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ROMANCING THE STONE: "PERDITA" ROBINSON IN WORDSWORTH'S LONDON

BY BETSY BOLTON

Apart from any more general indebtedness of the romantics to Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* is particularly apt in relation to their themes of reawakening or revival, as for example entering into the figure of the six-year-old boy of Wordsworth's *Intimations* ode and the ode's idea of the adult's world as "remains," as of corpses. . . . Now here at the end of *The Winter's Tale* a dead five- or six-year-old boy remains unaccounted for.

—Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*¹

Tw'as at a theatre
That I beheld this pair; the boy had been
The pride and pleasure of all lookers-on
In whatsoever place, but seem'd in this
A sort of alien scattered from the clouds.

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Seven²

From that hour
A maniac wild, the Alien Boy has been;
His garb with sea-weeds fring'd, and his wan cheek
The tablet of his mind, disorder'd, chang'd,
Fading, and worn with care.

—Mary Darby Robinson, "The Alien Boy"³

While now discussed primarily as a woman poet of the early Romantic period, Mary Darby Robinson was perhaps best known to eighteenth-century audiences for her doubled role as Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* and real-life mistress to the Prince of Wales. Perhaps for this reason, recent discussions of her poetry have tended to focus on Robinson's magazine and newspaper verse, reading Robinson as a producer (and figure) of popular culture.⁴ I want to draw on this work in order to suggest that the relations between popular culture (associated with "feminine Romanticism") and what we now think of as canonical writing (associated with "masculine Romanticism") were more fluid and contested than is frequently acknowledged.⁵ More specifically, I hope to

further the ongoing revaluation of Robinson's work, and of her importance to the period, by considering the mingled effect of her poetry and public persona on the work of a more canonical male contemporary: William Wordsworth. In the pages that follow, I first sketch the general constellation of concerns that might link Book Seven of Wordsworth's *Prelude* with the late Shakespearean romance of *The Winter's Tale*; I then consider the ways Wordsworth's portrayal of Mary Robinson, the Maid of Buttermere, may also lead to reflections on the public persona of Mary Darby Robinson, actress and poet. The latter sections of the essay focus on the kind of conversation established by the *Lyrical Ballads*, Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*, and Wordsworth's musings (in Book Seven) on the commodified London culture of ballads, spectacular stage shows, and prostitution. I will suggest throughout that each poet responds to and actively disputes the aesthetic for which the other might be said to stand.

I.

The first two epigraphs to this essay trace an odd and eccentric genealogy of romance, leading from the lost boy of *The Winter's Tale*, through Wordsworth's "Intimations" (woven as they are around the figure of a boy at once Pigmy-actor and a "mighty Prophet! Seer blest!") to the embalmed boy, an "alien scattered from the clouds," frozen in time amid the tumult of *The Prelude's* London. But where Cavell suggests Mamillius and his death are forgotten in the wonder produced by his mother Hermione in her return to life, Wordsworth, lost in his wonder at the lovely boy, preserves the child and forgets the mother. Indeed, he goes to some effort to cancel her out.

The mother, too,
Was present, but of her I know no more
Than hath been said, and scarcely at this time
Do I remember her; but I behold
The lovely boy as I beheld him then,
Among the wretched and the falsely gay,
Like one of those who walked with hair unsinged
Amid the fiery furnace. (*P*, 392–99)

The boy's survival in this passage depends not on the poet's knowledge (he knows no more of the boy than of his mother) but on his imaginative investment in the child's existence. In the poet's eyes, the boy becomes a triumphant martyr, surviving with some rhetorical inflation the torments of wretchedness and false gaiety while the mother fades from

memory.⁶ The poet “stop[s]” (*P*, 402) the boy’s existence and decay by repeatedly beholding him: by holding him, fixing him in a single moment of existence. But the narrative cannot be permanently “stopped.” The poet’s still-life musings are disrupted by the (displaced) voice and vision of a prostitute first met back in Cambridge, and this disruption is experienced as another stoppage, a trauma capable of “splitting the race of man / In twain.”⁷ The divorce of humanity from the human form is also a dismemberment, which produces, retroactively, the repeated yet degraded labor of remembering London.⁸

One might read this sequence—imaginative correspondence between poet and embalmed boy, followed by the sexually contaminated division of the race of man—as a gendered inversion of *The Winter’s Tale*. The romance, after all, ends with a kind of auto-revision: the promise of a new seasonal story (shifting perhaps from winter to spring) focused on preservation, to be told reciprocally by mother and daughter.

Tell me, mine own,
Where hast thou been preserved? Where lived? How found
Thy father’s court? For thou shalt hear that I,
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved
Myself to see the issue.⁹

Paulina, director and stage-manager of this final scene, breaks in on Hermione’s speech so as to break up this exclusive tale-telling between mother and daughter (“Go together / You precious winners *all*”) and the father-king Leontes closes the play by asking Paulina to stage a more general, and more performative, storytelling:

Good Paulina,
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand and answer to his part
Performed in this wide gap of time since first
We were dissevered. Hastily lead away. (*W*, 5.3.151–55)

This performance promises to reunite that which was dissevered, to fill in the wide gap of time which divorced the players/family members from each other and from themselves. Yet this performative reunion of romance can only take place elsewhere: offstage, after the closing of the curtain, the clearing of the stage. The leisurely demand and answer of the actors can be registered on-stage only by the unleisurely command, “Hastily lead away.” The deep backward and abysm of time becomes a plenitude in promise rather than in practice.

Where *The Winter's Tale* elides the boy Mamillius while preserving, against hope, both mother and daughter, the embalmed boy episode of *The Prelude* elides the mother to preserve the boy. And while *The Winter's Tale* ends with what I would call the romance promise of an offstage reunion, the poet's efforts at preservation lead instead to the memory of another death (that of Mary's unnamed babe), and to the self-division, through prostitution, of humankind. The greater cost of preservation in *The Prelude* may well result from the poem's attempt to achieve epic plenitude by negating the feminizing effects of both theatricality and romance.¹⁰ The theatrical mother and child first appear at the center of Book Seven, and, as Mary Jacobus has argued, "what they figure is the seduction of figuration itself, along with the error of romance (the romance of error)."¹¹ But while Jacobus, like Hartman, invokes more specifically the romance tradition of Spenser, I want to suggest that the late Shakespearean romance of *The Winter's Tale* is at least equally relevant here.¹²

Book Seven begins quite literally with a winter's tale—sung by a choir of robins sent by Winter to bespeak his coming. Yet "the child / Of summer" (*P*, 43–44) is also included in these opening lines, which thus promise the reunion performed by romance: "the whole year seemed tenderness and love" (*P*, 48). In this context, London appears as both duty and distraction, "tamer argument, / That lies before us, needful to be told" (*P*, 56). Some three hundred lines later, Wordsworth will attempt to return to this "argument" which is now "with sundry forms / Mingled, that in the way which I must tread / Before me stand" (*P*, 340–50). Interrupted yet again by the returning image of Mary Robinson of Buttermere, he turns to those "sundry forms" sixteen lines later: they are (of course) the lovely boy and painted mother. The argument of Book Seven, framed by the romance of a winter's tale, remains inextricable from this most theatrical mother and child, and the intruding image of one Mary Robinson. In the pages that follow, I will argue that the dangerous seductions of theatrical romance may have been personified for Wordsworth in the figure of Perdita—both a figure of Shakespearean romance and the nickname of the notorious actress-turned-royal-mistress (as well as novelist, playwright and poet): Mary Robinson.

II.

A very different Mary Robinson appears more immediately in the backdrop to this episode of the lovely boy: Wordsworth's allusion to the

Belle of Buttermere invokes the story of a woman from the Lake District fooled into marrying a bigamist, a forger and an impersonator of the upper classes. Her tale, like the embalmed boy himself, seems to hover somewhere between life and death: the drama which represents her story is one of the topical plays, “recent things yet warm with life” (*P*, 314), seen on the stage of Sadler’s Wells. Wordsworth retells the romance of the “Maid of Buttermere” as if to rescue the “maid” (Mary Robinson) and her story from the contamination of the stage, for they seem to him “too holy theme for such a place, / And doubtless treated with irreverence, / Albeit with their [the players’] very best of skill” (*P*, 318–20). He begins by seeming to summarize the stage production, but even this summary insists on reverence for youthful innocence and familial bonds:

how the spoiler came, “a bold bad man”
To God unfaithful, children, wife, and home,
And wooed the artless daughter of the hills,
And wedded her, in cruel mockery
Of love and marriage bonds. (*P*, 323–27)

Wordsworth melodramatizes the familiar outline of how Mary of Buttermere was seduced and betrayed; it seems unlikely he ever saw the play he pretends to describe.¹³ In rewriting his own version of the melodrama, Wordsworth attempts to “save” Mary of Buttermere by “recollecting” an image of a common past:

O friend, I speak
With tender recollection of that time
When first we saw the maiden, then a name
By us unheard of—in her cottage-inn
Were welcomed, and attended on by her.
Both stricken with one feeling of delight,
An admiration of her modest mien
And carriage, marked by unexampled grace. (*P*, 327–34)

Sight—with its power to “strike” the observer and evoke admiration—precedes and practically obviates the need for naming. Repetition (and the double negation associated with the pleasures of theater more generally) then serves to fix this silent image in place.¹⁴

Not unfamiliarly we since that time
Have seen her, her discretion have observed,
Her just opinions, female modesty,
Her patience, and retiredness of mind. (*P*, 335–38)

Mary's lack of speech in these passages seems constitutive of her ability to survive the speech of others, and to remain "Unsoiled by commendation and excess / Of public notice" (*P*, 339–40). Her unsoiled silence also provides a clear contrast to the prostitute's "open shame . . . and . . . pride of public vice" (*P*, 419–20).

Yet this description also abstracts her from flesh and blood, making her instead an allegorical figure for female purity in the Lake District. Wordsworth excludes from his account the economics of seduction that the historical Mary Robinson readily and publicly acknowledged. A newspaper notice of 24 December 1802 announced that

A letter has been received by Sir Richard Ford [the chief Bow-Street magistrate], from a Gentleman at Keswick, by which it appears, that Mary Robinson of Buttermere, declines prosecuting *Hatfield* for the Bigamy, as she is now very advanced in her pregnancy, although she expresses the greatest detestation of his actions. She says, she certainly married him, under an idea of his being Colonel Hope, brother to the Earl of Hopetoun, with a view of bettering herself; and, that she has been considerably injured by him in every way, as he left a very considerable bill for board, lodging, &c. at her father's house, unpaid, when he went off.¹⁵

Robinson's account of her rationale ("a view of bettering herself" materially) supports the analysis of marriage as legalized prostitution common in late eighteenth-century feminist tracts. Yet Wordsworth's "recollection" of the Maid of Buttermere (his claim to personal knowledge of the case) never directly contradicts the melodramatic terms of the play he imagines: rather than acknowledging Robinson's attempt to "better herself," he continues to present her as passive victim to Hatfield's "cruel mockery / Of love and marriage vows." Removed from economic agency, the figure of Mary of Buttermere becomes little more than an allegorical symbol, a blazoned name, like those that mark tradesmen's shops in London (*P*, 174). A figurehead of innocence, she remains stationed, Wordsworth's guardian saint, not "above the door" (*P*, 178) but on some imagined boundary between the corruption of commodified London and the refuge of the Lakes. Yet by making Robinson an allegorical figure, a means by which to announce the purity of the Lakes (on which his own literary trade is largely based), Wordsworth replicates the economic degradation he critiques in the city of London and in Bartholomew Fair. As Wordsworth hangs up his shingle, he fixes the Belle of Buttermere in place—with the ironic result that Mary Robinson "falls" into the realm of allegory, leaving the poet implicated in that fall, uncomfortably aligned with the role of seducer.¹⁶

Indeed, in worrying over the link between city life and writing turned to improper uses, Wordsworth may well have identified, however reluctantly, with the figure of John Hatfield, bigamist and forger. On a walking tour in 1803, Dorothy, William and Coleridge stopped in Carlisle, where Hatfield was tried, convicted, and eventually executed—not for his notorious bigamy with Mary Robinson, but for forgery. On 16 August 1803, Dorothy’s journal reported:

Dined at Carlisle; the town in a bustle with the assizes; so many strange faces known in former times and recognised, that it half seemed as if I ought to know them all, and together with the noise, the fine ladies, etc., they put me into confusion. This day Hatfield was condemned. I stood at the door of the gaoler’s house, where he was; William entered the house, and Coleridge saw him; . . . a debtor . . . told me in a dry way that he [Hatfield] was “far over-learned” and another man observed to William that we might learn from Hatfield’s fate “not to meddle with pen and ink.”¹⁷

Carlisle’s bustle, half-recognized, half-strange, put Dorothy “into confusion” and may have offered a small reminder of London’s “blank confusion.” More telling yet are the by-standers’ suggestions that these literary travelers consider the connections between learning, writing and crime. From this perspective, Wordsworth’s attempt to preserve Mary Robinson from the consequences of her “seduction” might be read in part as an attempt to protect himself from (self) condemnation as a man who misuses writing if not exactly for forgery and seduction, at least for economic gain, based in part on sexual differentiation.

Wordsworth’s first pass at a “memorial verse” for the Belle of Buttermere remains inadequate, perhaps because the memorial implies, and to some extent performs, Mary’s death. His version of her story is a memorial in the sense of being constructed from memories, but it also freezes “the maid” in past time: more specifically, in Wordsworth’s past. Refusing to stay put, she comes back to haunt him: “thy image rose again, / Mary of Buttermere!” In response to this image, the poet attempts to repair his story:

She lives in peace
Upon the spot where she was born and reared;
Without contamination does she live
In quietness, without anxiety.
Beside the mountain chapel sleeps in earth
Her new-born infant, fearless as a lamb
That thither comes from some unsheltered place
To rest beneath the little rock-like pile

When storms are blowing, Happy are they both,
Mother and child! (*P*, 351–60)

Wordsworth's characteristic repetition or redundancy here seems designed to propitiate this living image, to compensate for the inappropriate memorial. In almost ritual fashion, the passage negates the ideas of contamination, anxiety and fear, to replace them with peace, quiet, sleep and happiness. Suffering is written out of the picture. Yet this story too misleads—this time in its odd resurrection of the newborn infant (historically still-born or newly dead) as a lamb, freely roaming, who comes to seek shelter in burial. If the first retelling of Mary's story froze the Belle of Buttermere into Wordsworth's own past, this second version creates an imaginary present for her child. Regardless of her lived experience, Mary of Buttermere comes close to a figure of pastoral in Wordsworth's verse—yet at certain moments, specific aspects of her story (her living image, her lost child) threaten to erupt from the green pastoral landscape in which they are buried.

III.

I want to speculate that behind the revenant figure of Mary Robinson of Buttermere may lurk that of Mary Darby Robinson, the actress best known as Perdita, and the poet most celebrated for her *Lyrical Tales*. As a Perdita-turned-courtesan, Darby Robinson marks an uneasy intersection between the worlds of romance and prostitution—and thus circumscribes one of the central concerns at work within the London book of *The Prelude*. Born in 1758, married reluctantly in 1774 to a man who, like Hatfield, misrepresented his wealth and social standing, Mary Darby Robinson gave birth to a daughter within a year and then accompanied Mr. Robinson into debtor's prison. According to her own account, she turned to the stage in an effort to save herself and her dissolute husband from a second bankruptcy.¹⁸ Her greatest personal and professional triumph came on 3 December 1778, in a performance of *The Winter's Tale* before the royal family. In her *Memoirs*, Robinson recreates the doubled drama of this romance:

I hurried through the first scene, not without much embarrassment, owing to the fixed attention with which the Prince of Wales honoured me. Indeed some flattering remarks which were made by his Royal Highness met my ear as I stood near his box, and I was overwhelmed with confusion.

The Prince's particular attention was observed by every one, and I was again rallied at the end of the play. On the last curse [sic],

the Royal family condescendingly returned a bow to the performers; but just as the curtain was falling, my eyes met those of the Prince of Wales; and with a look that I *never shall forget*, he gently inclined his head a second time; I felt the compliment and blushed my gratitude.¹⁹

The secret of Darby Robinson's appeal seems to have been tied partly to her persona within the play. The day after this performance, the Prince of Wales sent young Lord Malden to Darby Robinson bearing love letters from "Florizel" to "Perdita," setting a suitably romantic tone for the reception of their affair. Not only did the lovers cast themselves as the slumming prince and lost princess of romance, but the public picked up on these characterizations. John Fyvie refers to a variety of "catch-penny publications, such as the poetical epistles from Florizel to Perdita, or the pretended copies of the letters which passed between Mrs. Robinson and the Prince of Wales under these signatures," though these seem to have appealed to the "pruriency of the public" rather than to their romantic sensibilities.²⁰

The scene which Darby Robinson hurried through was presumably the sheep-shearing festival, an event which causes the character as well as the actress some embarrassment. Perdita threatens to swoon at the (imagined) sight of herself ("most goddess-like prank'd up" [W, 4.4.10]) and worries over the unlikely possibility that the king himself might accidentally come upon them: "how / Should I, in these my borrowed flaunts, behold / The sternness of his presence?" (W, 4.4.22–24) Flirting with the masquerading prince, Florizel, she blames her unusually free manners on her dress:

Come, take your flow'rs;
Methinks I play as I have seen them do
In Whitsun pastorals; sure this robe of mine
Does change my disposition. (W, 4.4.132–35)

The stress laid on costume and acting, as well as the overall model of modest flirtation, would continue throughout the relationship begun during this on-stage-off-stage play between actress and prince. One of Robinson's neighbors, for instance, noted how extensively she played at acting different parts, changing her disposition with her robe.

To-day she was a *paysanne*, with her straw hat tied at the back of her head, looking as if too new to what she passed to know what she looked at. Yesterday, she, perhaps, had been the dressed *belle* of Hyde Park, trimmed, powdered, patched, painted to the utmost

power of rouge and white lead; to-morrow she would be the cravatted Amazon of the riding-house.²¹

Even Perdita's fear of parental disapproval is played out in the courting of prince and actress. A "diurnal print" reported one stormy encounter:

A circumstance of rather an embarrassing nature happened at last night's Oratorio. Mrs. R—, decked out in all her finery, took care to post herself in one of the upper boxes, immediately opposite the Prince's, and by those airs peculiar to herself, contrived at last so to basilisk a certain heir apparent that his fixed attention to the beautiful object above became generally noticed, and soon after astonished their Majesties, who, not being able to discover the cause, seemed at a loss to account for the extraordinary effect. No sooner, however, were they properly informed, than a messenger was instantly sent aloft desiring the dart-dealing actress to withdraw, which she complied with, though not without expressing the utmost chagrin at her mortifying removal.²²

So too Perdita claims (after Polixenes leaves) not to have been very frightened: "I was about to speak and tell him plainly, / The selfsame sun that shines upon his court / Hides not his visage from our cottage, but / Looks alike on all" (W, 4.4.445–49). But the expression of chagrin in neither case interferes with properly submissive behavior.

If the charming trials of Perdita's first scene were played out with exquisite and lingering care by these celebrity actors, the resolutions and reunions of the fifth act lay beyond their reach. George III wrote to Lord North in August of 1781 that

My eldest son got last year into an improper connection with an actress and woman of indifferent character through the friendly assistance of Lord Malden. He sent her letters and very foolish promises, which undoubtedly by her conduct she has cancelled. Colonel Hotham has settled to pay the enormous sum of £5000 for the letters, etc., being returned. You will therefore settle with him.²³

The break-up of the affair seems to have been complete by late spring of 1782. Yet even after the Prince of Wales had left her, Darby Robinson was (at first) received with a public sympathy in tune with her role as noble innocent. James Gillray's caricature of "Monuments lately discovered on Salisbury Plain" (5 June 1782), for instance, foregrounds four figures: the Prince of Wales and the Marchioness of Salisbury (his new romantic interest), as well as the two abandoned partners, the Marquis of Salisbury and Mary Darby Robinson.²⁴ The Prince and the Marchioness are sketched in exquisite detail, and the subscript beneath the caricature describes them as "lately . . . animated with the Celestial

Fire.” The marquis and Mary Robinson, by contrast, are monumentalized, partly turned to the stones that mark the historic Salisbury plain. The jealous husband appears as “an unfinished resemblance of the Human Form;” the observer is asked to note that “from the Vacancy of Countenance, & roughness of the Workmanship, this Figure cannot be supposed ever to have been intended as a companion to” the marchioness. Yet Mrs. Robinson is treated more gently, described as “some forlorn Dido, or forsaken Ariadne, of Quality.” In the public imagination, she remains for the moment a figure of romance or national epic, though this figure seems to be turning slowly to stone.

If Shakespeare’s Perdita can be thought of as “reconcil[ing] virginity and erotic appeal, modesty and abandonment,” Mary Darby Robinson soon lost all claim to the first half of this equation.²⁵ Even during the height of her relations with the Prince, a quarto volume was published (in 1781), claiming to present letters passed between Mrs. Robinson and “a certain Israelite” back in the 1770s. According to this volume, Darby Robinson and her husband together set out to make money out of her sexual attractions, both from Lords like Lyttleton, Valencia and Northington, and from moneylenders more directly. The last letter attributed to Darby Robinson within this collection complains to the “Israelite” in question,

I find you have not yet answered my draft. I do not wish an acquaintance with any man who professes so much love, but who gives so little proof of it. I wish I could recall those imprudent moments when I suffered your deluding promises and seductive tongue to betray me into sin; but unless you give me the token of your sincerity that I ask for, I shall take care how I trust you again. I am astonished that you should scruple to lend me such a sum as £100 when it was the last I should borrow and should have repaid it faithfully. Now you have an opportunity of showing your love, or I shall see that you have all along deceived me.²⁶

This counter-narrative of canny social prostitution disrupts and eventually displaces the romance of letters and epistolary poems attributed to Florizel and Perdita. Indeed, Robinson’s reputation became increasingly marginal as time went on. Abandoned by the Prince in the spring of 1782, she spent the summer flirting (and possibly having sexual relations) with a series of men: Charles Fox, Lord Malden, Banastre Tarleton. By autumn, she had more or less settled down with Tarleton, as the *Morning Post* announced on the 21st of September 1782:

Yesterday a messenger arrived in Town, with the very interesting and pleasing intelligence of the *Tarleton*, armed ship, having, after a



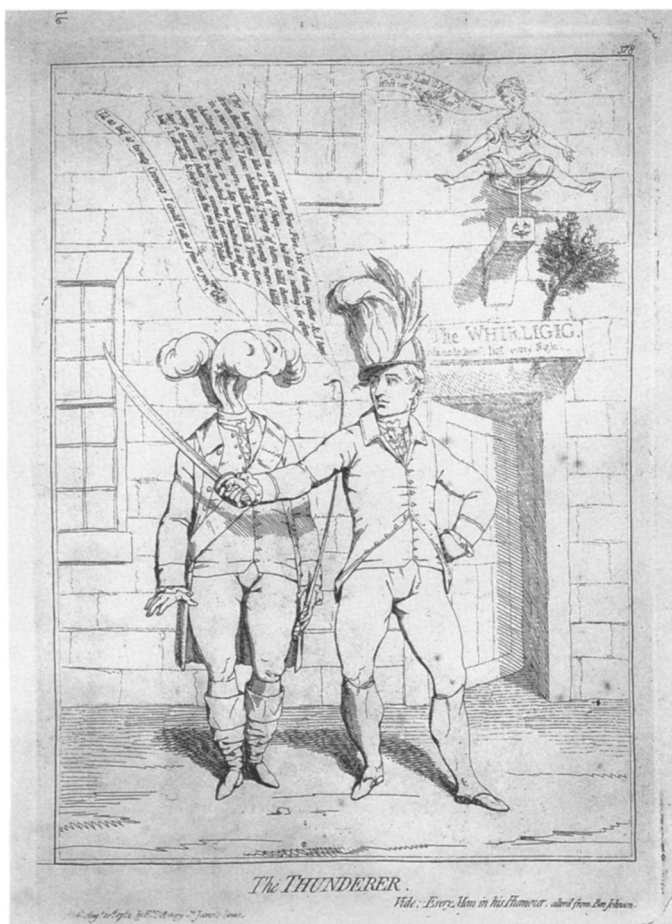
James Gillray. Monuments Lately Discovered on Salisbury Plain. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Prints and Ephemera.

chase of some months, captured the *Perdita* frigate, and brought her safe into Egham port. The *Perdita* is a prodigious fine clean-bottomed vessel, and had taken many prizes during her cruise, particularly the *Florizel*, a most valuable ship belonging to the Crown, but which was immediately released, after taking out the cargo. The *Perdita*, was captured by the *Fox*, but was afterwards retaken by the *Malden*, and had a sumptuous suit of new rigging, when she fell in with the *Tarleton*. Her manoeuvring to escape was admirable; but the *Tarleton*, fully determined to take her or perish, would not give up the chase; and at length, coming alongside the *Perdita*, fully determined to board her, sword in hand, she surrendered at discretion.²⁷

The nautical and military imagery tells the story from the perspective of *Tarleton*, a hero of the American wars, rather than that of *Robinson*. She is at once objectified and sexualized as “a prodigious fine clean-bottomed vessel,” while the monetary gains attributed to her connection with *Malden* (a “sumptuous suit of new rigging”) are shown to be *Tarleton*’s profit from the encounter. *Tarleton*’s phallic “sword” appears as (almost) the last word in the encounter, outlasted only by the lady’s supposed “discretion.”

Discretion, however, was long lost by September. Gillray had already noted the alliance between Tarleton and Robinson on 20 August 1782, with a caricature entitled “The Thunderer.”²⁸ I have suggested that Wordsworth’s account of Mary Robinson of Buttermere makes her a verbal analogue of the painted signs above shops and pubs announcing the local trade. In Gillray’s caricature, Mary Darby Robinson appears as just such an allegorical shape announcing an (un)savory local “trade.” Legs spread wide, and breasts uncovered, she is “sexually impaled” above “The Whirligig,” and raunchily redefines its promise to serve “Alamode Beef, hot every Night.”²⁹ The very post which supports her is given eyes with which to look up her skirt. The two male “rivals” of soldier and prince, meanwhile, are foregrounded by the print, oblivious to the female figure who defines their relative sexual prowess. Tarleton looks dashing but sounds ridiculous in Gillray’s adaptation of Jonson’s Captain Bobadil; the Prince appears as the original featherhead, mumbling, “I’d as lief as twenty crowns I could walk as fine as you.”³⁰ His featherhead has little to say to Tarleton’s plumed bragging—nor does the droopy end of the Prince’s riding whip measure up to Tarleton’s “poor Toledo.”

Gillray ignores his earlier sympathy for a Robinson abandoned by the Prince; her unseemly haste to find a new protector makes her sexuality fair game, as it makes her appear the one at fault in the break-up of the royal affair. Indeed, Darby Robinson’s fault may lie in her refusal to remain in the passive role of a woman abandoned by her lover: her refusal leaves the prince looking both vaguely envious and vastly impotent. Even as a shop-sign Robinson is made to speak her preference for Tarleton: “This is the Lad I’ll kiss most sweet / Who’d not love a soldier.” Her explicit statement of preference allows a moral translation of “abandonment:” first a woman abandoned by her lover, Robinson becomes in this later print a woman, as Wordsworth puts it, “to open shame / Abandoned, and the pride of public vice” (*P*, 418–19). Her speech (the expression of sexual choice) defines her moral abandon, as Wordsworth’s prostitute is defined by the blasphemy she both utters and implicitly enacts (*P*, 417). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines blasphemy as “profane speaking of God or sacred things; impious irreverence.” In Gillray’s caricature, Darby Robinson treats the manhood or virility of the crown prince with irreverence—an act which could be considered blasphemy against the divine (and sexualized) rights of kings and princes. Early in Book Seven of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth implies that theater itself is blasphemous, as sex is sacred: Sadler’s Wells’ burletta spectacle of the Belle of Buttermere touched



James Gillray, *The Thunderer*. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Prints and Ephemera.

“with irreverence” on a theme “too holy . . . for such a place” (P, 318–19). As actress, as abandoned woman and as namesake to the Belle of Buttermere, Mary Darby Robinson embodies and enacts the blasphemous transgressions of theater—in particular, its irreverence toward the holy themes of (pro) creation and poetic reproduction.

IV.

At first glance, the twenty years separating the adventures of the first Mary Robinson from those of the second make it unlikely that

Wordsworth would have thought of these two fallen belles together. But Wordsworth had other, more recent reasons to be thinking about Mary Robinson the poet. Toward the end of 1800, Coleridge had involved Wordsworth in a poetic flirtation by proxy. The second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* was about to go to press, though Wordsworth had considered changing the title of the volume to “Poems by W. Wordsworth,” since, as Dorothy Wordsworth put it, “Mrs. Robinson has claimed the title and is about publishing a volume of *Lyrical Tales*. This is a great objection to the former title, particularly as they are both printed at the same press and Longman is the publisher of both the works.”³¹ In the beginning of October, Coleridge sent four of Wordsworth’s poems to the *Morning Post* for publication; three of the poems linked Wordsworth more or less directly to Darby Robinson. The “Mad Monk” recalls Robinson’s “The Hermit of the Alps” in its use of a hermit monk, a murdered maid, a trail of blood in the snow, and so on—though all of these Gothic conventions were also poetic commonplaces of the time. Coleridge introduced “The Solitude of Binnorie” more pointedly with a deep (and deeply ventriloquised) bow to Mary Robinson:

Sir, it would be unpardonable in the author of the following lines if he omitted to acknowledge that the metre (with the exception of the burthen) is borrowed from *The Haunted Beach* of Mrs Robinson, a most exquisite poem This acknowledgement will not appear superfluous to those who have felt the bewitching effect of that absolutely original stanza . . . and who call to mind that the invention of a metre has so widely diffused the name of Sappho, and almost constitutes the present celebrity of Alcaeus.³²

Finally, the brief lyric “Alcaeus to Sappho” extends this play on names in a more flirtatious direction, turning what was originally a Lucy poem into a social convention of public homage.

Coleridge’s financial difficulties, his friendship for Mary Darby Robinson, and his “grief at her illness” undoubtedly all contributed to this oddly elaborate gesture of flirtatious plagiarism. But it’s also tempting to see this episode as Coleridge’s (passive aggressive) response to the decision to exclude “Christabel” from the *Lyrical Ballads*. Through this sequence of poems, Wordsworth, generally unappreciative of women poets, and with particular reason to resent the work of Mary Darby Robinson, is made publicly subservient to the most outrageous of contemporary female poets—yet this act of public homage remains a kind of private joke for Coleridge, since no one outside the Wordsworth circle would know to connect the poems with Wordsworth rather than with Coleridge.³³

Mary Darby Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* move beyond the poetic triangle established by Coleridge to challenge Wordsworth more directly. While the *Tales* were published on 17 December 1800, and the *Lyrical Ballads* delayed until January of 1801, both publications bore the date of 1800. And Darby Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* respond in a variety of ways to the *Lyrical Ballads*: in particular, the Robinson poems explicitly named "Tales" offer a model of reading which challenges that provided by the *Lyrical Ballads*. Both Wordsworth's "Ballads" and Robinson's "Tales" ask readers to think actively about the process of reading, and of storytelling. Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* asserts that "the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants" and dedicates the poet's work to "produc[ing] or enlarg[ing] this capability."³⁴ He explicitly contrasts his work to the "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" which he sees overwhelming the discriminating powers of readers' minds: "When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it" (*L*, 243). Wordsworth offers his readers a moral aesthetic, one designed to work upon the minds of individuals, enabling them to respond more forcefully and thoughtfully to "great national events" and daily happenings alike. Thus, he asks us to focus not on the sensational story of Martha Ray, but on the garrulous sea-captain's attempt to retell that story, and in the process, come to terms with it himself. Not the moving accident, but the bystander's responses, comprise Wordsworth's trade.

Darby Robinson's "Tales" also demand to be read on more than one level at a time, but rather than contrasting an event with the response to that event, she models for the reader two opposing stances: that of hypocritical innocence, and that of knowing cynicism. The moralizing conclusions of the tales repeatedly disrupt the naïveté they ostensibly support, to promulgate instead a mode of social cynicism, especially in cases of sexual impropriety. While the drama of the *Lyrical Ballads* tends to reside in the narrator's changing responses, Robinson's narrators pose few dramatic questions: the narrative voice remains consistently knowing. The potential for change sketched within the *Tales* lies instead in the reader's response to a (repeated) incommensurability of moral and story: to notice the mismatch is almost inevitably to become a more cynical reader. Acknowledging the gap between moral and action in the tale may also lead to acknowledging the limits of one's own presumed morality or innocence. A few examples should serve to

demonstrate how far from Wordsworth's earnest excitement this more cynical, social aesthetic stands.

By the end of her career, Mary Darby Robinson seems to have become an apt judge of the composition of her audience: five (or possibly six) of the nine tales are addressed specifically to women readers, two (or possibly three) to a mixed audience, and one with ceremonial indirection to the Prince of Wales.³⁵ Of the tales addressed to women, three attack the conventions of sexual purity by taking for granted women's sexual adventures, while two others mock older women who traffic in sexual scandal. In the first category, for instance, "The Mistletoe" tells the story of a young woman married to an old farmer. The tale opens by emphasizing her marriage vows—"That she a faithful mate would prove, / In meekness, duty, and in love"—and then casting doubt upon their value: "But, mark the sequel,—and attend!" (T, 10) At a Christmas party, a young admirer repeatedly urges her to accompany him beneath the mistletoe, and she betrays herself in trying to assert both her marital reserve and her power over him. "Resolved to make / An envious rival's bosom ache," Mistress Homespun

Commanded Hodge to let her go,
Nor lead her to the Mistletoe;
"Why should you ask it o'er and o'er?
Cried she, "we've been there twice before!" (T, 15–16)

Yet the moral of the tale rebukes Mistress Homespun, not for kissing young Hodge, but rather for betraying herself to her husband:

'Tis thus, to check a rival's sway,
That Women oft themselves betray;
While Vanity, alone, pursuing,
They rashly prove, their own undoing. (T, 16)

In criticizing the young woman's speech rather than the kisses themselves, the poem at once "undoes" its own ostensible morality, and urges women readers to value the material good of reputation over the more intangible indulgence of vanity. (Don't cut off your nose to spite your rival.) Cheating on one's husband is taken for granted: the arena of moral action restricts itself to the question of how a flirtation or affair is to be managed.

"The Fortune Teller" sketches another inconstant young woman (Kate) who, despite her approaching marriage to "honest Lubin," and the ten pounds he has given her to buy a wedding dress, has become sexually involved with the rakish Stephen. A gypsy girl trying to win Lubin for

herself tells him that his sweetheart is false, and that “home his bride would bring / A little, alien, prattling thing / In just six moons!” (T, 134–35) Lubin, after piquing Kate’s curiosity, masquerades as a fortune-teller himself, and when Kate comes to ask her fortune, scolds her for her affair. She offers to pay him five pounds for his silence; he demands ten.

But what was her dismay, to find
That Lubin was the gypsy bold;
The cunning, fortune-telling hind
Who had the artful story told—
Who thus, was cur’d of jealous pain,—
And got his TEN POUNDS back again! (T, 138)

By the end of the story, the ten pounds seem to loom much larger than Kate’s plighted troth—in the minds of the narrator and Lubin alike. It’s also worth noting that “honest Lubin” has suddenly become “cunning,” his story more “artful” than Kate’s adventures. And once again, the moral, addressed to “gentle Maids,” advises not chastity but reserve:

Thus, Fortune pays the LOVER bold!
But, gentle Maids, should Fate
Have any *secret* yet untold,—
Remember, *simple* KATE! (T, 138)

Lubin begins simple, but Kate ends that way, the fool of both Stephen and Lubin: her simplicity lies in looking for trouble in her relations with men—and letting “fate” unfold a secret over which she has lost control.

The Tales in general portray an irreverence for social roles and sexual mores at odds with Wordsworth’s idealization of the figures of humble, rural life; they also contradict the solemn and meditative reading process proposed by Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Indeed, if one accepts Wordsworth’s aesthetics as ennobling, Darby Robinson’s “Tales” must seem, by contrast, corrupt.³⁶ The narrative voice of these “Tales” speaks from beyond the social pale to redefine virtue—often, a specifically sexualized female morality. Yet just as Wordsworth presents his aesthetic as a partial response to “great national events,” Mary Darby Robinson uses her more equivocal position as discarded royal mistress to address a (once and future) Monarch. The “Old English Tale” of “The Trumpeter” undertakes to teach a king how best to manage his business: in the process, it disposes of a braggart who might have earned the nickname of “Thunderer” before that of “Trumpeter” (T, 120).

The “Monarch” of the “Old English Tale” is at first pleased to let dissolute men of birth and wealth determine his decisions and guide his rule, but when one particularly vile braggart claims the right to rule the banquet hall based on his military and sexual prowess—and his mistreatment of women—the king proclaims him a trumpeter instead, and promptly reforms his royal self, his court and his kingdom. This story seems to me an uncanny replay of the Gillray caricature, with Mary Darby Robinson as poet removing herself from the position of “whirligig” and debasing the thundering, trumpeting figure of Tarleton to offer a different lesson to the Prince of Wales. To the bragging of a Captain Bobadil, Darby Robinson adds a specifically sexual component.

“I have fought with all nations, and bled in the field,
“See my lance is unshiver’d, tho’ batter’d my shield,
“I have combatted legions, yet never would yield
“And the Enemy fled—one and all!
“I have rescued a thousand fair Donnas, in Spain,
“I have left in gay France, every bosom in pain,
“I have conquer’d the Russian, the Prussian, the Dane,
“And will reign in the Banqueting Hall!” (T, 120)

The Monarch, hitherto oblivious to the injustices perpetrated by his realm, suddenly awakes to a proper sense of his own dignity and duty. The closing lines of the poem seem markedly un-ironic, and their promise is recalled by the final words of the collection:

From that moment the Monarch grew sober and good,
(And nestled with Birds of a different brood,)
For he found that the pathway which wisdom pursu’d
Was pleasant, safe, quiet and even!
That by Temperance, Virtue and liberal deeds,
By nursing the flowrets, and crushing the weeds,
The loftiest Traveller always succeeds—
For his journey will lead him to HEAV’N. (T, 122)

Yet irony remains in the fact that a fallen woman of dubious virtue, whose own path has hardly been “pleasant, safe, quiet and even” should presume thus to preach to a royal prince. Mary Darby Robinson’s “Tales” are remarkable for an effrontery both political and aesthetic, and for their exploitation of what would seem a liability: the *demimondaine* status of their author.

In the midst of Book Seven, Wordsworth defines his own poetic artistry in opposition to that provided by the stage. *If* he experienced “aught of real grandeur” at the theater,

’Twas only then when gross realities,
The incarnation of the spirits that moved
Amid the poet’s beauteous world—called forth
With that distinctness which a contrast gives,
Or opposition—made me recognise
As by a glimpse, the things which I had shaped
And yet not shaped, had seen and scarcely seen,
Had felt, and thought of in my solitude. (*P*, 504–16)

The re-presentational world of the theater is thus diametrically opposed to the poet’s creative solitude; the gross realities of the stage are subordinated to the poet’s powers of shaping vision, feeling and thought. Mary Darby Robinson, by contrast, presents solitude as an experience of privation (“the horror-giving cheerless hour / Of TOTAL SOLITUDE!” [*T*, 168]), often as society’s ostracism of marginal figures.³⁷ Wordsworth’s chosen and creative solitude has little to do with Robinson’s repeated focus on the helplessness of the abandoned and neglected. Yet Wordsworth’s model of chosen, self-sufficient solitude and Darby Robinson’s images of horrific isolation repeatedly clash in the work of both poets.

Robinson’s “All Alone,” for instance, can be read as a critical revision of Wordsworth’s “We are Seven.” Both poems contrast an older narrator with a young, naïve speaker deprived (by death) of family members. Yet while Wordsworth’s “little maid” seems to rebuke her adult questioner for failing to recognize the ongoing presence of her dead siblings, Darby Robinson’s “little boy” resists the narrator’s attempts to comfort him. When the boy complains, “I wander’d, FRIENDLESS—and ALONE!” the narrator describes his or her own companionship throughout the day. Yet the child rebukes the narrator’s well-meant stupidity:

“O! yes, I was! and still shall be
 “A wand’rer, mourning and forlorn’
“For what is all the world to me—
 “What are the dews and buds of morn?
“Since she, who left me sad, alone
“In darkness sleeps, beneath yon stone?” (*T*, 8)

The mother’s death is the loss most irreparable and most powerfully mourned within the poem, though the loss of the father is what closes

the verse and clinches the boy's claim to have been "LEFT ALONE!" Where Wordsworth uses the figure of a little girl to speak for the continuity of affection and familial community beyond death, Darby Robinson uses that of a young boy to assert the primacy and pathos of loss.

Robinson's "Alien Boy" offers a more narrative version of the same claim. St. Hubert and his son Henry flee from the persecutions of the French Revolution to dwell "on a Mountain near the Western Main." When St. Hubert perishes trying to save the life of a shipwrecked man, Henry loses his mind.

From that hour
A maniac wild, the Alien Boy has been;
His garb with sea-weeds fring'd, and his wan cheek
The tablet of his mind, disorder'd, chang'd,
Fading, and worn with care. (*T*, 169)

Like Wordsworth's blind beggar, this young maniac offers a tablet to be read by others (though with increasing difficulty)—not by himself. Yet while Wordsworth uses the blind beggar to stress the common indecipherability of life and identity, Darby Robinson fixes the meaning of the boy as tablet by making him a figure of social failure. Henry resists all "gen'rous" efforts to return him to society, remaining instead: "A melancholy proof that Man may bear / All the rude storms of Fate, and still suspire / By the wide world forgotten!"

In Book Seven of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presents a "lovely boy" who seems "a sort of alien scattered from the clouds" (*P*, 378) as an almost direct contrast to the figure of the blind beggar or Darby Robinson's broad notions of social alienation. The boy and his painted mother are introduced with a brief, perhaps coincidental echo of the Robinson poem—

Twas on a Mountain, near the Western Main
An Alien dwelt (Darby Robinson)

’Twas at a theatre
That I beheld this pair (Wordsworth)

but this echo merely serves to underline a more fundamental contrast. Darby Robinson's boy is an outcast émigré, while Wordsworth's seems "scattered from the clouds" (*P*, 378), presumably "trailing clouds of glory" as he comes. Henry's noble, sainted and deceased father brings into sharp relief the fading, painted mother of *The Prelude*. While Wordsworth's boy occupies (with some danger) the center stage of a theatrical gathering, Darby Robinson's suffers, isolated and uncared for;

the former remains embalmed in poetic memory, the latter frozen in madness. Yet Wordsworth's "lovely boy" also exemplifies the kinds of forms and images that accompany the poet in his creative solitude—just as the girl in "We are Seven" keeps company with her dead siblings. In Wordsworth's mind, the boy seems to have been "embalmed / By Nature, . . . destined to live, / To be, to have been, come, and go, a child / And nothing more" (*P*, 400–4). The boy's excess of beauty separates him from his miserable surroundings and more generally from the "distress and guilt / Pain and abasement" of life (*P*, 405–6). A model of pure beauty and "stopped" time, the boy—like one of Wordsworth's spots of time—retains for the poet a fructifying, renovating virtue. The poet feeds on this image ("So I have thought of him a thousand times" (*P*, 408) yet the boy remains unconsumed by memory or by the fiery furnace (*P*, 399).

Ironically, consumption seems precisely the danger that the passage as a whole attempts (unsuccessfully) to hold at bay. The boy first appears as a consumable spectacle, part of a moveable feast:

Upon a board,
Whence an attendant of the theatre
Served out refreshments, had this child been placed,
And there he sate environed with a ring
Of chance spectators, chiefly dissolute men
And shameless women—treated and caressed—
Ate, drank, and with the fruit and glasses played,
While oaths, indecent speech, and ribaldry
Were rife about him as are songs of birds
In springtime after showers. (*P*, 383–93)

The translation of ribaldry into bird-songs does little to obscure the fear, hinted at throughout this episode, that the child will lose his innocence among these dissolute men and shameless women. Though the poet repeatedly denies the possibility of the child's fall, he finally turns away from the boy with the suggestion that

he perhaps,
Mary, may now have lived till he could look
With envy on thy nameless babe that sleeps
Beside the mountain chapel undisturbed. (*P*, 409–12)

Embalming the boy cannot keep him safe: he may be better off dead. This seems to me a rather striking case of "Wordsworthian euphemism:" the indirect suggestion of a "fate worse than death" for the boy is

followed by a (displaced) reference to *female* prostitution.³⁸ Three years earlier, the poet remarks, he heard for the first time

The voice of woman utter blasphemy—
Saw woman as she is to open shame
Abandoned, and the pride of public vice.

...
a barrier seemed at once
Thrown in, that from humanity divorced
The human form, splitting the race of man
In twain, yet leaving the same outward shape. (*P*, 417–26).

But of course prostitution has never been just a woman's profession: child prostitution, like child molestation, seems to have been a fairly common phenomenon at the turn of the century, while the sexuality of "dissolute men" in the theater had been traditionally suspect.³⁹ Most readings of the painted mother and lovely boy emphasize the way the fallen mother is sacrificed to maintain the purity of the boy child, with whom Wordsworth can then (in part) identify. Yet even within this passage, the sacrifice seems unable to keep fears of consumption and prostitution at a distance. Wordsworth's "alien scattered from the clouds" begins as a seeming refutation of Mary Darby Robinson's critique of solitude; yet the poet's account of the boy ends by turning to an uncanny approximation of her personal history—a woman "abandoned" to open shame and the pride of public vice.

VI.

A public and discarded mistress as well as a competitor-poet, Mary Darby Robinson might also be called a fallen Perdita, a monitory figure of stage romance gone wrong. And romance *per se* is the larger issue with which Book Seven of *The Prelude* continually struggles. For Wordsworth, as we have seen, the superficiality of stage romance serves to define by contrast the healing and creative powers of solitude and communion with nature. Indeed, the moral of Book Seven, if such a thing exists, might be summarized in the poet's proposed antidote to the chaos of the Fair.

Attention comes,
And comprehensiveness and memory,
From early converse with the works of God
Among all regions, chiefly where appear
Most obviously simplicity and power. (*P*, 717–21)

Yet while earlier books of this figurative autobiography show the impact of early converse with nature, with simplicity and power, Book Seven explicitly links the exercise of attention to the feminized and feminizing world of romance. The following passage associates romance both with the exercise of mental power, and with feminine changeability:

Through the night,
Between the show, and many-headed mass
Of the spectators, and each little nook
That had its fray or brawl, how eagerly
And with what flashes, as it were, the mind
Turned this way, that way—sportive and alert
And watchful, as a kitten when at play,
While winds are blowing round her, among grass
And rustling leaves. Enchanting age and sweet—
Romantic almost, looked at through a space,
How small, of intervening years! For then,
Though surely no mean progress had been made
In meditations holy and sublime,
Yet something of a girlish childlike gloss
Of novelty survived for scenes like these—
Pleasure that had been handed down from times
When at a country playhouse, having caught
In summer through the fractured wall a glimpse
Of daylight, at the thought of where I was
I gladdened more than if I had beheld
Before me some bright cavern of romance,
Or than we do when on our beds we lie
At night, in warmth, when rains are beating hard. (*P*, 466–88)

This passage, itself full of shifts and turns, at once replicates the larger structure of the book and demonstrates the kinds of watchful, sportive motion required to profit fully from this world of popular entertainment.⁴⁰ Romance, in other words, becomes visible as a structuring principle at the very moment it is most explicitly (and favorably) thematized.

The poet's youth, a period in which—"the senses easily pleased" (*P*, 441)—he remained enamored of theater, is seen as an enchanting and romantic age. Yet what remains of romance in this period is "something of a girlish childlike gloss"—hardly comparable to the "meditations holy and sublime" which Wordsworth presents as his more honorable labor. Indeed, the "girlish childlike gloss" of romance points further back in time and space, to the child's world of a country playhouse, with daylight shining through cracks in the walls. The poet's mind thus plays over three separate times and places: 1) the present at Grasmere in which he writes and thinks back to 2) his attendance at the minor London

theaters, until the memory of his “girlish” pleasure there leads further back, to 3) a more rural (less corrupt?) form of theater. Like the storytelling proposed by Leontes, this passage begins to close, though only in the name of girlish pleasure, the “wide gap of time since first / We were dissevered” (W, 5.3.151–55).

What seems to be dissevered or disrupted in the country playhouse, however, are the boundaries separating reality from the world of romance: its fractured wall lets in glimpses of daylight. This fracture operates in both directions, for while light from the outside world breaks the illusion of the play, recalling the spectator to himself and his location, the world outside remains visible from within only in fractions and fragments. The poet claims to have been better pleased with this fracturing (of) illusion than he would have been with a vision of “some bright cavern of romance.” Yet the play of light within this passage suggests that one might read the playhouse itself as a charmingly imperfect cavern of romance, brightened by the daylight peeping through its walls. On yet another level, this playhouse presents an image of the mind itself—a mental theater, “as it were,” in which the mind turns with “flashes” from the illusion on stage to the spectacle (of spectators) which frames it. Light, natural or mental, breaks the frame of romance, returning the spectator to himself, though in a movement directly opposed to the “Imagination!” passage of Book Six:

when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world. (*P*, 6. 534–36)

In Book Six, these flashes mark a loss of sense perception, the usurpations of Imagination. In Book Seven, flashes of light return the viewer to himself, and the return to self-presence gradually strengthens the poet’s independence from the imaginative force of romance. In this way, the world of stage romance serves to exercise the poet’s attention through the poet’s resistance to its domination. Yet while the struggle privileges the poet’s mental theater over the literal theater which surrounds him, it also produces (yet another version of) the internalization of romance.

This internalized romance remains alarmingly feminized and thus potentially degraded. The fracturing of illusion in the country playhouse is also compared to the sense of comfort and security experienced “when on our beds we lie / At night, in warmth, when rains are beating hard”—and this comparison suggests, it seems to me, that the real world of adventure and romance exists beyond the walls of the theater, but

also beyond the poet's mingling of daylight and dream light. The romance found in the fractured playhouse equals girlish pleasure on the one hand and womb-like comfort on the other. Yet if we venture out into the hard rain, we find that

Scenes different there are—
Full-formed—which take, with small internal help,
Possession of the faculties: the peace
Of night, for instance, the solemnity
Of Nature's intermediate hours of rest
When the great tide of human life stands still,
The business of the day to come unborn,
Of that gone by locked up as in the grave;
The calmness, beauty, of the spectacle,
Sky, stillness, moonshine, empty streets, and sounds
Unfrequent as in deserts; at late hours
Of winter evenings when unwholesome rains
Are falling hard, with people yet astir,
The feeble salutation from the voice
Of some unhappy woman now and then
Heard as we pass, when no one looks about,
Nothing is listened to. (*P*, 626–42)

Here some strength of usurpation remains, and is able (with some internal help, though small) to take possession of the faculties. Yet what possesses the poet here seems remarkably emptied out of life. Three night scenes are described: the first caught in a limbo where womb and grave overlap; the second both deserted and explicitly desert-like; the third obscured by the unwholesome winter rain, so that voices may be heard, but nothing is listened to. More specifically, of course, the voice that gets no hearing is that of “some unhappy woman”—a prostitute, looking for trade. Wordsworth repeatedly associates the romances staged in London with prostitution, yet his alternate, offstage mode of naturalized romance produces the figure of the prostitute as a constitutive element.⁴¹ Mary Darby Robinson's recurrent complaint that the “feeble salutations” of marginalized figures remain unheard seems at once included and occluded within this landscape, as the prostitute's cry is generalized into an alienated or barren harmony with the peace of the night: *no one* looks about, *nothing* is listened to.⁴² The voice of the woman poet as well as the woman prostitute is perhaps most fully elided through this kind of incorporation in the still-life spectacle of London, and in the off-stage (textual) rehearsal of male poetic identity.

Yet on the great stage of London, the “suburbs of creation” are always waiting in the wings.⁴³ The poet's complaint with melodrama, after all, is

that despite its apparent emotional force, it remains, internally speaking, a suburban art:

For though I was most passionately moved,
And yielded to the changes of the scene
With most obsequious feeling, yet all this
Passed not beyond the suburbs of the mind. (*P*, 504–7)

In these lines the poet translates the appeal of theatrical romance into a (merely) suburban form. And in what seems an oddly similar gesture, the poet turns from the “waters, walks, and gardens green” of London’s peaceful courts to an explicitly “suburban” landscape (*P*, 204–11). In this latter vision, the tide of humanity slackens, the walls are dead, and the breezes straggling, but prolific files of ballads (with tales interspersed, perhaps?) dangle from those walls, even as giant “advertisements . . . press forward in all colours on the sight” (*P*, 205–11). Later in the book, the poet will try to dissociate himself from the commercialized culture of this proto-suburbia by defining his own creativity as its opposing term (*P*, 511–16). Yet here he focuses on “a most imposing word”—the word “Inviting” is specified in an earlier draft.⁴⁴ That invitation, written out of the poem at a place where ballads as well as advertisements appear, returns later, in the midst of other writing at Bartholomew Fair:

the midway region and above
Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
Dumb proclamations of the prodigies;
And chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,
And children whirling in their roundabouts;
With those that stretch the neck, and strain the eyes,
And crack the voice in rivalry, the crowd
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons
Grimacing, writhing, screaming. (*P*, 665–73; my emphasis)

Amid the proclamations of prodigies, the writing on suburban walls turns into the writhing of the crowd at Bartholomew Fair; the invitation which links the commercialized popular culture of fairs and ballads remains inseparable for Wordsworth from a vision of bodies strained, excessive and transgressive.

To awaken his imagination before the writhing spectacle of the fair, Wordsworth calls on the help of the (prostituted) Muse:

For once the Muse’s help will we implore
And she shall lodge us—wafted on her wings
Above the press and danger of the crowd—
Upon some showman’s platform. (*P*, 656–59)

Deposited on a showman's platform, Wordsworth becomes indistinguishable from the other hawkers of the fair. Indeed, I would suggest that the catalogue of carnival images which follows seems closer in some ways to the work of Darby Robinson (a prostituted muse if ever there was one) than to Wordsworth's own standard ware. Compare the passage of writhing invitation above with the lists produced by Robinson's "Winkfield Plain; or, a Description of a Camp in the Year 1800:"

Tents, marquees, and baggage-waggons;
 Suttling-houses, beer in flagons;
 Drums and trumpets, singing, firing,
 Girls seducing, beaux admiring;
 . . .
 Tax'd carts full of farmers daughters;
 Brutes condemn'd, and man who slaughters!
 Public-houses, booths, and castles,
 Belles of fashion, serving vassals;
 . . .
 Tradesmen leaving shops, and seeming
 More of war than profit dreaming;
 Martial sounds and braying asses,
 Noise, that ev'ry noise surpasses!
 All confusion, din, and riot,
 Nothing clean—and nothing quiet.⁴⁵

The two passages are linked by the general sense of chaos, din and riot—as well as by their proliferation of gerunds. Yet Stuart Curran remarks of "Winkfield Plain" that "no man could have written this poem so conscious of the place of women within the economy of war and no woman in English society but an inhabitant of the *demi-monde* like Robinson, would have dared to."⁴⁶ Obviously, the same could not be said of Wordsworth's portrayal of Bartholomew Fair. Even the difference in form seems suggestive: Wordsworth's contorted blank verse sketches the "blank confusion" he finds in London and the Fair, while Darby Robinson's rhyming couplets highlight the pattern of differences operating (without syntax or significance) within the chaos of a war camp. Mary Robinson's recognition of the economic or commercial basis of war becomes in Wordsworth a horror of the market more generally: a fall into the grotesquerie of commercial transactions. Wordsworth's insistence on chaos in this closing portrait of London serves to maintain the possibility of unravelling its contortions into "[c]omposure and ennobling harmony" (*P*, 741)—the romance promise of resolution. Darby Robinson speaks from a place beyond (even fallen) romance: her verse shows the apparent contradictions of the war camp already

resolved, through self-delusion and cultural contrivance—people’s willingness to live out the contradictions of a gendered national and commercial ideology.

Yet just before the close of Book Seven, Wordsworth momentarily seems to begin moving beyond the framework of romance. At the fair, as the writing on the wall becomes the writhing of bodies within the press of the crowd, the wonders of romance are crudely travestied.

All moveables of wonder from all parts
Are here . . .
The stone-eater, the man that swallows fire
Giants, ventriloquists, the invisible girl,
The bust that speaks and moves its goggling eyes. (*P*, 680–86)

If Hermione’s miraculous return to life has been replaced by a speaking bust with goggling eyes, the poet likewise becomes ventriloquist, stone-eater, the man that swallows fire. He has incorporated (through consumption) not only the monumental women of romance and the stony writing of the city, but also the figure of the boy who walked through the furnace unsinged. “Attention [. . .] and comprehensiveness and memory” produce the poet as the (feminized, prostituted) city even as they recreate the city along the sight lines of poetic memory. While these three aspects of interpretation or analysis may well come from “early converse with the works of God” (*P*, 719), Book Seven also shows them developing in response to the romance of the stage. And the far side of romance repeatedly appears in the figure of the prostitute, a figure defined by Samuel Johnson as “a woman who converses unlawfully with men.”⁴⁷ Mary Darby Robinson remains the closest historical and lyrical prototype for such an unlawfully voluble woman—a figure of and yet beyond romance, in response to which the reluctant poet of London perversely and romantically takes shape.

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NOTES

I am very grateful to Mary Jacobus and Catherine Burroughs for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay and for research assistance from Lindsay Koval.

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 193.

² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathon Wordsworth (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979). Hereafter references to this version of *The Prelude* will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number and abbreviated *P*; all citations are from Book Seven unless otherwise noted.

³ Mary Robinson, *Lyrical Tales* (London: Longman, 1800), reprinted as Mary

Robinson, *Lyrical Tales* (1800) (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989). Hereafter Robinson's *Tales* will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number and will be abbreviated *T*.

⁴ See for instance Stuart Curran, "The 'I' Altered" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 185–207; Judith Pascoe, "The Spectacular Flâneuse: Mary Robinson and the City of London," *The Wordsworth Circle* 23 (1992): 165–71; Curran, "Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context" in *Revising Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Jerome McGann, "Mary Robinson and the Myth of Sappho," *Modern Language Quarterly* 56 (1995): 55–76; Robin Micskolcze, "Snapshots of Contradiction in Mary Robinson's Poetical Works," *Papers on Language and Literature* 31 (1995): 206–19; Pascoe, "Mary Robinson and the Literary Marketplace" in *Romantic Women Writers*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1995), 252–68.

⁵ For an influential discussion of "masculine Romanticism" and "feminine Romanticism," see Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ Lawrence Kramer argues that the mother "is called back to be stripped of her erotic regalia; Wordsworth literally renders her contaminated sexuality invisible" (629). Yet her existence as well as her eroticism fades from view here. See Kramer, "Gender and Sexuality in *The Prelude*: The Question of Book Seven," *ELH* 54 (1987): 619–37.

⁷ See Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing and Sexual Difference: Essays on The Prelude* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 206–36. It seems remarkable, given the "overwhelming visibility of prostitution" in London at this period (Jacobus, 208, 209n) that the only explicit vision of a prostitute in Book Seven occurs *outside* London. The prostitute mentioned later in the book is not explicitly seen, but only dimly and indirectly heard through the winter rain.

⁸ See Jacobus (213–14) on castration anxiety and fetishism in the prostitution episode. For an example of the kind of remembering I refer to, see lines 146 and following.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), 5.3.123–28. Hereafter *The Winter's Tale* will be cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene and line, and will be abbreviated *W*.

¹⁰ For more on Romantic anxieties about theater and femininity, see Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 134–75.

¹¹ Jacobus, 236.

¹² Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 277–78.

¹³ Charles Dibden's "Burletta Spectacle" of *Edward and Susan* (*Songs, &c. in Edward and Susan: a burletta spectacle* [London: Glendinning, 1803]) is far less faithful to the true story—yet the irreverence (and irrelevance) of the plot serves to save Susan, the maid of the inn, from ever having married the adventurer Cheatall. Susan's true sweetheart, the sailor Starboard, plays the part of the parish clerk to keep the marriage from being performed legally, and the two true lovers are reunited by the end of the play in terms which, however cheesy, are not that distinct from Wordsworth's own celebration of integrity and community:

Of love in disguise I've play'd a long part,
But have found no disguise in the girl of my heart
So now we'll get married and foot it so gay,
With tol-de-rol-lol! heave-a-head! pull away!

Let love and concord here have birth,
Friends and neighbors join our mirth
While the merry piper plays;
Altho' our song with joy abound,
That joy is but an empty sound
Till sanctioned by your praise. (4–5)

¹⁴ The double negative “Not unfamiliarly” in this passage is preceded by the poet’s earlier responses to Sadler’s Wells: “Nor was it mean delight” (296) and “Nor was it unamusing” (310).

¹⁵ Quoted in Donald Reiman, “The Beauty of Buttermere as Fact and Romantic Symbol,” *Criticism* 26 (1984), 144.

¹⁶ I take the term “fall” from Jacobus: “Prosopopoeia gives voice to the face of Wordsworth, inviting us to identify the autobiographical front of *The Prelude*—its masquerade of identity—with the figure of the poet. Figuratively speaking, it masquerades as a self that is ‘literal and unrhetorical,’ concealing the representational and economic structures which produce such a person. That these structures should involve reference to an allegorical fall which is itself a privileged example of the fall into allegory gives special resonance to the Maid of Buttermere sequence and the accompanying figure of the prostitute in Book VII of *The Prelude*” (235).

¹⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. William Knight (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1930), 164.

¹⁸ John Fyvie was highly skeptical of this account, and offers an entertaining alternative. See his *Comedy Queens of the Georgian Era* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1907), 274–313.

¹⁹ Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of Mary Robinson*, ed. J. Fitzgerald Molloy (London: Gibbins and Co., 1894), 157. See also the new edition of the Memoirs: *Perdita: The Memoirs of Mary Robinson*, ed. M. J. Levy (London: Peter Owen, 1994).

²⁰ Fyvie, 284.

²¹ Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, *Memoirs, Anecdotes, Facts and Opinions* (London, 1824).

²² Quoted in Fyvie, 294.

²³ George III, *The correspondence of King George the Third from 1760 to December 1783, printed from the original papers in the royal archives at Windsor castle*, ed. the Hon. Sir John Fortescue, 6 vols. (London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1927–28), 5:234, quoted in Fyvie, 303–4.

²⁴ The caricature can be found in Thomas Wright and R. H. Evans, *Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray* (London, 1851; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 372–73, no. 373.

²⁵ Coppélia Kahn, “The Providential Tempest and the Shakespearean Family” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), 235.

²⁶ *Letters from Perdita to a Certain Israelite, and his Answers to Them* (London, 1781), 40, quoted in Fyvie, 287.

²⁷ *Morning Post*, 21 September 1782, quoted in Fyvie, 287.

²⁸ Wright and Evans, 382–84, no. 378.

²⁹ The phrase “sexually impaled” is from Jan Fergus and Janice Farrar Thaddeus, “Women, Publishers, and Money, 1790–1820,” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, 25 vols. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Colleagues Press), 17:194.

³⁰ The balloon speech reads: "They have assaulted me, some three, four, five, or six of them together, and I have driven them afore me like a flock of sheep; but this is nothing, for often in a mere frolic, I have challenged twenty of them, kill'd them—challenged twenty more, kill'd them,—twenty more, kill'd them,—twenty more, kill'd them too; & thus in a day have I killed twenty score; twenty score, that's two hundred—two hundred a day; five days, that's a thousand,—that's a—zounds, I can't number them half,—and all civilly and fairly with one poor Toledo."

³¹ See Dorothy's letter of 10 and 12 September 1800 in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–93), 1:297. The title "Poems by W. Wordsworth" may have been anticipated in October as well, when the decision was made not to include "Christabel" in the collection, at least nominally on the grounds that Wordsworth "felt it indelicate to print two Volumes with *his name* in which so much of another man's was included" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters, 1772–1834*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. [Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956], 1:631). See also Stephen Parrish, *The Art of the Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 200.

³² The Greek names evoke a double-entendre, as Darby Robinson had published a sequence of sonnets under the title of "Sappho to Phaon," and so the "widely diffused name of Sappho" could also be taken as a delicate compliment to the contemporary poet. Alcaeus's "present celebrity," could be taken in turn as a back-handed comment on the growing dispute between Coleridge and Wordsworth over the question of meter. For more on Robinson's sonnet sequence, see McGann. For more on the relationship between Coleridge and Robinson, see Susan Luther, "A Stranger Minstrel: Coleridge's Mrs. Robinson," *Studies in Romanticism* 33 (1994): 391–409.

³³ For his part, Wordsworth either maintained or pretended ignorance of the whole affair: he claimed none of his poems, save a few political sonnets and "The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale," were ever published in any newspaper, either under his name, or that of any other man. See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth; The Later Years*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 2:941–42. An interesting lapse of memory—or act of disavowal.

³⁴ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), 242–43; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page and abbreviated *L*.

³⁵ The "Domestic Tale" of "Mistress Gurton's Cat" focuses on the actions of a grumpy older woman, but the moral is more general in its application. Many of Robinson's "Tales" are written in the persona of Tabitha Bramble; see Curran, "Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context" and Pascoe, "Mary Robinson and the Literary Marketplace" for discussions of this poetic persona. The tale addressed to the Prince might also be said to appeal to those readers intrigued by her own illicit connection to royalty.

³⁶ Note in particular how many farmer's wives and village women get up to mischief.

³⁷ "The Lascar," for instance, tells the story of an Indian soldier adrift in England: "Alone, amid the race of man / The sad, the fearful alien ran!" Refused food by the wealthy and the pious, he eventually starves to death. Likewise, the narrator of "The Fugitive" urges the "Poor Traveller," "Oh, tell me, tell me all— / For I, like thee, am but a Fugitive / An alien from delight, in this dark scene" (*T*, 69).

³⁸ The term "Wordsworthian euphemism" comes from Kevin Goodman, "Wordsworth's 'Invisible Workmanship,' The New Historicism, and the Apocalyptic Fallacy," forthcoming in *Studies in Romanticism*. I am grateful for the opportunity to have read this paper in advance of publication.

³⁹ See Antony Simpson, "Vulnerability and the Age of Female Consent" in *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1987), 181–205. Simpson's discussion of rape trials between 1730 and 1830 leads into the related areas of child molestation and child prostitution; he suggests that sex with children was popular as a means of avoiding (or, according to popular myth, curing) sexually transmitted diseases.

⁴⁰ Various critics have noted (or complained about) the incoherence of Book Seven's structure. Kramer, for instance, remarks that "the narrative illogic here, the lack of convincing transitions and the jumbling of ostensible topics are extreme even for Wordsworth" (620).

⁴¹ I should perhaps limit this claim to the romance of the city—but it's interesting to note that in the country fair presented as a wholesome contrast to Bartholomew Fair, the poet himself comes strikingly close to (metaphorical) pimping:

But one is here, the loveliest of them all,
Some sweet lass of the valley, looking out
For gains—and who that sees her would not buy?
Fruits of her father's orchard (8.36–39)

The enjambment momentarily muddles the question of just what is for sale here.

⁴² Two examples of a general trend in Robinson's poetry: the hermit of Mont-Blanc, separated from his true love by parental ambition, "consum'd his days, / Unnotic'd, and unblest" (*T*, 86), remaining "an alien Man / From all the joys of social intercourse / Alone, unpitied, by the world forgot!" (*T*, 89) So too, the "Negroe Girl," Zelma, "pour'd, unmark'd, her melancholy strain" (*T*, 106) of antislavery indictment into the African seas.

⁴³ The phrase is from Edward Young, *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts* (New York: Johnston and Van Norden, 1823), 296, or "Night the Ninth," l. 1158.

⁴⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest De Delincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), MS X, 232 crit. app.

⁴⁵ Pascoe (in "Spectacular Flâneuse") points out that Darby Robinson's daughter Mary Elizabeth Robinson claimed authorship of this poem, but the style and even content of "Winkfield Plain" seem remarkably close to "January, 1795" (acknowledged as the work of Darby Robinson).

⁴⁶ Curran, "The 'I' Altered," 191–92.

⁴⁷ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London: Strahan, 1755; New York, AMS Press, 1967), 2:129.