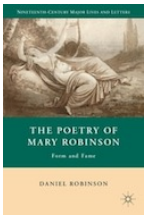
Home
Editorial
Authors' Responses
Guidelines For Reviewers
About Us
Masthead
Feedback

Search Every Field
Search

THE POETRY OF MARY ROBINSON



By Daniel Robinson
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) xi + 287 pp.
Reviewed by Amy Garnai on 2011-08-13.

Click here for a PDF version.

Click here to buy the book on Amazon.

Mary Robinson seems to have come into her own. Since the appearance of Stuart Curran's essay, "Romantic Poetry: The 'I' Altered" (*Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor [1988], 185-207), with its groundbreaking recovery of women's poetry of the Romantic era, she and her work have been examined in many critical studies as well as in three major biographies. While explaining her career as an innovative poet and radical novelist, her interpreters and biographers have also defined her status within prominent cultural circles, including her participation in the Della Cruscan literary convention and her later association with the radical milieu surrounding William Godwin. Thus they have shown how she herself embodied an emergent notion of cultural celebrity.

As editor of Robinson's poetry in *The Works of Mary Robinson* (Pickering & Chatto, 2009), Daniel Robinson is well qualified to amplify this growing body of criticism. Besides expanding our knowledge of Robinson's poetry, he also sheds new light on the wider intellectual, political, and social communities of which she was a part. Above all, this is an erudite study of Mary Robinson's use of poetic form as both a key motivation for, and a dialectic response within, the writing of poetry in the late eighteenth century.

In framing Mary Robinson's career with Robert Merry and Coleridge as poetic bookends, and with newspaper publishers John Bell and Daniel Stuart as professional bookends (13), Daniel Robinson shows how the "wreath of fame" she earned as a writer replaced her earlier, notorious, celebrity status as former mistress to the Prince of Wales (6). She successfully refashions her public persona, Robinson argues, by using various poetic modes in "a kind of networking...by which she participates in a web of social interaction and literary intertextuality in order to achieve professional legitimacy, recognition and fame" (8). By thus pursuing the two intersecting paths of literary and social networking, Daniel Robinson demonstrates his expansive knowledge of both formalist poetics and cultural history.

The originality of this volume is most apparent in its treatment of the formal properties of Mary Robinson's poetry, her use of various rhymes, meters, and genres, and her conscious engagement with the texts and ideas of her literary predecessors: an involvement that grew from her early association with the Della Cruscan convention through her sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon* and on into her final collection, the *Lyrical Tales*. This approach provides illuminating ways of reading Robinson's poetry. Discussing *Sappho and Phaon*, for example, Daniel Robinson writes that she uses the Petrarchan sonnet to "show that she can stand on equal footing with male poets" (125). Though this has been said before, the sheer erudition of the argument here--interweaving her use of the Petrarchan form with her impersonation of Sappho and her appropriation of Ovid (and Pope)--lets us see her sonnet sequence in a much more complex way. Consider how Robinson contrasts *Sappho and Phaon* with her earlier "Petrarch to Laura":

> Robinson's 'Petrarch to Laura' is modeled on Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, which is Pope's modernization of Ovid's heroic epistles, the *Heroides*; in her poem, Robinson takes a Petrarchan subject out of its original form, the sonnet, and formally recasts that subject in light of Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*. By contrast, *Sappho and Phaon* is adopted from the Ovidian heroic epistle, "Sapho to Phaon", translated by Pope, which conveys the final history of the pre-eminent lyric and female poet, Sappho; Robinson formally recasts this subject in Petrarchan form, the sonnet (128).

Robinson's other poems are just as rigorously scrutinized. In his analysis of Della Cruscan poetry, for example, Daniel Robinson moves beyond the accepted view articulated most prominently by Jerome McGann in *The Poetics of Sensibility* (1996). Rather than construing Della Cruscanism as an earnest enactment of sensibility, he takes it as a "ludic network of writers, signatures, texts, intertexts and media" (35) and convincingly makes his point for its playfulness -- as a deliberate "burlesque" (57). To buttress his overall claim that Mary Robinson palpably manifested her genius through her "assertion of poetic form," he examines her later career and her poetic dialogue with Coleridge, who claimed that "technical virtuosity" was "her greatest strength as a poet" (197-198), and he sets her poetry beside "Kubla Khan" and the poetry of Wordsworth. He also enlighteningly treats her use of "nonce" verse -- "an original form that a poet constructs for a particular poem, which is then recognizable as peculiar to that poem or poet" (203). In presenting Matthew Lewis's "Alonzo meter" as the premier nonce form of the 1790s, he not only helps us to see (by contrast) what Robinson did with the form, but also to learn more about the poetic forms of the Romantic period as well about formalist poetics more broadly conceived.

The discussion of the relationship between Mary Robinson and Coleridge and their shared cultural network illustrates the second theme of this book: fame. In writing a cultural history of the late eighteenth century, Robinson weaves together

politics, newspaper history, strategies of social networking and, of course, the literary endeavor itself. In particular, Daniel Robinson explores Mary Robinson's multiple poetic personas and her use of "avatars," which he defines as "neither costumes nor disguises but versionings of her poetic identity" (13). While her use of pseudonyms has been discussed at length, for example, by Paula Feldman (2002), this book intricately documents her various avatars, the particular persona displayed in each of them, and the rationale surrounding their deployment, again linking the "formal features of the poems to which they are attached" to the cultural moment in which they appeared (20).

Robinson used avatars, we learn, throughout her career, from her first publication under a constructed identity in her Della Cruscan period up to the newspaper poetry that she wrote in the final years of her life. As the editor of her poems, Daniel Robinson knows them well, and together with his recent edition, this book is a project of recovery. Thanks to his editorial work we now have access to many more of Mary Robinson's poems, such as the eight by "Tabitha Bramble" that appeared in the *Morning Post* in 1797-98 but do not appear in earlier collections such as Judith Pascoe's *Mary Robinson*: *Selected Poems* (Broadview, 2000). Besides illustrating the instability of the "Tabitha Bramble" signature, which Robinson later used in a comical and more earthy context, these eight poems are said to be "among the most explicitly political poems she ever wrote," some of them "downright vituperative"(169). Daniel Robinson thus helps us to see just how radical her literary agenda was.

But the very name "Tabitha Bramble" leads us into the brambles of literary attribution. While it signals further evidence of Robinson's politics, including a self-reflexive engagement with contemporary topical satire (176-179), it also illustrates the kind of obstacles that impede the work of historical and literary excavation more generally. In 1794, Daniel Robinson tells us, a letter signed "Tabitha Bramble" was sent to Robert Dundas, Lord Advocate of Scotland, protesting the outcome of the Scottish treason trials. Though this letter has been attributed to Mary Robinson by Adriana Craciun ("The New Cordays: Helen Craik and British Representations of Charlotte Corday, 1793-1800", in *Rebellious Hearts*, eds. Craciun and Lokke [2001]), Daniel Robinson thinks otherwise. Citing the analysis of the letter's handwriting by Mary Robinson's biographer Hester Davenport, he conclusively argues that it could not have been hers (171). In my own work on Mary Robinson I have cited Craciun's research into this letter--a copy of which I have seen myself-- to plot the course of Robinson's radical awareness. But I must now reckon with this authoritative refutation of the case for her authorship of the letter to Dundas.

This problem of attribution raises wider questions about the reliability of secondary sources, especially with the growing interest-- over the past few decades-- in archival work on "rediscovered" authors of the 1790s. To what extent can we depend upon earlier critical studies? In a field that is still being mapped, what constitutes an authoritative or standard account of a previously marginalized author, public figure or historical event? One answer to these questions has been provided by John Barrell, whose extensive work on the political and literary culture of the 1790s has been foundational for so many scholars who study this period. In "The Reptile Oculist" (*London Review of Books* [26:7, 2004]), Barrell traces the career of John Taylor, a newspaper critic and editor who supported the Pitt government and its policies but at the same time closely befriended many writers, artists and actors who were identified with the opposite side of the political spectrum--including Mary Robinson. Barrell chiefly aims to re-examine the received historical account of Taylor, which makes him--among other things-- a government spy. According to the received account, he had been an *agent provocateur* in Scotland, had infiltrated the radical London Corresponding Society, and had later testified for the prosecution at the London treason trials of 1794, but had somehow kept up convivial social ties with his radical friends even as his career in espionage became publicly known. Puzzling over this incongruity, Barrell has found that it was wrought by historical fiction: in reality four different men named John Taylor were conflated into one by prominent scholars of this period. The newspaper editor John Taylor, while still a strong Tory supporter, had not been a spy at all. So at a time of "reawakened thirst for narrative history" (25), Barrell warns that historians should scrupulously check all the facts given by their predecessors, even as he acknowledges the difficulty in doing so.

As if to illustrate this difficulty, Daniel Robinson's meticulous history of a particular aspect of the 1790s and of Mary Robinson's place in that decade treats John Taylor as a spy (96). Since he does not explain how Taylor's spy status would have affected Mary Robinson's life and career, his error scarcely injures the book, but it gives their relationship an aura of danger that--thanks to Barrell--we now know it could never have had. Nevertheless, together with the Tabitha Bramble letter, Daniel Robinson's error reminds those who work at the intersection of politics and literature in the 1790s to heed Barrell's warning: to be ever vigilant in our efforts to respect the facts as we record the lives, stories, literary output and cultural negotiations of this dynamic and endlessly fascinating historical moment.

Amy Garnai teaches in the Department of English and American Studies at Tel Aviv University and in the Department of English at the Kibbutzim College of Education.

Daniel Robinson responds:

I am most grateful for this generous review by Amy Garnai, herself the author of a very fine book on Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, and Elizabeth Inchbald.

I was unaware of Barrell's article on John Taylor in the *London Review of Books*. Thanks to Professor Garnai, I have had a chance to look at it. Here, Barrell takes issue with historians such as Clive Emsley and Lucyle Werkmeister for their misleading representations of the oculist John Taylor, friend of Mary Robinson. He does not, however, specifically mention having previously reprinted their account of Taylor. In other words, the error Professor Garnai attributes to me derives from Barrell's monumental study *Imagining the King's Death* (Oxford UP, 2000). While Professor Garnai correctly reports that I treat Taylor as a spy (96), she overlooks the fact that I cite Barrell himself (*Imagining* 393) as the source of this information. So, at the risk of seeming overly defensive, I find it a tad unfair that Garnai uses Barrell's article to correct my error without mentioning that I was relying on Barrell's book for this information.

The point Barrell makes, summarized by Professor Garnai, is well taken, so I am grateful to Professor Garnai for drawing it to my attention. But my book makes only a passing reference to Taylor's supposed career as a spy; what chiefly interests me is his work for the Tory paper, the *True Briton*, which is indisputable, and his ongoing relationship with Robinson despite their political differences.

Leave a comment on Amy Garnai's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020