 2003 b: 467).

It is easy to brush off Walsingham's womanising antics as an illustration by Robinson of general eighteenth-century masculine prejudice against the female sex, a tendency whereby men will place responsibility upon the women for their sexual deviations. However, one or two incidents occur in the novel which induce us to reflect that Robinson may have been less critical of Walsingham's libertine ways than some feminist scholarship would like to allow. Indeed, there are indications that intercourse between Walsingham and Amelia may have been consensual, while Robinson subtly hints at Amelia's own attempts to seduce Walsingham. At the first masquerade she and Walsingham attended, Amelia enticingly wears a Welsh peasant costume which intrigues him and later imitates Isabella's black dress to wear at the second masquerade, where she is tragically mistaken for her by Walsingham (Robinson 2003 b: 270, 292). Sidney also plays her part in keeping Walsingham from honourably fulfilling his marital obligations to Amelia by lying about his marriage to Isabella (Robinson 2003 b: 365). Furthermore, despite Walsingham having probably forced himself on Amelia, she still claims to love him;

Must I forget you Walsingham?’ said Amelia with a look that permeated my heart: ‘Must I abjure every cherished prospect of happiness and return to my melancholy home, like a wretched penitent? Suffer me to be the partner of your enterprise: - I can even disguise my sex, to be the partaker of your peril. The heart which can really love is superior to apprehension. Try my courage; - prove my affection! - you cannot - you will not refuse me the gratification of being your companion. (Robinson 2003 b: 298)

In certain instances Robinson displays an unexpected understanding of the libertine male and does not place blame on them for their sexist treatment of women. In *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson (2003 a: 148) characterises sir Lionel as

pleasant and lively, but so misguided in his opinions of women, that he only estimated their worth in proportion as they evinced a partiality for his person.

She continues that despite his arrogance, he had

an excellent heart in everything which did not appertain to women. He was good-tempered and thoughtless, yet liberal and brave. He was by nature formed ‘to love and persuade:’ but his education had been neglected. He had been finely and exquisitely molded, but spoiled in polishing.

Surprisingly, Robinson places the blame for his bad opinion of women on lady Penelope, the villainess who had ‘destroyed’ him,

for judging of every woman by the sample she presented, he scarcely believed that the sex was capable of anything noble, generous, or estimable. (Robinson 2003 a: 148-149)

Again with Lord Kencarth, a wild, comedic, uncouth womaniser in *Walsingham*, his mother is held culpable for having spoilt him too much and for his lack of exposure to correct education (Robinson 2003 b:n 361-362). Lord Kencarth is commended for his ‘liberal affections’, and a heart that never fails to sympathise or offer help to the unhappy. Walsingham states even that

If the virtues are the associates of a wild unfashioned nature, let the polished and the proud blush while the contemplate their own deformity. (Robinson 2003 b: 362)

Thus, it is clear that, instead of haranguing the evils of libertine men, Robinson appears to attempt to gain some unbiased understanding of their characters and situation.

If we accept that Robinson does express some sympathetic consideration towards certain libertine characters, I would argue that she extends the same sympathy to Walsingham and his libertine misconduct. Robinson does not *condone* Walsingham's reprehensible behaviour towards women, but she does attempt to understand its origins in the unschooled mind and uncontrolled passions, and is therefore less critical than we might expect of his criminal weaknesses. While feminist scholarship may desire an unambiguous condemnation of Walsingham's masculine attitudes, I would argue that we should consider the possibility that Robinson was in fact trying to sketch a philosophical and social image of how the 'man' Walsingham was created, faults and all.

In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin argues that man is not originally bad-natured or criminal, but it is imperfect social and political structures which make him so; hence Caleb laments that

But of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society? It is a rank and rotten soil, from which every finer shrub draws poison as it grows. All that, in a happier and a purer air, would expand into virtue and germinate into usefulness, is thus converted into henbane and deadly nightshade. (Godwin 1831: 451- 452)

Robinson similarly demonstrates in *Walsingham* that political and social inequality, as well as an incorrect or insufficient education, can corrupt individuals who therefore cannot be held responsible for their crimes. Unlike Godwin, who places greater weight on external factors, Robinson emphasises that the passions are an innate corrupting force which cannot be easily corrected by education, reason, or reformation in society.

Brissenden (1974: 136) surmises that

[t]he libertine, no matter how sentimental he may be in some ways, is at least by conviction, the arch enemy of all forms of sentimentality. Sexual libertinism, in short, is the physical expression of a sceptical and critical attitude to life, an attitude which, taken to extremes, is anarchic and nihilistic.

As Brissenden implies, the libertine figure is used to break down sentimentality and deconstruct idealistic misconceptions about love, and Robinson uses the character Walsingham to accomplish this goal. Walsingham, in a moment of self-reflection, acknowledges the true reasons behind his love for Isabella, which he cannot give up:

The human mind seldom relinquishes a pursuit wherein self-love is the predominating spring of action. All the vanity of the heart is roused to subdue that which presumes to resist its wishes; and we are unwilling to relinquish a shadow of success, lest we betray our want of power, though the accomplishment of our enterprise promises little happiness to reward us for our labour.

(Robinson 2003 b: 248)

His faithfulness and devotion to Isabella are not 'heroic', as would have been the case in many other sensibility novels, but merely signify a pursuit of self-gratification, the desire to show one's power over another. Walsingham's 'rape' of Amelia thus signifies the shattering of sentimental doctrine, as Robinson disrupts the notion that virtue and suffering will be rewarded and that love is a pure feeling. Both Walsingham and Amelia act under the sentimental illusion of love, only to be rewarded by the true ugliness of it. Their blighted union offers Walsingham a night of lustful revenge, whereby the passions reveal his true self: no sentimental hero or reasoning philosopher, but a flawed man driven by forces he cannot control. Amelia gains from it the tragic recognition that virtuous love is not rewarded with a happy ending. The night between Amelia and Walsingham symbolizes not only the shattered illusions of love, but also the crumbling of the benevolent illusion of an age with impossible ideals.

'I was the dupe of my own passions, an alien from reason, the slave of early impressions, and the pupil of restless nature.' (Robinson 2003 b: 349). What Robinson creates in the character of Walsingham is a product of his age, a sceptic idealist, philosopher and romantic; yet what he discovers, not only about his world but about himself, leaves him disheartened and cynical. The most painful realisation for Walsingham, perhaps for Robinson as well, is the unjust fate which may befall talent and genius:

I beheld virtue and genius oppressed, and destined to encounter every humiliation, while vice and ignorance reared their unblushing heads, and abjured all the sympathies of nature... If knaves and villains are to pass through the dark variety of crimes - to ingulph others, and escape themselves -

where is the justice of mankind? And what are the bonds that harmonize society? (Robinson 2003 b: 348 349)

Walsingham questions the Godwinian philosophy that man instinctively aims to work for the good of the whole or for his fellow man; what is apparent to **him** is that man, on the contrary, is intent upon disturbing the foundations of society and overturning the morals that supposedly structure it. Walsingham sees philosophy almost as a sham, for it has done little to curb man's destructive instincts or the evils in societies at large:

The basis of philosophy is a universal love of our species; the mischiefs of jealousy, resentment, pride, revenge, and hatred set its precepts at defiance, while they nourish all the miseries of life, and render the thinking creature, man, scarcely one degree less savage than the tiger which he shrinks from. (Robinson 2003 b: 350).

When Walsingham contemplates suicide, he asks:

Would not my disastrous fortune urge me on to an accumulation of crimes? and was it not virtue to shake off a being, which would either become a curse to society, or a terrible example of offended justice? (Robinson 2003 b: 350)

Walsingham becomes persuaded that one can exist only as the villain or the victim: fate will drive one into criminal behaviour, because of society's pressures, or one will eventually become the prey of those criminals. Robinson is sympathetic to Walsingham's moral fall as a philosopher, because it demonstrates that he is human. She sees that the high ideals of men of benevolence and reason presented throughout the eighteenth century are unrealistic, if not unattainable. Walsingham's role as the fallen philosopher shatters expectations about love, civilisation, and society. Robinson uses his character to compel her readers to come to terms with the flaws of their own humanity and, by refusing to morally 'judge' Walsingham, she encourages the acknowledgement that weaknesses and flaws are an inevitable part of life. Walsingham's character further reveals the limitations of philosophy through the force of his passions, something which cannot be controlled by reason. Robinson's strength as writer is shown most strikingly through introspective, imperfect characters such as Walsingham, rather than the 'gender bending' Sir Sidney, who is generally more favoured by feminist scholars.

The incestuous plot of *The False Friend* is particularly interesting to feminist scholarship for it provides significant elucidation on male/female power relations. Shaffer (1999: 2, 8-9) observes that constructing incestuous relations was a common plot strategy in Gothic and sensibility novels during the eighteenth century. From a feminist perspective the father figure

stands in for, and is in ways coextensive with, the patriarchal figurehead, the critique of the father as abusive is equally an attack on patriarchal power, specifically for the way it empowers men, who arguably stand in as father figures over those dependent on them. (9)

Therefore, according to Shaffer (10), father-daughter incest stands for

the most dire female suffering - political, social, and sexual - and should instigate the greatest sympathy from readers exercising their own sensibility in response to the sufferings displayed.

Ty (1998: 63-65) also finds validity in the notion that Gertrude's incestuous impulses represent a transgression into forbidden desire. She discusses a psychoanalytic perspective and concludes that Gertrude is confused about her sexuality and desires. However, she emphasises that Robinson is mostly interested in the nature of female desire, and that Gertrude's incestuous passion represents an unfulfilled fantasy, an unattainable object, the manifestation of imaginative possibilities which cannot be realised in Robinson's fallen world (1998: 64, 65). Ty again returns to a favoured feminist interpretation that the

damsel in distress becomes suggestive of a woman's sense of helplessness and vulnerability in a society that accorded her little real economic and social power. (65)

Robinson's incestuous plot in *The False Friend* thus functions as a mechanism to display women's desperate position in the world.

Susan Ford (1994: 51-52) explores the nature of father-daughter incest in *The False Friend*, amongst other novels, whereby they

'all share a plot powered by forbidden desire, a characteristic definition - and then redefinition - of both daughter and father...the involuted matrix of family relationships charts the disruptive connections between sexuality and power, figuring the forbidden desire as a threat to family, to the society, and to the very self.'

Ford adds that while the orphaned daughters in these novels are defined in terms of powerlessness and isolation which contribute to their lack of 'self',

'the fathers are defined in terms of authority, whether personal or institutional, that manifests itself through both love and the sometimes angry exercise of power.' (52)

Shaffer, Ty, and Ford understand the father-daughter incest plot in relation to woman's forbidden desire for power, as they see the father figure as representing an oppressive authority which suppresses transgressive desire.⁵¹ Within this perspective, issues such as female victimisation, the thwarting of sexual desire, and exclusion from power re-emerge strongly. However, Ford (1994: 56) does note that

Gertrude is the most aware of herself as a victim. That victimisation comes, however, not only from the corrupt institutions of society but also from within. The greatest tyranny woman is subject to (she argues) springs from her own heart, her passionate nature.

Peter Thorslev (1965: 41-42) gives an account of incest as a Romantic symbol, recognising

the psychological truth that evil can grow from what are apparently the best of motives, that insidious lusts exist in the best and bravest of men; or the metaphysical truth that there is an element of irrational caprice in the order of things which can transform a seemingly innocent love into a degrading lust.

Thorslev (1965: 44) argues that the horrors and marvels of the Gothic genre prepared for the rise of Romanticism, signifying

an irruption of the irrational into the well-ordered eighteenth century literary universe; they are the poet's or the novelist's way of expressing the possibility that there is not only moral evil (a result of the misdeeds of man) but also an ultimate and metaphysical evil in the universe around us - evils never satisfactorily accounted for in the optimistic eighteenth century theodicies.

⁵¹ Mary Fravret (1994: 159-161) alternatively argues that incest, particularly brother-sister incest, indicates a disturbing similarity between two genres, namely poetry and the novel. She points out that Smith attempts to redefine the hierarchy of genres, where poetry is associated with the masculine, while novels are seen as 'feminine'. Through the combination of the lyric and the novel, sibling incest serves to feminize poetry, a traditionally 'masculine' literary field.

Thorslev (44) further asserts that the passionate loves, hatreds, sadism, and incest of Gothic novels 'imply a deep-felt objection to the shallowness of empirical or associationist psychologies.' Therefore by questioning the superiority of reason over the mind, the Gothic breaks away from logical and scientific accountability.

Robinson's female philosopher character, Gertrude, does not only explore female powerlessness against male patriarchal authority, as some feminist scholars suggest, but investigates, as Thorslev surmises, the thought of an overly optimistic age which denies the inexplicable evils of human society. The eighteenth century's confidence in human reason and benevolence fails to acknowledge human frailty and weakness. In *The False Friend*, Gertrude's symbolic quest for love in the figure of Denmore reveals a horrific truth about herself and the world she lives in. Lord Denmore is endowed with the appearance of perfection, reason, and generosity but Gertrude's perseverance in loving him blinds her to his real, flawed nature and perpetuates greater disasters and 'unnatural' evils clearly signified by her incestuous desires.

Gertrude's unrealistic love for Denmore parallels eighteenth-century society's optimistic philosophical belief in man's reason and civilised nature. Gertrude's desperate illusionary love equates society's futile quest for an impossibly unrealistic eighteenth-century (ideal) man. Robinson insinuates through the tragic, incestuous plot of her novel that the ideal man of benevolence and reason does not exist. To deny the true chaotic, flawed state of the world poisoned by unnatural evils and horrors, for Robinson only leads to more tragedies. As I have explained earlier, what she attempts to expose is the gap between social reality and philosophical illusions about man's nature.

Gertrude is a fallen philosopher. Like Maria in Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Women* (2007) and Hays' *Emma Courtney* (2000), who allow their reason to succumb to their passion. The female philosophers of Hays and Wollstonecraft, are mostly corrupted by external stimuli: an imperfect education, unsuitable novels, and corrupt men. Yet Gertrude, who has been similarly affected by these factors, chooses not to accept the world in its flawed state and opts for death. Her acute sensibility disables her from recognising that suffering and victimisation are part of the real world - one either must strengthen one's mind to this fact or be destroyed by it. Gertrude (Robinson 1799: vol. 3; 30) attributes her downfall to her secluded childhood and reasons that

[b]y frequently witnessing the atrocities of mankind, I would have been more guarded against them; and by intercourse with the more amiable, I might have felt in a fainter degree, the powerful attractions of Lord Denmore... Habit would reconcile it to the evils attendant on human destiny; and pleasure would fail to exhilarate the heart beyond the boundaries of reason.

Habituation to the realities of human suffering does more for one's education than philosophy. Robinson implies that eighteenth-century philosophy denies the truth about the inherent cruelty of human nature through its insistent optimism, and it does little to prepare one for the true realities of suffering and human victimisation. Gertrude (Robinson 1799: vol. 4; 296) reflects:

How illusive is the theory of philosophy! how difficult is the practice! how facile is every mental acquirement, when placed in competition with self-knowledge.

True self-knowledge, Robinson surmises, is brought about only by exposure to suffering in the world, and philosophy is a superficial mental attribute which blinds one to the true knowledge of self. Robinson alludes to the supposition that one must first come terms with one's own imperfect humanity and inevitable human suffering, before one can act with reason.

Thorslev (1965: 50) observes that incest, particularly sibling incest, in Romantic theory and poetry indicates an alienation from society and the poet's narcissistic sensibility and predilection for solipsism. Romantic heroes tend to have an almost 'obsessive preoccupation with their own feelings, moods and thoughts' (52) and Romantic poetry may show evidence that 'one's own mind and its ideas are the only reality.' (52-55). He deduces that incest was a Romantic literary symbol which illustrated the psyche's preoccupation with self and its tragic isolation in an increasingly alien world (56).

Robinson's incestuous themes explore this Romantic phenomenon, especially in the character Walsingham and his obsession with his own feelings and sense of reality. There is a hint of sibling incest between Isabella and Walsingham, at least from his side. Walsingham and Isabella admit to their brother/sister type of relationship; they were certainly raised as such with Mr. Hanbury supplying the father figure in the temporarily content family (Robinson 2003 b: 119, 162, 125). Walsingham (Robinson 2003 b: 153) in fact admits that he had never

avowed a passion for Isabella till Sidney's return, and that his feelings for her were dictated by the 'purest friendship.' When Walsingham decides to transgress those boundaries of brotherly/sisterly friendship, his passions become obsessive and indirectly incestuous, and his pursuit of them alienates him from society. He acknowledges this isolation and solipsism when he affirms that 'I feel, yes, I feel that I am fit only for myself.' (Robinson 2003 b: 43). Similarly, Gertrude's incestuous desire for her father indicates her own isolation from society; it is her 'narcissistic sensibility' and obsessions with her own thoughts which lead to her downfall.

To conclude: in this Chapter I have attempted to explore how Robinson uses her 'fallen philosophers' to expose more than the victimisation of women. Her philosophers concretise an existential view of the world whereby people become subject to the whims of nature, fate, and God. There is no escaping the ugly reality of existence, but an acceptance of it will assist in attaining a greater understanding of one's self and of one's strength. Robinson exposes, through the characters of Walsingham and Gertrude, the false expectations that eighteenth-century philosophy created about the benevolence of mankind, and emphasises the gap between (unfoundedly) optimistic philosophical beliefs and devastating social reality.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE VICTIMISATION OF GENIUS: MARY ROBINSON AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE PHILOSOPHER

Mary Robinson's time has come again in the early twenty-first century: she fashioned her own image, she knew how to manage the media, she lived in the world of celebrity, but she was also an acute and often comic analyst of that world.

(Paula Byrne 2005: 425)

Mary Robinson was dead: the talented actress, spectacular Cyprian, accomplished and industrious author, committed feminist and radical, charming and witty hostess, spendthrift, devoted daughter and mother, compassionate, sensitive and sometimes spicily difficult woman. A genius? Perhaps only in her extraordinary versatility, but not undeserving of the 'One little laurel wreath' she craved.

(Hester Davenport 2004: 221)

[A description of Lord Byron] He was the epitome of mysterious glamour and also a commodity opportunistically manufactured by his publisher, the celebrity machinery of the newspapers, reviews, magazines and caricaturists, and his own eye for the dramatic. The force was felt across Europe, generating fresh inspiration not only in literature but also in the other arts.

(Susan Wolfson & Peter Manning 2005: x)

Both Romantic poets described in these passages were notorious in their own time, providing gossip fodder in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British society, each leaving upon the history of English literature a singular poetic mark. Whereas Byron has been established as an important subject for literary scholarship for almost two centuries, Robinson has not enjoyed the same privilege. Forgotten for many decades, her work made its re-entry into the British literary critical sphere in the late 1980s, as feminist scholarship's interest and influence in the field of Romantic literature burgeoned. Robinson's reputation as a Romantic poet is now virtually established and scholarly interest continues to grow steadily. Yet the question remains: on what terms has Robinson's recently attained status been established, and was she really a genius worthy of posterity's note?

According to Byrne in the quotation above, Robinson had a talent for ‘fashioning her own image’, ‘managing the media’, and living in a ‘world of celebrity’, while still being an ‘acute and comic analyst of the world’. Davenport covers an even wider scope of characterisation when she describes Robinson as a ‘talented actress’, ‘spectacular Cyprian’, feminist, radical, devoted daughter and mother, and often a difficult woman. Both critics appear to single out for note and praise every other talent well above her writing skills, supposedly one of the primary reasons for which an author is usually studied. Wolfson & Manning succeed better in describing the potency of the poet Byron, ‘the epitome of mysterious glamour’. He was a force felt across Europe who gave fresh inspiration to literature and the arts, whereas Robinson might be regarded as a genius perhaps only in her own ‘extraordinary versatility.’

The contrast between the reputations of Byron and Robinson, as deduced from these quotes, is quite remarkable: the great artist and the self-fashioning socialite. In the past decades feminist scholarship has generally attributed the frequent failure of women writers to establish their artistic reputation to a dominating masculine presence in literature. Negative gender perceptions have narrowed opportunities for female writers throughout history; therefore, it is natural that their artistic reputations would be stunted. The current depictions of the artists, however, do not issue from gender-biased nineteenth-century reviewers who entertained no interest in the subjugation of women, but from modern writers who have long been exposed to feminism. Furthermore, they are women writers themselves. Despite many years of progress in the study of female writers in Romanticism and their elevation in literary status, it is still the male poet who seems to triumph. The problem can no longer be attributed purely to the domination of masculine literature, as feminism has gained enough influence within modern scholarly circles to counter many of the negative assumptions which have surrounded female writers from the Romantic era.

The ‘superior’ portrayal of Byron, as poet, need not be an inaccurate depiction, merely because of its apparent masculine exaggeration: poetic talent cannot be denied nor should it remain unacknowledged, whatever the gender of the artist. Rather, the question which needs to be investigated is why Mary Robinson should continue to be depicted as a less than affable woman and a writer with insufficiently distinctive talents by certain critics of the twenty-first century, a time of liberation for Western woman? Two hundred years later, her reputation as a scandalous courtesan is still a dominant image which haunts her reputation. The predicament of eighteenth-century female writers now no longer lies only in a patriarchally

dominated history, but within modern feminist scholarship itself. The dispute does not concern only how eighteenth-century women were viewed in the past, but is about how we choose to construct them in the present. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which **some** feminist scholarship decides to construct these eighteenth-century female philosopher-writers according to a certain perception of what a female philosopher or writer should be. Often it is feminist theories which dictate the nature of these constructions.

This chapter will build on scholarship which disputes the separation of Romanticism into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ literature, an approach initially advocated by Mellor in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), and followed by Berehent (1995), Cross (2001), Lokke (2001), Craciun (2003), Lau (2009), and Cross (2009). First, I propose to analyse how Robinson is viewed as a Romantic poet within current criticism, and how she is ‘constructed’ in recent studies of her *Memoirs*. I will argue that the emphasis placed on her *Memoirs* serves to construct an image of Robinson which seeks to promote feminist theories of patriarchal victimisation and gender construction, rather than reveal her true value as a Romantic writer. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that, on the contrary, Robinson used victimisation to foster her egotistical sense of artistic genius in the novels *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter*, echoing a Miltonic ‘Romantic Satan’, which depicts the poet as the ‘masculine model of the heroic outcast’ (Craciun 2003: 100-107).

I hope to show that certain strands of Romantic feminist scholarship in many ways deny eighteenth-century female writers a stable sense of identity and is loath to concede that they had access to a Romantic ‘masculine’ artistic egotism. Robinson’s sense of poetic identity is frequently termed ‘fragmented’ or ‘theatrical’ on the grounds that, through her multiple uses of pseudonyms, she is unable to maintain a single identity as she consistently adjusts herself according to the patriarchal cultural context of her audience. Her consistent poetic metamorphosis also proves useful in asserting the instability of gender definitions.

I suggest that a denial of a Romantic ‘feminine’ artistic egotism may ultimately undervalue an eighteenth-century female writer’s ability to compete with male Romantic writers on equal terms. Therefore, a greater effort needs to be made by specific Romantic feminist scholars to recognise the negative consequences which their own theoretical agendas may have on the process of rediscovery of an important Romantic female writer. We need to explain why, even after decades of feminist awareness, Byron, or other major male poets for that matter,

still appear as Romantic poetic heroes, while Robinson lumbers behind them, despite her notable artistic achievements, yearning to lay claim to her little ‘laurel wreath of fame.’

Berhendt (1995 § 3) points out that post-Victorian canon formation suppressed women poets who had been familiar to their audience at the time, as institutions were male-dominated and women wielded little power and influence. However, he notes that

‘[w]omen writers were not the mere echoes of men; nor did their work simply represent a feminine emphasis within a masculine literary ethos. Hence the need for an enlightened revision of Romanticism generally, one that incorporates male and female writers of stature within the Romantic literary community.’

(proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did000000494954711&Fmt=3&client=43168&RQT=309&VName=PQD: §3)

Some progress has been made in criticising the separation of male and female Romantic writing in recent scholarship; however, although a tendency is developing to perceive male and female writers as sharing cultural and idealistic values, more investigation needs to take place in this area of study.

In her *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender* (2006: xviii), Susan Wolfson disputes the notion that gender was seen as a fixed entity by men and women. She not only argues for the existence of women writers who breach typical eighteenth-century gender definitions by demonstrating gender’s constructed nature in their literary work, but also sees *both* men and women as experimenting in various gender roles. She implies that the boundaries between genders were more permeable than has previously been assumed and were crossed frequently by both sexes. However, she adds that

Romanticism was then remapped to relativize received tradition: there was the ‘masculine’ canon and the ‘feminine’ of (excluded) women’s writing; the first a nexus of values and practises summed (variously) as egotistical, colonizing, appropriative, imperialistic, anti-domestic, sublime; the other matrix summed (variously) as selfless, object orientated, empathetic, sympathetic, communal, domestic. (2006: 3)

Lau (2009: 3) correctly comments that Romantic women writers have been viewed by critical scholarship mostly in the manner that Wolfson previously outlined:

For the most, however, this has been the trend in Romantic studies; the pendulum has swung predominantly in the direction of viewing women writers separately from the men and emphasizing their differences and antagonisms between the sexes.

I concur with Lau (3) that the time is now ‘ripe for moving to this next level and studying interrelations between literary men and women.’ Lau (8) argues that our understanding of Romanticism need not be radically changed by adding new writers who are studied separately from traditionally revered figures; our perceptions should rather be re-conceived by exploring interactions and conversations between literary men and women that shed light on one another’s works. Therefore, Lau argues, ‘Romanticism’ should be expanded to incorporate complexities, but retain the term which designates ‘a rich, diverse literary period in which a set of shared attributes may nonetheless be discerned.’ According to Lau (8), these attributes often involve conflicts

between self and community, reason and passion, tradition and innovation, violence and forbearance, earthly and spiritual, idealism and realism, imagination and judgement - with which both men and women struggled.

Finally, Lau (8) claims that

Rather than assign one set of beliefs and values to male writers and an opposing set to women, it is often more accurate to recognize the mutual ambivalences in Romantic writers of both genders.

Lau’s approach to this issue provides a far more fruitful way of understanding Romantic female writers, as it does not isolate them artificially from cultural influences exercised upon *both* men and women of the time, nor does it perpetuate eighteenth-century critics’ view of women writers as consistently ‘different’.

Robinson’s notorious *Memoirs* have often come under the scholarly microscope. This autobiographical work proves extremely interesting for some feminist scholars, because it supposedly reveals much about how women writers construct their own subjectivities. Close (2004 a: 180-185) argues that the *Memoirs* illustrate how Robinson rewrites herself as a typical Gothic heroine, while also redefining the image to include the ‘values’ of sexually experienced women, alongside those of stereotypically virginal innocents. Close sees

Robinson's *Memoirs* primarily as a redemption narrative, an opportunity to redeem the Gothic heroine, the sexually notorious woman, and herself. She further observes that

[h]er *Memoirs* ultimately validates her experiences as a sexually notorious woman determined to participate in the public sphere as an actress, writer and sexual agent. (182)

According to Close, Robinson seeks to 'subvert Gothic scripts of sexuality', attempts to reassign 'the significance of sexual virtue and [posits] that independence and strength of character are more vital to a woman than her virginity' (184). Robinson's heroines develop a 'political subjectivity', which allows them to see 'beyond the immediate threats to their safety' and 'connect their individual suffering with the far reaching institutions and practices that repress women' (185).

Close's analysis of the autobiography aims to show how Robinson rewrote masculine suppressive ideas about women in Gothic literature to revalue the sexually experienced woman. An attribute which has become closely intertwined with the current conception of the female philosopher is her supposed ability to express her sexuality, an appreciation of which no doubt stems from modern feminism's ideal of the sexually liberated woman. Close's argument, therefore, aims to associate Robinson's writings with the sexually liberated female philosopher. However, I would suggest that there is also the possibility that Robinson, in her *Memoirs* at least, associated herself with the virginal maiden. Robinson may have attempted to align her innocence (as she saw it) with the virginal Gothic maiden's, instead of replacing it with the status of 'woman of sexuality.' What mattered for Robinson was the purity of her soul and mind. By inserting herself within the imagery of the Gothic virginal maiden, she may have striven to highlight her own innocence, a perhaps more fitting goal in an eighteenth-century context.

Ty (1998: 20-41) seeks to investigate how Robinson constructed herself as a subject. The *Memoirs* represent different types of biography of her life, which seek to counter negative representations of her within the public realm. Robinson not only 'engenders' herself in the *Memoirs* and her novels 'through cultural expectations of what a woman ought to be', but also is 'manipulated' by her implied readers and public into becoming a fiction of 'her female selfhood' (25). Ty further argues that Robinson

resists and inscribes herself as the figure of the repentant whore, because her status as the one-time mistress of the Prince of Wales is the primary reason for both her fame and her disgrace in her early years... [Robinson's] depiction of herself reveals how she is framed by the male gaze, constrained discursively by social definitions of her identity, even as she wishes to free herself of the public's misconceptions about her. (25-27)

Ty (31) views Robinson's tendency to tell only half-truths, sentimentalise events, and suppress facts in her *Memoirs* as a manifestation of her struggle with her own subjectivity. Therefore, Ty appears to suggest that Robinson's sense of identity is unstable, because of male preconceived notions of womanhood which ultimately condition her selfhood. In this view, Robinson is ultimately a 'victim' of her world and society because the narrative she constructs in her *Letters* (2003 a) of

female powerlessness and of male deceit, is one that reflects her personal experience of being forsaken. (1998: 35)

Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* appeals to Ty, because it reveals more about the writer's sense of victimisation in a patriarchal society, in contrast to her rather passive acceptance in the *Memoirs*. In contrast, noting that Ty constructs Robinson as an 'object lacking agency', Brock (2002: 108) observes that

feminist critics, however, have denied women the ability to control their public images and Mary Robinson especially has been depicted as a poor, defenceless victim hounded by the press.

I particularly agree with Brock's assessment of Ty's and of other feminist scholars' interpretation.

Brock's criticism (2002: 108-109) can be little disputed, as Ty does emphasise that male conception of womanhood and public perceptions of Robinson dictate how she constructs her own authorial identity: cultural context is seen to completely negate any ability to function as an individual writer. Wolfson (2006: 1) soberly and tellingly repositions the argument. While conceding that an overwhelming cultural context can influence the determination of individual literary agency, she reminds us of the importance of the role of literature itself in the process:

Some of the most influential accounts of Romantic-period writing, especially on questions of gender, have taken this cue to invoke a determinative socio-historical context, one seen to dictate, or at least underwrite, literary practise... While no one would deny the formation and force of context, there is a loss in discounting literary agency in the world, and a loss, moreover, in neglecting literature itself as a context in which ways of the world are refracted by oppositional pressure, critical thinking. (1-2)

Regarding Robinson, I suggest that her 'literary' agency has certainly been lost within her gendered context. While, as Wolfson observes, the importance of cultural context cannot be denied, we should not consider it powerful enough to dictate and undermine an eighteenth-century female writer's ability to resist and construct her own individuality. Ty's determination to create a victim of masculine literary discourse who voices her frustrations is part of current discourse on the female philosopher and its emphasis on gender formation. However, it appears to unjustly underrate the female writer's ability to determine her own literary identity.

Mellor's article (2000: 271-304) follows a strain similar to Ty's argument in over-emphasising cultural context's power to limit individual agency. Mellor attempts to use Robinson's portraits and the *Memoirs* to answer the question, 'How could the story of female sexuality be told?' (271). In so doing, she turns Robinson's life story into a broad generalisation of those of women writers. The 'Woman question' becomes the central issue, as the way in which Robinson's life is portrayed in her texts is identified with an expression of some form of gender oppression. For Mellor (272), the four competing narratives found in Robinson's texts are those of a

whore; unprotected and abused wife; a star-crossed lover; or a talented performer and successful artist.

Mellor seeks to separate Robinson from the world of the masculine poet, declaring that

[t]he representation of Mary Robinson as above all an artist is also the self she chose to project in her *Memoirs*. In contrast to a masculine myth of authorship, a myth of original genius, Robinson's *Memoirs* consciously construct a myth of female authorship as *maternal* creation, an authorship that combines intense feminine sensibility with biological motherhood. (292)

Mellor (296) observes that Robinson's own biography, fiction, and poetry present a diverse and contradictory series of authorial self-images, reinforced by a name that constantly shifts with her use of various pseudonyms. She explains this strategy by suggesting that Robinson associates genius with sensibility, the empathetic ability to enter the feelings and character of other people, a capacity she genders as feminine (297).

Mellor virtually divests Robinson of any individual agency and portrays her as 'subsumed' into eighteenth-century gender narratives. She insists that

Mary Robinson becomes a vivid example of the way in which individual agency, especially female agency, is necessarily subsumed into pre-scripted sexual and gender narratives (such as 'woman as whore,' 'the woman as angel in the house,' etc.). This historicist reading is supported by Robinson's *Memoirs* in which she inscribes herself as victim, a victim of her innate temperament, her 'too acute sensibility' (297)

In this view, Robinson created a concept of self as entirely 'fluid, unstable and performative' (298), the complete opposite of the masculine sense of self which is knowable, stable, and predictable. Mellor's definition of Robinson's sense of identity is informed by a post-modernist perspective from which feminism has drawn its conclusions on the formation of female identity. The focus is placed firmly on how context creates the writer, instead on how the writer may have attained her own literary agency, perhaps rebelling against accepted social norms. Mellor surmises that Robinson's identity, both personal and authorial,

can be nothing more nor less than the sum total of the scripts she performed both in public and in private. (300)

She further compares Robinson to a modern day Madonna, being nothing more than a public image, and describes her as the

remote, alluring, fashionable, but forever inaccessible 'Perdita' - the woman who is always already constructed by the gaze of her admirers and the gendered scripts of nineteenth-century England. (300)

A well established feminist criticism is that women are generally depicted, in male-authored literature, as passive beings with little control or say over their own destinies. Therefore, it is

a little surprising to see a feminist critic like Mellor rehearsing the same flawed assertion. In her view, Robinson is nothing but a passive recipient of history and negative gender stereotypes, a 'site' of 'constructed' texts. Mellor shapes Robinson into a victim of her cultural context, and does very little, in this particular article, to define the value of Robinson's literary contributions or individuality. Mellor appears to 'construct' Robinson according to her own feminist theoretical perspective: Robinson's one redeeming quality appears to be her 'multi-faceted' sense of self, and we know how important a 'fragmented' identity that is not biologically fixed but socially created is for gender and feminist theorists. This is a necessary criterion for the modern conception of the female philosopher, which views the figure as possessing a sexual identity which is socially constructed.

Pascoe (1995: 253-268; 1997: 163-183) also focuses on how Robinson constructs her poetic and authorial identity; however, she does not substantiate her argument from the *Memoirs*, but rather from the writer's use of multiple pseudonyms in the daily newspaper *The Morning Post*. She argues (1997: 173) that Robinson used her prominence within the newspaper to 'reinvent herself, to substitute for her old notoriety a new, distinguished status as serious literary figure.' Her pseudonyms 'represent a sustained and sustaining experiment in self-representation', as she used them to 'proliferate herself' and as guises for her own poetic experimentation. Robinson's

alternate identities are not, then, an attempt to seize a masculine authority but rather an effort to explore the possibilities of a multiply constituted female one. (173-174)

She sees Robinson's pseudonyms - in contrast to Wordsworth's 'stable' poetic voice - as a fluid, theatrical representation of her 'authentic' self; they 'project a self constructed from an array of cultural forces' and depict a theatrical persona with a 'fragmented consciousness' (178). Pascoe concludes that while Robinson's self-representation did not serve her well in terms of her reception, it did provide her with a

'remarkably fluid identity which she could use to wrest herself out of the stultifying subject position of the publically fallen woman and the aesthetically limiting position of the Della Cruscan Laura Maria.' (183)

In a later article (2004), Pascoe seeks to illustrate the lack of individual agency and the effects of gender analysis on Robinson's work, yet I would argue that her emphasis on the 'theatrical' or 'performative' nature of Robinson's identity places greater value upon the writer's self-representation than it does upon her actual ability to write. As Curran (2002: 9) points out, the problem with this kind of approach is that 'the surfaces of [Robinson's] poetry are, historically speaking, of greater import than their depths.' While Pascoe (1997: 4-6) disputes Mellor's 'feminine vs masculine' understanding of Romanticism, and instead sees it as beneficial to study male and female Romantics as elements in a symbiotic relationship, she still does not sufficiently appreciate how Robinson functions equally in the Romantic *masculine* realm. Pascoe views Robinson's fragmented consciousness as distinctly feminine, and argues that her fluid identity protects her from a debilitating scandalous past, and saves her from an inferior position as a 'fallen woman'. Although Pascoe (1997: 177) does not regard Robinson's performative identity as 'escapist', she does maintain that such an identity functions as a means of self-protection from a harsh literary environment.

Pascoe's performative theory has been extremely influential on other studies on Robinson. As Curran (2002: 11) observes:

she [Robinson] was a public person, a genius at self-representation: the numerous poetic personae she wrote under during the 1790s testify to the protean nature of her guises and voices.

Feminist critics find Robinson's fragmented identity an extremely interesting one. Setzer (1996: 501-520) argues in a similar strain, but uses Greenblatt's New Historicist understanding of self-fashioning in order to analyse Robinson's construction of her authorial persona in the *Sylphid* essays. Setzer states that 'Robinson's Sylphid persona posits an imaginative flight from the materiality of her own body', which ultimately suggests that 'the goal of Robinson's self-fashioning was to refine herself out of bodily existence' (503). For Setzer (505), Robinson's *Sylphid* forms a moment of feminist resistance to the stereotypical representations of women as reflected in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*.⁵² Robinson's constantly changing 'sylphid' commentator effectively defends herself against the stigma of being a woman. Setzer (515-516) observes that there is no escape from history, and once historical

⁵²⁵² For an alternative interpretation of Robinson's *Sylphid*, see M.J Musgrove (2009: 159-166), who argues that Robinson creates a space for the representation of the middle-class female which breaks away from the negative stereotypes of women depicted in the London scene.

texts surrounding the formation of Robinson's *Sylphid* essays are taken into consideration, such as Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, it becomes extremely difficult to construct a critical narrative that fully liberates Robinson (or ourselves). She points out that Robinson's attempt at self-fashioning is a partial failure because 'it does not free her to float above the artificiality against which she rails'; Robinson merely reveals the cultural and historical forces in which she is perhaps unwillingly or unwittingly complicit (516).

Setzer offers a historical, and pessimistic, viewpoint, as she argues that no one is able to function beyond the historical forces which create them; this virtually nullifies individualism in any writing. In Setzer's study of Robinson's self-fashioning we see the writer as a desperate prisoner trying to escape her historical, masculinist context; her malleable fictional character in the *Sylphid* essays demonstrates the impossibility to escape one's historical epoch, or one's gender. Robinson is once again constructed as a victim of history for the benefit of feminist criticism; her identity is displayed as unstable and constantly evolving according to forces beyond her control. I would suggest that the problem lies not so much in Robinson's inability to escape history, as it does in our unwillingness to allow her to escape it. Might this reluctance be due, perhaps, to the fact that to keep her individualism trapped within its historical context better serves post-modern theories?

Laura Runge (2004: 563-564) claims that one of the attractions of Robinson's *Memoirs* is its chameleon-like nature; in other words, it is well liked thanks to Robinson's fluid, performative identity.⁵³ She states that

[s]cholars are unsurprisingly intrigued by the various masks of Robinson's self representation, particularly when they are at odds with the culture's dominant representation of Robinson as 'whore'. (564)

Runge aims to show that Robinson's self-representations are a reaction to the conventions of anti-adultery discourse which found favour with the general public in the wake of her affair with the Prince of Wales. She argues that

⁵³ It is not only Robinson's *Memoirs* which attract attention because of their 'fluid' or performative identity construction; Robinson's adoption of multiple personae, in general, attracts a good deal of interest from feminist scholars.

[t]he negative public identities she accumulated - prostitute, adulteress, condemned writing woman -, all influence the construction of her subjectivity as she takes up particular details from the discourse and either explicitly or implicitly challenges them. (574)

Runge further points out that Robinson does not portray herself as a repentant whore; rather, she chooses to complicate her story by emphasising the libertinism of the male élite, and aligning herself with her masculine counterparts through the wage-earning labour of authorship and acting, thereby distancing herself from associations with sexual commerce. Robinson emphasises the demanding nature of her work in a way that does not allow for condescension or the trivialization of her writing (574-575). Runge praises Robinson in that she

refused to be associated with prostitution,' and clearly 'distinguished her identity from any trade in sex, and instead renders in a serious, if melodramatic, way the labour of writing that eventually sustains her independence. (585-586)

She concludes that Robinson

confidently participated in the bourgeois moral discourse, refusing to be exiled by virtue of her adultery. Her *Memoirs* contributes to the anti-adultery campaign by commanding its discourse and telling the story that led to her adultery, and it is a complicated telling, indeed. (586)

Runge is far more optimistic than Setzer about Robinson's self-representation in the *Memoirs*, and recognises the resilience and vitality characteristic of Robinson's writing (582).

Although Runge paints a far more positive picture of Robinson than Setzer, Mellor, or Ty are willing to do, she does emphasise a particular aspect of Robinson's, namely her spirited defence of her own reputation as a female writer. Thus Robinson is commended because, in her *Memoirs*, she vigorously attempts to stem the tide of negative discourse surrounding her scandalous, so-called adulterous, lifestyle. Robinson is valued precisely because she can 'fight back', a quality generally admired in our modern conception of the female philosopher, which requires that a woman writer should voice her rebellion. Furthermore, Runge's analysis still focuses on Robinson's construction of her own identity, and does not recognise her ability to access what is perceived as 'masculine' Romanticism.

Linda Peterson (1994: 36-49), however, does permit Robinson to be acknowledged as a participant in the Romantic 'myth'. She argues that Robinson's *Memoirs*

illustrates a woman writer's attempt to participate in Romantic myths of authorship and the difficulties of such participation. (36-37)

and adds that, while Robinson strove to present herself as an authentic Romantic artist, her female contemporaries and successors rejected both her as their 'literary mother' and her mode of self-presentation. Instead, they chose to validate a sense of female authorship which excluded the assertion of genius, literary taste, and the poetic production of literary knowledge. Peterson notes that Robinson attempted to draw a parallel between her life and Sappho's, as

Sappho represents, for Robinson and other women poets, an ancient, original, and originating figure who fulfils the criteria for Romantic artistry, yet adds specifically female features to the myth of becoming a poet. Sappho adds the possibility of female community and a female literary tradition. (41)

Expanding her analysis, Peterson argues that Robinson closely links the ideas of maternity and of literary production, by associating (Romantic) authorship with motherhood and domesticity; she thus provides an original attempt to combine Romantic myths of the artist with a feminine version of becoming a poet. Peterson insists that Robinson's *Memoirs* is a

model of the woman artist's autobiography, one showing her (literary) daughter(s) how to become an author. From the maternal perspective, the *Memoirs* is a confirmation of and testimony to Robinson's genuine female artistry, uncompromising in its insistence on genius *and* domestic solicitude. (48)

Mellor (2000: 297) out-rightly disputes Peterson's assertion that the *Memoirs* could have embraced a Romantic myth of authorship, on the grounds that Robinson must be gendered as 'feminine'. Aiming to validate the existence of a 'female community' with a female literary tradition, Mellor is determined to keep Robinson 'segregated', whereas Peterson clearly pursues the possibility of associating her with 'masculine' Romanticism. However, while Mellor grudgingly concedes that Robinson does promote certain feminine and domestic

ideals, it is Robinson's specific attempt to leave a 'maternal' perspective and legacy for later writers which particularly appeals to Peterson.

In my view, Claire Brock (2002:107-124) provides a substantial interpretation of Robinson's 'authorial self': instead of focusing on the theme of her fragmented identity, she highlights Robinson's ability to promote herself and her own celebrity. Brock argues that Robinson did not collapse under her notoriety, or try to escape it; rather, she

exploited her renowned past and her firm grasp of the mechanics of eighteenth-century fame to ensure maximum publicity for herself, both as a notorious actress and mistress, but also, later, as a writer. (107-108)

Brock recounts (113-115) how Robinson used fashion to foster her prominent position amongst London society and succeeded in posing a challenge to aristocratic dominance in this sphere. Through the many portraits painted of her, she was able to influence the public's perception of her status as the first and most famous mistress to the Prince of Wales; in this way, she also ensured that her name would constantly appear in print. In rejecting Setzer's suggestion that Robinson, in her *Sylphid* essays, achieved agency in her writing only by 'divorcing herself from a publically scarred body', Brock argues that Setzer follows the same strain as Gallagher's poststructuralist claim that no eighteenth-century female writer was ever able to own her text, but rather celebrated her dispossession of it (115). Brock, in contrast, argues that the author drew upon

discourses of fame, both thematically and as a powerful strategy to publicise the *presence* of the female writer; Robinson continued shrewdly to gauge reader response, using her celebrated name in her novels, poetry, and political theory of the 1790s. (115-116)

Brock also points out that self-references constantly appear in her novels; since she was 'acutely alert to consumer demand, Robinson exploited her sexual celebrity to sell her texts', (116). There are, indeed, several such self-references within *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter*; Brock, for instance, is struck by Robinson's ploy to use Martha, a novelist, as a character in the *Natural Daughter* (118).⁵⁴ More importantly, however, Brock

⁵⁴ It is interesting to draw a parallel between Mary Robinson's self-referential technique to deliberately promote herself as an author (Brock's argument) with Lord Byron's own self-referencing within *Don Juan*.

criticises the fact that Robinson's use of pseudonyms has been interpreted by some feminist scholars as a strategy to escape her true identity (118). Brock counter-argues that Robinson's 'literary disguises' were loaded with connotations of renown, being closely associated with famous women characters from Shakespearean plays or with celebrated literary figures, such as Pope's 'Sylphid' and Petrarch's 'Laura'. She notes that

these pseudonyms pointed to Robinson's confident ability to assimilate the identities of some of the most popular and famous writers and their creations of the eighteenth century and earlier, while still holding on, firmly, to Mary Robinson. (119)

Lastly, Brock asserts that

Far from succumbing to self-effacement, Robinson's texts present one with an author who threw off contemporary literary disguises to find and revitalise her famous self in her work. (120)

Brock's study of Robinson clearly departs from the positions taken by some of the critics discussed earlier, in that she represents Robinson as an *individual* who is not passively victimised by her own reputation, but is instead in control of it. Much of the theorisation around Robinson's self-fashioning, fragmented consciousness, multiple identities, and pseudonyms is linked to Robinson's presumed attempt to escape herself and her gender. Context, within this perspective, takes precedence over individuality. Brock, at least, allows Robinson some literary agency and the strength to control her social context, rather than resignation to merely being its victim.

I suggest that it may be fruitful to question the general tendency of critics to favour both Robinson's *Memoirs* (and the construction of herself within this text) and her portraits as the primary sources for a better understanding of her 'identity'. A foray into a wider range of texts might be helpful. For instance, I would argue that we should give some thought to one of her poems, *Stanzas to a Friend who desired to have My Portrait* (Robinson 2000: 139-142). In this composition, Robinson attempts to paint a picture of her own 'mind' and personality. It would have been helpful if Ty and Mellor had taken this text into account when they investigated the strategies employed by Robinson in constructing her identity. *Stanzas to a Friend* presents a rather different version of the author from what emerges in her *Memoirs*. Here she is not a heroine plagued by a vulgar, licentious husband and on flight

from libertine men. What we see is a confident woman who knows her own mind. To my knowledge, only Paula Byrne and Anca Munteanu have taken into serious consideration *Stanzas to a Friend*.

Paula Byrne infers that the poem was written to Banastre Tarleton, Robinson's lover, and claims that it was

thought by her friends to be very accurate... a painfully honest self-estimate of her virtues and her foibles. It gives insight into her ambition to be taken seriously as an author and discard her image as a celebrated beauty. (2005: 305)

Byrne mentions Robinson's poem only in her biography. Munteanu (2009), however, in a scholarly study of the poem offers new interpretations of Robinson's portraits by Reynolds and Gainsborough, which differ in their conclusions from Mellor's and Ty's interpretations. Furthermore, Munteanu argues that Robinson used both painted portraits and her poetic self-portrait to reinvent herself in order to acquire a different social, political, and artistic identity. Through this 'reinvention' Robinson attempts to relegate to the past her incarnations as actress and as mistress to the Prince of Wales, and replace them with that of prominent *literary* figure (124-152).

Munteanu counters Ty's and Mellor's assertions that Reynolds' and Gainsborough' portraits of Robinson depict her in a negative light by bringing out elements of the 'actress as whore' or of 'the 'beautiful whore' *tout-court*. They in fact present her in a 'most dignified and flattering light' (127). Her analysis of Robinson's famous portraits contributes a more realistic alternative reading, which does not seek to implicate the general male population of the artistic realm in a secret conspiracy to symbolically refer to women in terms of whorish stereotypes. Munteanu argues that *Stanzas to a Friend* responds to one of the most pressing issues for Romantic poets, namely 'the role of self-reflection in the human sciences' (139-140). Although she still refers to the poem as a 'feminine self-knowledge' text (140), because Robinson here examines the heart and not the mind, she does not argue that Robinson's cultural context creates her identity; rather, she states that the confessional passage in Robinson's poem

makes abundantly clear, [that] the speaker is in absolute control of her self-representation,' crediting 'painting, the sister art, with having taught her [Robinson] how to 'handle' her verbal portrait. (142)

Although she acknowledges Robinson's control over her own self-representation, Munteanu denies Robinson certain continuities with male Romantic poetry, noting that *Stanzas to a Friend* is a poem very much like those of other female poets, in that

Robinson shows no interest in the imaginative transcendence of Romantic ideology and the details of her life constitute the very substance of the poem. (143)

Munteanu expresses her admiration for Robinson's virtuosity, rhetorical power, and wit and asserts that 'rhetorically' the poem is an 'absolute triumph', for it is

serious and playful at the same time, precise but full of paradoxes' [constructed as a] 'witty game' (144)

I concur with Munteanu's reading of *Stanzas to a Friend*: the poem does not depict a 'repentant whore', persecuted heroine, scandal-tainted mistress, sentimental 'feminine' writer, or any of the numerous other identities subversively projected onto Robinson. Another element which appears to be missing from the poem is allusion to Robinson's so called 'fragmented identities', as the poem focuses upon a single identity. It is difficult to trace in it any sense of the 'victimised' woman, even though the poem does offer criticism on how men choose to perceive women. Paradoxically, certain feminist scholars who might wish to construct a 'feminist' identity for Robinson, would find the textual material of this poem far more suitable than her *Memoirs*. This thought leads one to consider the ramifications which feminist scholars' choice of highlighting Robinson's *Memoirs* over the poem may have on the construction of Robinson's artistic image.

The first couple of verses in *Stanzas to a Friend* (Robinson 2000: 139) criticise the value placed on a woman's physical beauty instead of on her mind. Through using the metaphor of a drawn portrait, Robinson seeks to show that focusing only on a woman's attractive features is a shallow approach:

But what are features? What is form?
 To combat life's tempestuous storm?
 Can they Time's pinions bind?
 Truth whispers, No! Then take, my Friend,
 The Lasting sketch which I here send,
 The Picture of My Mind!
 (139-140)

Robinson asserts that her poem, the 'lasting sketch' of her mind, will last as long as any artist's portrait because it is itself a work of art and it portrays an intellectual quality whose value will outlast that of mere physical beauty. She also proudly, if indirectly, affirms her status as an artist of genius, for she is confident that her poem will stand the test of time as a truly great artist's work would. Thus, already in the opening stanzas we detect an allusion to Robinson's strong sense of her artistic power. There is no inference, on the other hand, that Robinson is attempting to 'escape' or reconstruct her identity according to more favourable measures.

Robinson makes a strong statement in defence of the female sex when she condemns the male obsession with womanly physical beauty and observes that far greater attention should be paid to a woman's mind. Taking into consideration this critical stance, I would argue that, in many ways, *Stanzas to a Friend* could be seen as a more useful text in constructing Robinson's identity, because of some of its 'feminist' overtones. However, Robinson's *Memoirs* is considered to better demonstrate how women are entrapped in patriarchal discourse and cultural context. I consider it problematic that, because it does not contain an angry defence of the sexualised woman or a portrayal of patriarchal victimisation, the poem appears to hold less 'value' for certain feminist criticism. Robinson's social and cultural background also plays a more significant role than her writing. Ezell (1993) wrestles with a similar issue, in her study of Renaissance and Restoration female writers. Woman is judged as

a representative of her class and her sex. Without success as a 'woman', a female writer can expect little credit to be given to her writings. (97)

Robinson's witty self-representation in the poem conveys limited conventional biographical detail regarding social and cultural aspects. Therefore, Robinson's *Memoirs* attains greater

value in the eyes of some feminist scholarship, because the book contains information on her background necessary to ascertain Robinson's attributes as a representative of her class and sex. The aim to find out the meaning of 'Woman' takes precedence over interest in the artistic identity of the writer, as it is considered to be more significant to interpret what Robinson may symbolise for woman's place in history.

In Chapter One I argued that the twenty-first century ideal of the female philosopher for some feminist critics entails an outspoken Wollstonecraftian character, an author victimised by patriarchal discourse and conservative propaganda, and a political subject who crosses the boundary of eighteenth-century definitions of gender.⁵⁵ Robinson's 'fragmented identity', as identified by some feminist scholarship, matches this ideal projection of the female philosopher because it reveals her (supposed) subjection to a patriarchal discourse which defines her and frames her within its male gaze. Her 'fragmented identity' may even give her the means to evade and, to a certain extent, combat negative stereotypes present in masculine conceptions of gender, yet hers is a losing battle for she cannot escape socially ingrained male perceptions of what women should be. In the feminist view, Robinson thus fails to completely achieve a significant 'Wollstonecraftian' image in her *Memoirs*, for she is unable to sufficiently critique male behaviour, as she merely expects chivalric sympathy.

Beer (1997: 90) reminds us that a radical reading is not one

that simply assimilates past texts to our concerns, but rather an activity that tests and de-natures our assumptions in the light of the strange languages and desires of past writing.

If we attempt to superimpose the idea of a fragmented identity upon her autobiography, we risk merely assimilating her text to our own ideal of the twenty-first century female philosopher. The *Memoirs* is a text which perhaps conforms more easily to the needs of modern feminist scholars; however, in *Stanzas to a Friend*, there is room for only one identity, namely the one engendered by Robinson's own sense of her artistic genius, scandalous past included. This poem of self-portrayal has little to apologise for, as much of it seems to wink playfully, and daringly, at its audience. With quiet confidence, Robinson asserts:

⁵⁵ See Chapter One, 17-19, 32.

Religion says, to be forgiv'n,
 We all should own our crimes to Heav'n,
 And picture each transgression:
 And thus, my follies to repair,
 For well I know I have my share,
 I will make this frank confession.
 (Robinson 2000: 140)

Robinson does not try to hide the fact that she is well known for her sins, 'For well I know I have my share', and she admits quite charmingly:

'I blush not freely to unfold
 The feelings of my breast;
 My faults I own - my virtues know;' (140)

Although she knows that her audience is quite well aware of her past, she does not confess openly to any licentiousness. She boldly admits to being a passionate woman and lover:

'I'm jealous, for I fondly love;
 No feeble flame my heart can prove' (141)

Claiming that her passionate relationships were never based solely on sexual desire, she distinguishes her love from 'base desires', and perceives her passions as 'pure.'

Her open admission that she can 'fondly love' (141) illustrates Robinson's daring in inserting a statement which her readers could interpret either as an allusion to her passionate nature or as a reference to the love affairs she had had with several men. Overall, the poem conveys confidence and a keen sense of self, both as woman and as artist:

'Ambition fires my breast!
 Yet not for wealth, or titles vain;
 Let but the Laurel deck My strain,
 And, dullness, take the rest.

.....

To Sons of Genius homage pay,
 And own their sov'reign right to sway,
 Lords of the Human Race! (141-142)

Robinson is willing to pay homage to those whom she considers 'Sons of Genius', but she includes herself among those 'Sons'. Her single burning ambition is to achieve a 'Laurel', or high poetic distinction, and, by being recognised as a prominent poet, to be able to also claim the title of 'Lord' of the human race.⁵⁶ Robinson sees herself as a member of a superior race of artists who can sway the views of the public and even the direction of history. Clearly, one *can* argue that she does not limit herself to the 'feminine' sphere.

Robinson's identity is conceived as 'fragmented' by some feminist critics, because she may thus be shown to attempt to be reconstruct her image as an artist and to recover her dignity diminished by derogatory caricatures and publicised liaisons. In this view, Robinson's public image is shaped by culturally dominant masculine conceptions of the female gender, whereby a woman must be seen as pure, domesticated, and beautiful. She is seen to define her identity according to masculine constructions of gender, and as constantly attempting to redefine or 'escape' these negative definitions, thus placing immense limitations on her ability (and will) to express her views freely. I would argue, however, that *Stanzas to a Friend* compels the reader to accept the 'portrait' as it is, for Robinson boldly confronts her audience, instead of pleading her case or asking for their sympathy. She concludes the poem thus:

Such is my Portrait; now believe;
 My pencil never can deceive,
 And know me what I paint;
 Taught in Affliction's rigid school,
 I act from principle, not rule,
 No Sinner, yet No Saint.

Now contemplate a picture true;
 With Kindness ev'ry Virtue view;
 And all that's wrong explore:
 If you the brightest tints defend,

⁵⁶ The implications of the phrase 'Lord of the human race' could also be a reflection of colonial attitudes which reflected the Eurocentric view that Western culture is the "Lord" of human civilisation.

The darkest shades I'll Try to mend;
The Wisest Can No More! (142)

Robinson's injunctions 'Such is my portrait; now believe' and 'know me what I paint' show that she confidently invites the reader of the poem to accept the portrait's flaws, imperfect behaviour, artistic temperament, and all. Unlike a painted portrait, which often conveys the artist's *idealised* vision of his subject (and his model's self-perception, for that matter), and attempts to disguise physical or moral blemishes, Robinson's poem does not seek to present a perfect picture of her mind, but aims to portray both weaknesses and strengths. Her teasing label, 'No Sinner, yet No Saint', reveals Robinson's humorous outlook on her public past; since her reputation is well known, any reader of the line would no doubt immediately think about her sexual escapades. Robinson makes a bold and witty move when she includes the line, drawing her audience into a sympathetic complicity. The final stanza closes on a flirtatious note, asking her readers to 'with Kindness ev'ry Virtue view' and the 'brightest tints defend', while they should her 'wrongs explore', implying that these should be forgiven as every person is merely human and thus imperfect. She admits her flaws, but at the same time demands to be remembered as honest and courageous.

Stanzas to a Friend presents a different 'persona' from the one that emerges from the *Memoirs*. Perhaps the former is a text less favoured among feminist critics because it is less capable of projecting important aspects of the 'Woman' question or of the history of (oppressed) female sexuality, as Mellor remarks (2000: 271). *Stanzas to a Friend* simply tells us a great deal about Robinson the individual poet. This, in itself, can provide much valuable material for a better understanding of *both* poet and woman. Studies on Robinson as a Romantic poet have been less focused on what her writing reveals about her identity or the history of sexuality; rather, Romantic scholars often examine Robinson's poetry in the perspective of its relation to the writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Lisa Vargo (2002: 37-52) examines how Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* functions as a social critique in contrast to Wordsworth's *Ballads*, which fail to acknowledge 'social ugliness'. Curran (1994: 17- 33) similarly highlights the existential nature of Robinson's poetry, commending it for its unique social understanding which early Romantic poets in general did not possess or display. His later article (Curran 2002: 9-22) credits Robinson with innovations in poetic style which, he argues, influenced Victorian poets such as Tennyson.

Betsy Bolton (1997: 727) comments on the mingled effects of both Robinson's poetry and public persona on the writings of Wordsworth, whereas Cross (2001: 571-605) conversely suggests that it was Robinson who in her *Lyrical Tales* imitated Wordsworth's *Ballads*, in an attempt to foster her reputation as a poet. Kathryn Ledbetter, in her examination of Coleridge's correspondence with Robinson (1994: 44), discerns a paternalistic attitude in the former poet towards her poems, an unwillingness to provide her with artistic support, and a misguided critical understanding of her work. Susan Luther's analysis of Robinson's and Coleridge's poetic dialogues (1994: 391-409) investigates how the borderlines between public and private spheres blur into one another as, she argues, although Coleridge is clearly attracted to the feminine poetic voice (symbolized by Robinson), he is reluctant to acknowledge its power.

Debbie Lee's study (1997: 23-34) discusses the poetic anthology, *The Wild Wreath*, which Robinson's daughter Maria Elizabeth compiled with the aim of remoulding Robinson's sexual ill-repute into poetic fame. Maria Elizabeth focused on her mother's illness and suffering, and thus attempted to evince a more feminine sympathetic perception of Robinson.⁵⁷ Tim Fulford's article on the Coleridge-Robinson connection (1999) argues against the feminist tendency to interpret male Romantic poets as constantly usurping or assimilating the feminine poetic voice. He views Coleridge as a writer who, on the contrary, sought to open up closed categories of gender roles and gendered poetics, leaving the relations between masculine and feminine poetry undetermined.

In her discussion of the essay 'Present State of the Manners, Society, &c of the Metropolis of England', Craciun (2002: 19-40) highlights Robinson's advocacy of free press. She also suggests (19) that Wordsworth may have been influenced by Robinson's presentation of British culture in this essay and developed his views in the preface of *Lyrical Ballads* in opposition to it.⁵⁸ More recent studies, such as Eugene Stelzig's (2004: 118-122), do not view

⁵⁷ Lee does not sufficiently recognise the artistic merit of Robinson's poetry, claiming that it might have been admired by male poets only because they were 'sympathetic' to her suffering. However, other scholars have noted that poets such as Coleridge did express a genuine admiration for her work on *artistic* grounds.

⁵⁸ Brewer (2010: 146, 149) disagrees with Craciun's assessment of Robinson's 'Metropolis', because, in his view, it underestimates the contradictions apparent within the essay. Craciun sees it as promoting a 'democratic' approach, whereas Brewer points to the fact that Robinson insists that writers should mingle with the high-born and wealthy, and not with the plebeian poor. He surmises that Robinson's essay reflects the chaotic, polymorphic, and paradox-filled late eighteenth-century London, which was rife with contradictions. The only way to negotiate them was through promoting a free press, hoping it would engender a more egalitarian society, where the aristocracy of genius, not of class, would triumph.

the Coleridge-Robinson's poetic relationship in a negative light. Stelzig argues that Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* were both an imitation of and an act of mingled poetic collaboration/rivalry with the Lake poets; he also points out (119, 121) that Coleridge held real admiration for Robinson's poetry, and suggests that she may have had some influence on his publication of 'Kubla Khan'. Stelzig does not over-emphasise the exploitative nature of Coleridge's artistic relationship with Robinson.

Michael Wiley (2008: 219-240) provides informative comments on 'plagiarism' amongst Romantic poets, and appraises the poetry of Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and Robinson to show how they all 'borrowed' and appropriated from one another. He concludes that this type of plagiarism not only was a common practice among poets, but in fact assisted in the development of Romantic poetry.⁵⁹ Daniel Robinson (2010: 142-146) reviews Robinson's earlier and less well-known 'Tabitha Bramble' poems. He links Robinson's 'Tabitha Bramble' pseudonym with a *female* version of Peter Pindar's 'Matthew Bramble' (whereas the pseudonym is usually associated with Smollet's own fictional character called 'Tabitha Bramble')⁶⁰ and observes that the changes in political attitudes reflected in the Bramble poems may be connected to a general Romantic disillusionment with Revolutionary politics. Cross (2011: 10-17) looks into the possibility of a poetic dialogue between Southey and Robinson taking place within the sphere of the *Morning Post*; she infers that their contributions to the same newspaper must have made them aware of one another as poets and may have had subtle mutual effects upon their work.

Cross's 'Coleridge and Robinson: Harping on Lyrical Exchange' (2009: 39, 41) contends that, like many other poets at the time, Robinson represented herself as an original and tormented Genius. Cross claims that the poetic exchange between Coleridge and Robinson reveals the collaboration of two poets who 'united' with the purpose of bolstering one another's reputation. She notes (42) that their lyrical exchange was

as close perhaps as it was possible to come to intellectual equality across gender at the time.

⁵⁹ Cross (2001: 571-605), also, observes that Robinson borrowed from male Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, and linked her work to his *Lyrical Ballads* in order for her to foster her reputation as an 'original genius', a title seen to be appropriate only to men. What Cross fails to point out is that the borrowing and imitation took place both ways: male poets did influence Robinson, but she influenced them as well.

⁶⁰ Tabitha Bramble is a comedic character in Tobias Smollet's novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. Tabitha is an outspoken, rude spinster in search of a husband. Perhaps Robinson's pseudonym refers to this character because the poetry she published under this name was often 'spiteful'.

And adds insightfully (43) that Robinson

writes with an authority that disrupts the traditional gender pattern of female writers trying to make their way in a male dominated market... the trajectory of her career does not fit the model of feminine and masculine Romanticism that Anne Mellor posits in *Romanticism and Gender*.

Cross (43-44) further argues that Robinson may have begun as a Della Cruscan, yet she

ended her career as a Romantic poet who saw herself as able to help the careers of the young Wordsworth and Coleridge. Her interactions with Coleridge are thus aggressively confident, self-promoting, and respectful, an assertion of both her gender difference and her equality.

Cross (2009: 45) observes that *Walsingham's* protagonist sees himself as victimised by circumstances; he seeks a sympathetic response to validate his plight and the cross-dressed Sidney fulfils that need. However, Walsingham must first acknowledge his connection to her and sacrifice his egotism. In much a similar manner,

Robinson thus articulates, in a form that troubles gendered identities, her authorial need for a sympathetic mind - a shared sensibility - that bridges gender and authorizes the poet.

She maintains (67-68) that the lyrical exchange that occurs between Robinson and Coleridge reveals their *shared* concern for neglected genius as well as their inclination to favour natural settings and self-reflection, items generally associated with the term Romanticism.⁶¹ Cross's interrogation of the poetical exchange between Robinson and Coleridge proves to be both refreshing and beneficial to my argument. This critic does not consider Robinson to be in the grip of a 'fragmented identity' crisis, rather she sees her as functioning on equal terms with contemporary Romantic male poets. Thus she counters the negative construction of Robinson as primarily a victim entrapped in a patriarchal discourse, in practice calling into question Mellor's gendered binary system. In this context, Cross also emphasises Robinson's confidence - almost arrogance -, a feature not easily found amongst other female writers.

Daniel Robinson identifies a similar aspect in Robinson's poetry. In his *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (2011), he produces a detailed and innovative study of

⁶¹ The term 'Romanticism' need to be applied with caution as it applies to a highly complex ideological movement. Any attempt at definition is often seen to be inhibiting and deterministic.

Robinson's poetry. He argues that Robinson recently has become a major figure within an expanded Romantic literary canon, being the subject of three biographies and a romance novel. Her current status as an artistic icon is a 'replay of the kind of attention she herself endured', during a life which was well-publicised, if not notorious (1). Unfortunately, Mary Robinson has achieved the dubious distinction of being compared to a modern-day Madonna;⁶² however, this association casts a shadow not much different from the one caused by the 'courtesan' reputation she earned during the eighteenth century. It is true that research on Robinson's life has focused too often on titillating and sensational aspects; but it is worth noting that it is the morally dubious aspects of her celebrity which render her more accessible and intriguing than more conservative contemporary writers (3).

Daniel Robinson significantly points out that assessment of literary merit has proven to be a thorny issue in the process of reassigning their rightful place to non-canonical writers; this is due to a wide-spread perception that their work is judged to be inferior to that of (more familiar) writers whom we are better equipped to read and interpret (7).⁶³ He further reminds us that two centuries of study and comparative investigations have been necessary to allow us to gain a better understanding of the so called 'Big Six' Romantic poets:

it is not much a matter of recovering them, as it is of recovering ways of understanding them. We should remember that, at the end of Robinson's career, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's were not off to particularly auspicious starts; and critics would ridicule Wordsworth's poetry for several years to come. (7)

Daniel Robinson's book represents a unique attempt at critically analysing the techniques of Robinson's poetry from a specifically formalist perspective:

⁶² See Chapter 1 p. 35 and Chapter 4 pp. 136-137.

⁶³ Curran (1999: 147-148), for instance, suggests an alternative approach: female writers should be evaluated from the standpoint of their normative experiences as *females* within the eighteenth century. In other words, they ought to be interpreted within a gender framework; furthermore, he argues that accepted normative determinants of literary value should be disregarded and re-evaluated. According to Curran, the determination of literary value must imply ideological issues premised upon a *gendered* aesthetic code. I disagree with Curran's conclusions, because his 'specialised' reading would consistently advocate an essentialist view on female writers' work; also, it would entail the assumption that women's writing might not be good enough to withstand a general aesthetic interrogation, thus declaring its implicit inferiority. In my view, such 'specialised' gender readings of female writers paradoxically give rise to a misunderstanding and under-appreciation of their artistic abilities.

Robinson's poetry has been denied the close reading and formal analysis that provided the foundations for the study of poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge over the past 200 years. Because formal approaches are not so prevalent as they once were but are still necessary for understanding the poetics of the writers who constellate our field of vision (including, now, Robinson). (9)

His purpose is to discover what it was that drew Coleridge to Robinson's work (8). He argues that Robinson's poetry resists the usual gendered binaries that unfortunately have become a 'by-product' of the recovery of women writers, who are then 'privileged' with a 'literature of their own', and observes that

Robinson herself sees poetry as a masculine genre and thus plays on (admittedly) essentialized notions of gender and form in order to transgress them, to compete with men poets, and to surpass women poets,... Robinson consistently and purposely affiliated herself with powerful male figures. (11)

He adds that 'Robinson's poetry does not sit well in isolation with her female contemporaries', and that while such gendered studies were initially useful for the recovery of the status of women writers, this approach can now impose severe limitations on insightful interpretations of the role of both sexes. (12)

Both D. Robinson and Cross question the benefits of a 'segregated' study of Romantic literature; a perspective based on a division between male and female would appear to be of little assistance to gain an insightful reading of Robinson's poetry. I share D. Robinson's regret that Romantic studies appear to suffer from a dearth of formalist analysis of women's poetry, but I suggest that this type of analysis should be extended to women's novels as well. Feminist scholarship has revealed much indeed about the history of gender oppression and has rightly emphasised the lack of literary recognition received by women. But, in general, studies of women writers mostly engage with cultural constructions of gender or sexual oppression, and say very little about what these women have contributed to literature in aesthetic terms. While I do not at all advocate that gender analysis should be relinquished, I wish to suggest that, if greater significance were to be placed upon the formal aspects of eighteenth-century women's writing (poetry *and* prose), a more thorough estimation of their artistic contribution could be reached, surely also to the advantage of the feminist project.

Labbe (2002: 7) sums up what Robinson's value as a Romantic writer may entail, as follows:

Robinson's skill at scene-setting, her facility with language, her trenchant self-presentations, her knowledge of culture's desires and pleasures, her abilities as a poet, novelist, and social critic, all mark her as one of the most significant writers of the Romantic period. As we move progressively further from the notion that 'Romanticism' only means transcendence, 'sincerity', 'originality', and other abstractions derived from exclusively male-authored texts, it becomes easier to enjoy Robinson's manipulations of form, self-hood, and identity. This issue therefore commemorates Mary Robinson as key to our understanding of the fluid, coy, slippery and multivalent aspects of what we now call Romanticism.

Robinson is commended here for her various 'self-presentations', her manipulation of form, self-hood, and identity. These distinctive terms are typical to gender discourse which requires its subjects to be fluid, versatile, and multivalent. Such attributes expressly support the idea of gender being a social construct, constantly evolving according to the dominant cultural ideology: gender is not naturally acquired, rather it is created socially. Therefore, a non-essentialist Romantic ideology which does not adhere to specific unchanging definitions, but is 'fluid', 'coy', 'slippery', and 'multivalent', would cater more meaningfully to the need of gender-based theories which emphasise the flexible nature of gender.

Mary Robinson proves to be such a valuable candidate as a subject of feminist studies in Romantic literature precisely because her various constructed identities may be employed to support certain gender theories, and the 'performative' nature of her authorial identity well illustrates the contention that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. D. Robinson contends that Robinson's acting background has over-determined the way her pseudonyms have been read to analyse the theatrical performativity of her identity (19). He concludes (2011: 19) that Robinson followed a long-standing tradition of pseudonymous periodical publication, through which many emerging writers attempted to establish themselves, and that

Robinson's use of pseudonyms cannot be explained by any one coherent theory that seeks the constitution of Robinson's biographical or authorial self. (19)

What is further glossed over is that Robinson clearly possessed a confident 'single' self, which was unaffected, and undaunted, by her sex. She valued what she judged to be her

artistic genius as much as any male poet would his own, and had little doubt about her artistic identity. Both Cross and D. Robinson have speculated that Robinson saw herself as equal to the male poets.

Robinson's egotistical belief in the benefits of possessing artistic genius emerges clearly in the use of victimisation in her novels *Walsingham*, *The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter*. Although victimisation is generally perceived by feminist criticism as revelatory of masculine oppression, in the context of sensibility literature and culture it was seen as a sign of genius. Kelly (1993: 8) observes that sensibility

on the one hand was associated with excessive or sublime selfhood of the imagination and 'genius', it validated the authenticity of the subjective self against competing models of identity, such as inherited rank and ascribed status, and it was often treated as an aristocracy of soul, equal or superior to aristocracy of birth, and designed to subvert it. On the other hand, 'sensibility' could lead to social transgression, crime, or 'madness', as social categories designed for the wilfully or unwilling extra-social. Yet such transgression had considerable glamour, enabling the middle-class individual's social failure or dependence to be hero-ized. The 'man of feeling', too good for a bad world, subsumed the aristocratic hero of classical epic or chivalric romance.

I note that Kelly excludes women from this use of sensibility because they were supposedly confined to the domestic sphere. However, I would argue that Robinson's writing clearly refutes this assumption, as her character Walsingham (in some aspects, Robinson's *alter ego*), for example, is singled out for his sensibility, social failure, and sense of dependence; furthermore, I would observe that Robinson particularly likes to bestow on her characters a certain 'aristocracy of soul.' A clear sign of the aristocracy of soul or genius is the fact that the character is ostracized by society and is exposed to life's cruelty. In Chapter Three I explored how Robinson employs sensibility in 'negative mode', to expose the destructive influence it can exert on the human mind; however, she also uses the philosophy of sensibility in a positive way to illustrate how suffering *can* shape a mind into a superior mould. As Amy Garnai (2005: 382) comments,

Robinson views the artistic endeavour as a privileged moment that can provide a degree of meaning in what is, for her, a world characterized by momentous and senseless loss.

Garnai (382) discusses Robinson's use of Marie Antoinette in her poem *A Monody to the Memory of the late Queen of France* as a symbol of her disillusionment with revolutionary ideals, as the writer emphasises

her focus on the existential condition even as it is embedded in a narrative of political currency.

Later (393), she observes that, in the context of the poem, Robinson locates artistic merit, as a means of redemption, in the midst of a tumultuous society. Garnai claims that Robinson endeavours to salvage something from the 'ruins of the Revolutionary promise', judging that it is the task of art, if not to revitalise culture, then at least to provide the possibility of representation amidst the struggle. Similarly, Craciun, in *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003 a: 89-91), highlights the political and Romantic potential of Robinson's work in *A Monody*, and provides a critical comprehension of Robinson's use of the concept of the 'suffering genius'. She argues that Robinson draws a comparison between herself as a poet and Marie Antoinette as a queen, in order to equate their sense of genius - as women.

According to Craciun (89-90), Robinson's identification with the Queen in her poem springs from the acute awareness of a similarly unjust fate as victims of 'inferior souls'. The Queen was persecuted by unthinking political tyrants, while Robinson's position as a female author exposed her to ridicule. Yet, it is the suffering inflicted by this very persecution which has elevated Robinson to a plane of higher nobility, where she is able to display a powerful sense of poetic consciousness and sublimation (90). The 'Aristocracy of Genius', to which Robinson aspires, is unrelated to noble birth, but has much to do with being a Romantic poet. Robinson, therefore, celebrates the power of sensibility (feeling, emotion, passion, and suffering) in her portrayal of the Queen of France's body, as she genders her as a Romantic female:

For Robinson, the treason trial of the French Queen came to represent the public persecution of all women who dared to enter the public sphere. More specifically, the Queen represented women of genius, such as Robinson herself, who dared enter the Republic of Letters on distinctly Feminine terms, by celebrating the dangerous associations of femininity with sensibility, sensuality, and the body. (91)

While Craciun does highlight Robinson's exploitation of the feminine, unlike Ty she does not disallow her from the realm of Romantic genius nor limit her within patriarchal definitions of femininity. Robinson's emphasis on 'victimised genius' enables her to idealise and endow the female writer with an artistic power similar to that of the Romantic male poets.

As I have argued earlier, Robinson is not a passive recipient of her historical, cultural, and political surroundings, but firmly believes that her art *can* shape the world within which she lives:

But the Poet's life is one perpetual scene of warfare: he is assailed by envy, stung by malice, and wounded by the fastidious comments of concealed assassins. The more eminently beautiful his compositions are, the larger is the phalanx he has to encounter, for the enemies of genius are multitudinous. (Robinson 2000: 148)

Although in this particular instance she is referring to a male poet in her introduction to *Sappho and Phaon*, the quote gives an accurate description of her attitude towards women writers during the 1790s. Robinson here asserts that the more beautiful a poet's or writer's work is, the fiercer the persecution they will have to endure. For Robinson, evidence of genius is indeed indicated by the presence of attack and unfair criticism. While she certainly portrayed suffering female writers in her novels in order to evoke sympathy in her readers, as Mellor (2000: 291-292) and Ty (1998: 13) argue, we should not gloss over an important aim which Robinson was attempting to achieve by portraying 'suffering genius'.

As a result of the prominence of negative propaganda surrounding female philosophers such as Wollstonecraft, Robinson deliberately exploited the existence of this criticism by arguing that it provided clear evidence of these women's genius and superiority. Martha Morley, in *Natural Daughter*, exemplifies a female philosopher and writer who endures many trials and tribulations within the novel: however, far from yielding in defeat, she derives a sense of empowerment from her suffering. For Martha feels that

she had been neglected, but there was a distinction in the neglect of unenlightened beings. (Robinson 2003 a: 198)

In her view, her victimisation signifies that she is a member of a separate class, what Craciun (2003: 90) refers to as the ‘Aristocracy of Genius’, or the nobility of the Romantic poet. Here Robinson idealises the female writer by portraying the experience of persecution as the mark of genius.

Robinson’s portrayal of women writers as ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’ finds a telling expression in a passage from *Walsingham*, where the protagonist comments on the experiences of a writer, Mrs Woodford:

Let it be remembered, that true genius is, of all things in nature, the most irritably alive to every attack which menaces a diminution of that fame which is the pride of its existence. Let the candid reader recollect that one mean and dastardly assailant can overshadow the prospects of a legion, whose mental powers would enlighten the world, and who, if properly taught to resist the petty tyranny, would live in the annals of their country, when their calumniator’s name was no longer remembered. (Robinson 2003 b: 216-217)

At first, Robinson again reminds her readers that genius thrives under criticism; she then reinforces the message by warning the reader about the dangerous presence of ‘assailants’ who can deprive society of poets and writers whose genius ‘would enlighten world’ and, therefore, shape it. She insists that their work will transcend time, while their critics’ petty denigration will be forgotten. Robinson does not use transcendence in the traditionally Romantic sense of the term, rather as ‘historical’ transcendence, whereby writing will overcome the ignorance of the present oppressive age and continue to exist into a freer and more glorious one in the future. Robinson thereby counters conservative propaganda, by implying that the effects of its attempt to ridicule the so-called ‘female philosophers’ will not endure, whereas their creative work will. As she concisely puts it in her essay *Present State of Manners*,

[t]heir productions will be their passports to immortality (Robinson 1800: 138)

Robinson believes in art’s *transformative* influence upon society and in the power which a writer or poet possesses. She further illustrates this in this essay, when she remarks that

[e]very man, nay, almost every woman, now reads, thinks, projects and accomplishes. The force of human reflection has taken off the chain which once shackled the mind; the poorest peasant is now

enabled to trace the language of truth, in pages calculated by the plainest doctrines and the most rational reasoning, to awaken, enlighten, harmonize, regulate, and refine human understanding. (Robinson 1800: 35)

Stephen Bygrave has noted that male Romantic poets saw the artist as a gifted individual who functions outside the constraints of society and the law, for the

poet is not merely a commentator upon society but plays a central part in it. (1996: 6)

Robinson's characters, such as Walsingham and Martha, possess a special knowledge of the world and exist outside the norms of society by virtue of breaching either accepted social conventions or the law, or both. The persecution and suffering which these characters endure mark them as social exiles, outsider-observers who envision the world as they know it should be, but whose trials are a constant reminder of what it is not. Although these characters, like the figure of the Romantic poet, stand in many ways separate from the society in which they exist, Robinson does not allow them to entirely escape unfavourable circumstances through their creative vision.

They *must* suffer, and their suffering must serve the purpose of proving that victimised genius has access to a superior truth about the world, a concept drawn largely from the ideology of sensibility. As Jerome McGann (1996: 7) comments:

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, that Knowledge increaseth Sorrow, centres the imagination of sensibility and sentiment, which made an important addition to that wisdom by reversing its terms.

In other words, in the context of sensibility sorrow or suffering are seen to increase the capacity for knowledge, as Walsingham argues:

The falsehood and folly of the world does more towards forming a perfect philosopher than all the pedantry of scholastic knowledge... The citizen of the world is the only true philosopher: he examines without prejudice; he judges from experience. (Robinson 2003 b: 213)

Walsingham knows that his exposure to the persecutions of society has given him experiential knowledge and thus the ability to better perceive the truth about the world.

Through Martha's character, Robinson conveys the view that the harsh criticism directed by conservative forces at female philosophers serves only to increase these women's knowledge through suffering. Their victimisation places them in a better position from which to perceive and proclaim the truth about society, as their knowledge is based on personal experience and not just abstract study or education.

Craciun (2003 b: 700) acknowledges an area of neglect in critical scholarship regarding women's writing on Satan, and she notes that

Romantic women writers found a surprising range of uses for Milton's Satan, the most significant being a vision of outcast female genius, hurled from the celestial sphere for having claimed equality: a feminist Romantic Satan.

She traces instances of a feminist identification with Satan as an outcast genius in the writings of Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Mary Wollstonecraft; these writers, she argues, found in Milton's 'hero' a figure that well represented their own struggles. In *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, Craciun observes that Robinson's depiction of Marie Antoinette as the outcast genius shows

the morning star's political and Romantic overtones of proud rebellion and defiance, familiar to modern readers in the poetry of Blake, Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. (2003 a: 100)

Robinson, moreover,

allegorizes an unrepentant (and here ungendered) Aristocracy of Genius as that first revolutionary proud outcast who chose to reign in hell rather than serve in heaven. A Satanic Genius here enjoys a 'dominion vast and unconfined' enthroned in the mind, via its exclusive and dangerous power, quintessentially Romantic, to make a heaven of hell, and of its confined (private) sphere a vast dominion. (104)

Craciun legitimately criticises certain studies of Romantic-era women's poetry, when she argues that too many accounts overemphasise these poets' supposed 'anxiety of authorship' or their

hesitancy to proclaim themselves visionaries, geniuses, unacknowledged legislators, or even Satanic over-reachers.⁶⁴ (105)

Such a reading of the female writers' identification with Milton's 'Romantic' Satan not only encourages us to see that female writers did not lack artistic confidence or egotism; it also breaks down the artificial schism of masculine / feminine Romanticism, as Robinson uses a metaphor typically attributed to male poets such as Byron and Shelley. Bygrave notes (1996: 20) that Robinson did not attempt to 'cash in on her notorious persona', as Byron did, and Brock (2002: 107-124) adequately refutes this suspicion by demonstrating that Robinson was not above marketing her scandalous persona. Mellor (1993: 2-3) argues that Romantic women writers forswore the 'concerns of their male peers', such as the capacity of the imagination, the limitations of language, transcendence or 'unity of being', and political revolutions which envisioned the creative writer in the role of political leader or religious saviour. These women did not celebrate the achievements of the imagination nor the overflow of powerful feeling, but rather the working of the rational mind. This was coupled with a high degree of ethical concern for family and community (Mellor 1993: 3). I would argue that, in fact, Robinson indeed transgresses most of the boundaries which Mellor suggests she does not.

Walsingham, Gertrude St. Leger, and Martha Morley are characters who function outside the realm of society and its conventions. Thus, they all, as outcast geniuses, in certain respects embody Craciun's 'Satanic Genius', at times almost glorying in their own artistic rebellion. Gertrude reflects on her wanderings in the countryside as an exile:

I looked back on the valley. I observed the contrast between the luxurious abode of an eastern despot, and the low thatched cottage where a work-hand no less expiated his offence by an untimely death: a sigh relieved my heart, and the philosophy of an uncontaminated spirit whispered, 'Gertrude, more happy art thou in the poverty of rectitude than the gilded caitiff, who, though his crimes are hid beneath a shield of gold, is still a slave of persecuting conscience. (Robinson 1799: vol. 3, 104-105)

⁶⁴ Although I agree with Craciun's opinion on Robinson's identification with the Romantic Satan, I am inclined to use it not so much to substantiate a feminist Romantic Satan as outcast genius, but rather as a device to link Robinson to the Romantic poetic ideology from which she is often excluded on account of her female gender. Furthermore, the identification conveys a strong sense of confidence in and awareness of her artistic talent, a factor which much of current feminist criticism underrates or ignores.

Robinson often implies that the wealthy and fortunate are to be pitied, while the tormented genius, no matter how bad the circumstances, will always attain a superior position. And like Walsingham, Gertrude proclaims that

[i]t is adversity alone that unfolds the page of knowledge: it is experience whose pencil justly delineates the rational, the reasoning atom, Man. It is truth alone that can sustain the mind; and nothing less than conscious truth can arm it in its journey through this mazy, this perplexing scene, to resist, to combat, and to vanquish. (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 240)

It is her belief that only through suffering can the mind be exposed to Truth, whereas conventional rich aristocrats cannot attempt to know the secrets of the human heart or the truth about existence, blinded as they are by the ease of a fortunate life. For, she exclaims

[h]ow little does the mortal, born in the exalted sphere, and nursed in luxurious splendour, know mankind! (Robinson 1799: vol. 4, 240)

Gertrude describes the world as a ‘mazy’, ‘perplexing scene’, a hell almost; her goal must then be to rebel, resist, and combat amidst these evils. She has been expelled from the ‘heavenly’ realm of the wealthy nobility to wander in exile amongst the poor and the damned. But, though she does lament her unjust fate, she rebelliously looks down with contempt upon those who have rejected her, because she is conscious that she has attained a superior mind and true knowledge of the human heart. Gertrude even implies that the reason why the children of Genius or Nature are so hated is that other people, jealous of their abilities, cannot imitate them. She laments:

Do the attributes of Nature excite such envy in the mind that those who are not graced with the stamp of powerful intellect must hate what they cannot exemplify? I have wept when I have read the progress of that fate which has followed some of the most distinguished mortals; I have, notwithstanding, considered them indebted to Heaven for superior dignities, which poverty cannot debase, and which time will record to an admiring posterity. The gifts of Fortune follow not their possessors when the tomb closes on them; but the favours of Nature, the fruits of Genius, bloom over the grave, and live, even in the remotest glooms of Time, unperishable.

(Robinson 1799: vol. 1, 166-167)

Thus Robinson argues that true Genius will transcend time, and that poverty and suffering will never affect negatively those with ‘superior dignities’ (she includes herself among them). To be social outcasts is a sign of prestige, since the world envies and punishes those gifted with extraordinary ‘natural talent’.

Like Craciun’s ‘Satanic Genius’, Walsingham and Martha seem to take pride in their fall. Hanbury advises Walsingham to withstand the ‘enemies of virtue’,

[b]y arming your mind with fortitude, and meeting their injustice with contempt. If you would bring a villain to shame, repay his injuries with scorn. Evince the proud superiority of rectitude, by pity; and leave it to the mirror of reflection, to display that deformity from which conscious innocence shrinks from abhorrence. (Robinson 2003 b: 82)

What Hanbury exhorts Walsingham to bear in mind is his own superiority over his oppressors, and the necessity to maintain this status of superior worth or ‘genius’ intact by ‘arming his mind with fortitude’ and exercising contempt mingled with pity in his dealings with them. A poem entitled ‘Exile’ describes, in *Walsingham*, the sufferings of a wandering outcast. The final stanza poses the question whether it is not better to die than to continue amidst suffering in this world:

Poor Exile! Why such fears endure,
 When Nature’s hand presents a cure,
 Which only death can give?
 Methinks the wretched wand’rer cries -
 ‘GUILT seeks the grave; - the COWARD dies;
 While VIRTUE nobly dares to suffer and **to** LIVE!’
 (Robinson 2003 b: 392)

The exile responds rebelliously, stating he would rather be damned and live a virtuous life than give in to the world by committing suicide; it is his noble pride which enables him to endure, as much as it does Martha Morley.

Robinson (2003 a: 197) describes Martha as gifted with a

‘susceptible [heart], her sentiments were liberal, and her feelings infinitely too acute for the repose of her existence. She was one of those ill-starred mortals, whose bosoms participated in the pains and pleasures of beings, who had the inhumanity to behold her sorrows with the most frigid apathy.’

She further observes (197-198) that Martha is singularly capable of dealing with the sufferings of the world

‘because her proud mind would have placed her beyond the reach of calumny or insult. She would, in the consciousness of innate qualities, which depend not on the perishable basis of worldly splendour, have laughed at the low scorn, the vulgar arrogance of less ennobled beings: and even in the meanest habitation of indigence, wounded by ingratitude, assailed by malevolence, chilled by neglect, or irritated by the insolence of taunting pride, she would have been the creature nature made; on which a stamp was set that eclipsed all less adventitious honours.’

We perceive here the fierce confidence of the ‘fallen angel’, whose ‘proud mind’ and ‘consciousness of innate abilities’ set her apart from everyone else. By implication, Robinson advocates an (artistic) ‘egotism’ reminiscent of her male Romantic counterparts. Martha’s pride

‘was still more powerful than her misfortunes, again the inborn spirit of her soul armed her with courage to resist oppression.’ (198)

Sharon Ruston (2007: 60) notes that

‘one of the most universally acclaimed abilities of poets during this period was their ability to feel for others, to imagine themselves in others’ situations and predicaments.’

She comments that there are two ways in which poets participate in the egotistical sublime: Wordsworth and Coleridge are ‘examples of subjective poets where the ego governs and unifies poetic experience’; then there are those such as Keats, who calls himself a ‘chameleon’ poet, with a character which has ‘no self’, but ‘inhabits many different skins and has no life of its own’ (66-67). These poets, Ruston argues (67),

‘are less concerned with talking of themselves and more concerned with the feelings and lives of others.’

Generally, Robinson could be said to fit into both categories, as her characters often pride themselves on their ability to feel for others and to portray the world as they feel it is. The former is an ideal inherited from the culture of sensibility, which filtered into the ideology of Romantic poetry. Even Wordsworth (2003: 8) deems sensibility to be a necessary requirement for poetry,

‘[f]or all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.’

Similarly, Walsingham not only possesses sensibility but is often inspired to write poems while swept away by a ‘spontaneity of powerful feeling’:

‘Wrapped in the visionary gloom of melancholy, I poured forth the feelings of my heart in that language which was most congenial to sorrow.’ (Robinson 2003 b: 225)

Walsingham, Martha, and Gertrude St. Leger often break the mould which Mellor envisions for them by celebrating powerful feeling and by influencing society with their pen (this applies to Martha and Walsingham); nor are they concerned only with an ethic of care or family, but also with their own artistic genius. As Walsingham aptly puts it:

For, however greatness may exalt the brow, and keep the multitude at a distance, the most powerful of the human race, in these momentous times, are *men of letters*, not men of *titles*: - those who can guide the *pen*, and influence the country by the genuine language of truth and philanthropy; not the trifling, fawning idiot who, like the noxious weed, twines round the most thriving tree, and while it seems to decorate its trunk, destroys it.’ (Robinson 2003 b: 345)

For Robinson it is the poets and writers who will truly direct the course of the nation and not its government - a sentiment shared by male Romantic poets.

In a brilliant essay, Beherendt (1994: 5-25) argues that the Romantic novel has been given insufficient attention within Romantic scholarship; although this may have begun to change thanks to feminist scholars, the novel still holds a dubious reputation when compared to poetry. Beherendt claims (7) that we have

‘conditioned ourselves to find in Romantic prose fiction a rather amorphous and unarresting entity.’

He cites literary criticism as being partially responsible for this due to its ‘cultural elitism’ which clouds judgement about cultural activities, as it often dismisses as valueless what is popular (13-14). Beherendt argues that while we should not neglect to consider aesthetic or intellectual parameters when evaluating novels, we should not be constrained by these to the extent that

‘we fail to investigate Romantic novels as intersections in the vehicle of literary prose fiction of social, political, economic, and intellectual forces.’ (22-23)

He suggests that the problem may lie in the fact that we have not asked enough questions or formulated a sufficiently broad accommodating perspective; thus, our reassessment needs to include a re-examination of what seems to be familiar and ‘common’, in order to truly appreciate the wide variety of Romantic literature.

Similarly, feminist scholarship needs to broaden its perspective when approaching eighteenth-century literature beyond the borderlines of gender. Our modern-day construction of the eighteenth-century female philosophers affects the way we read them. They are sometimes valued as proto-feminists, as victims of oppression and manipulators of gender stereotypes, but what is too often forgotten is that they tried to establish themselves primarily as artists, particularly Robinson. In this Chapter I have argued that Robinson has been constructed within a certain modern scholarship in a manner that would endorse certain gender ideologies, and has been evaluated and valued primarily as a victim of patriarchal language and culture, and not as a writer of talent. I suggested that, while she has been accepted as a Romantic poet, she has yet to be truly understood and appreciated for what she contributed to literature aside from her criticism of patriarchal institutions and representations of female victimisation. Robinson displayed a sense of artistic egotism which was as

confident as any male poet's and firmly believed in the possibility of shaping society through literature. She used 'victimisation' within her novels not only to expose female oppression, but especially to legitimise her status as an artistic genius. Robinson constructed her female philosopher as an élite artist whose fame would transcend suffering and the caducity of time: I suggest that that is how she herself would have liked to be remembered.

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CONCLUSION

Barbra Taylor (2003: 246-253) discusses how Wollstonecraft's image has evolved according to the cultural bent of different epochs, and notes that today she is regarded as a 'canon-busting Woman Writer', who has been

well adapted to scholarly feminist endeavour, but still with plenty of political energy left to stir up passions and controversies among new generations of readers. (252)

Taylor (256) claims that Wollstonecraft's writings continue to play an important role in our society because twenty-first century women still suffer from sexual discrimination (thus rendering terms like 'post-feminism' quite fatuous). She adds that Wollstonecraft is constantly

re-moulded in feminism's changing image. Wollstonecraft retains one enduring role: to represent women's hopes of a society free of misogyny and sexual injustice, (256)

a goal that still begs to be achieved.

Yet, as I have tried to show, the challenging question for some Romantic feminist criticism remains whether it should continue to attempt to mould certain eighteenth-century female writers into a 'Wollstonecraft', leaving those who 'don't make the cut' trapped within masculine ideologies. In the previous chapters, I have argued that certain feminist criticism on eighteenth-century female writers needs to take into consideration the impact of their own ideologies upon an insightful understanding of their work. Clearly there is a risk that we may be remoulding a few of these writers according to our own conceptions of modern womanhood and truly value them only in terms of their (supposed) contribution to feminism.

I have argued that what we should give greater weight to is the fact that these writers shared far more with their male Romantic peers than is acknowledged: they were active within the same literary movement, culture, philosophy, and historical period. We should be wary of driving a wedge between female and male writers in order to satisfy demands of gender politics. As Behrendt (1995: 6) aptly notes,

‘[c]ontinuities among themes, subject matter, and formal poetic features and structures also cross gender lines in the Romantic period. When it comes to redefining the nature and impact of British Romanticism, the continuities may ultimately prove to be more important than the discontinuities, for they point us toward the fundamental internal coherence of Romantic writing.’

I have discussed how some feminist scholarship has attempted to mould Robinson according to its own vision of what the ‘female philosopher’ should be. In many respects, she is valued precisely because she has expressed feminist views in her *Letter to the Women of England*, and questioned the nature of masculine gender stereotypes in her novel *Walsingham*. Her outspoken criticism of patriarchal oppression in the novels *The False Friend* and *The Natural Daughter* has also attracted approval. Her autobiography has proven to be of great value to feminist scholarship because it tells the story of her victimisation by men, and society: it fulfils an important requirement of feminist criticism in that it contributes an important piece to the creation of a feminine sexual history mosaic.

Furthermore, the various pseudonyms she uses in the poems published in journals and in her *Memoirs* convey assumed multiple identities. This is an element which dovetails with feminist performative theories that advocate gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, rather than a biologically inherent attribute. In spite of these ‘achievements’, however, Robinson does not quite succeed in being considered as a ‘full-blooded’ feminist, since her critique of patriarchy is not as vocal or sufficiently politically radical as required. She is seen, thus, as a ‘moderate’ feminist and, although she is acknowledged as a Romantic *poet*, she is not in general considered to have been a meaningful participant in what is termed ‘masculine’ Romanticism.

I put forward the view, therefore, that Robinson’s ‘philosopher’ image has been useful in formulating a history of female oppression in society, in general, and exclusion from the Romantic canon, in particular, but that, paradoxically, it contributes to the underestimation of her literary value. In this view, Robinson may be claimed to have accomplished more than Wollstonecraft, as a *writer*, yet it is the latter author who has attained the higher status in feminist Romantic criticism.

I have argued that much of the artistic wealth of Robinson’s novels *Walsingham*, *The False Friend* and *The Natural Daughter* is lost, if they are approached primarily from a gendered

perspective. These works contain significant contradictions for feminist analysis, such as their powerful female villains, a controversial hero who exploits women and gets away with it, as well as an incestuous plot line and ambiguous endings. While these contradictions limit the novels' relevance and usefulness as feminist texts, they reveal much about Robinson's existential stance, Sadean ideas, and critical response to eighteenth-century optimism and philosophy.

These novels also expose Robinson's high expectations of the *artist*, who, she believes, can play an important formative role in shaping both society's values and politics' direction - a belief shared by her Romantic male peers. Robinson's valuation of the artist is often symbolized through her use of the figure of the 'victimised genius' in her novels, as her philosopher characters display an artistic egotistical pride when they are ostracised by a society peopled by inferior souls who cannot understand or appreciate genius.

By examining the effects of certain strands of feminist ideology upon the image of an eighteenth-century writer like Mary Robinson, I have attempted to show that certain strands of contemporary feminist scholarship on eighteenth-century female writers should no longer engage only with championing the cause of the inclusion of female Romantic writers in the Romantic literary canon. Feminist scholars' past efforts have enabled women writers to be accepted as significant contributors to Romanticism, but closer attention needs to be paid to the impact that the application of our own gender ideologies may have on the formation of these writers' reputations within the Romantic literary canon.

My argument might be criticised for revisiting issues which (it may be claimed) were resolved within the critique of second-wave feminism, and for echoing Robinson critics who have pointed out some of these problems before. I would respond, however, that the greater portion of Robinson scholarship active over the last decade of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, is based on second-wave feminist ideology. In the majority of later readings of Robinson's work, such earlier critics as Ty, Setzer and Mellor are still accepted as proposing a persuasive approach. There has been a severe lack of critics who argue in the spirit of Pascoe, Craciun and Stafford. Currently, it is quite apparent why Robinson should be studied as a feminist, but much of twenty-first century scholarship on Robinson still fails to show why she should be studied as a *writer*.

Therefore, I have argued that we ought to attempt to establish clearly on what terms we seek to preserve women writers' place within Romantic literature and to recognise that it is important that we no longer value them primarily in terms of their possible contribution to the feminist cause in the field of literary studies, but begin to understand and appreciate their artistic and literary worth independently from their gender. This approach should encourage further research into the benefits of reading women writers from the eighteenth century, and perhaps even the nineteenth century, from a Formalist standpoint.

This dissertation was limited in its performance of close readings of Robinson's writings from a formalist approach, as this is an aspect that would require a separate in-depth study and a much larger scope of research: something that, it is hoped, will be given due weight in a future PhD thesis.

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