Xena Wolf

Lyrical Tales and *Lyrical Ballads*: The Supposedly Gendered Worlds of Romanticism

Though her name was all but forgotten for almost two centuries, Mary Robinson was, in her own time, “a writer and public figure who, more than any of the other [Romantic poets], courted celebrity” (Labbe, “Mary Robinson’s Bicentennial” 3). In the last few decades, however, a flurry of criticism has again been dedicated to her many works, not least *Lyrical Tales*, the collection of poems she published in response to William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. Much of this critical scholarship, and that related to other female Romantics, focuses on the debate over the proposed “two separate Romanticisms, a masculine and a feminine version” (Lau 1). The opposing theory, then, is that “men and women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries participated in many of the same literary traditions and experiments, and that they influenced and interacted with one another in dynamic and fruitful ways” (Lau 1). As two volumes in intimate conversation with one another, and penned by three of the most renowned writers of their time, *Lyrical Tales* and *Lyrical Ballads* provide the perfect case study of the alleged gender differences in Romanticism. A comparison of these collections reveals an array of both similarities and divergences inherent to Robinson’s revisionary premise, and while some differences are linked to the writers’ genders, there is not sufficent evidence to warrant Anne Mellor’s claim of “significant differences between the thematic concerns, formal practices, and ideological positionings of male and female Romantic writers” (2).

In *Lyrical Tales*, Robinson almost explicitly references, reacts to, revises, and even mocks Wordsworth and Coleridge’s poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*, from the parallel titles of the collections, to specific themes and tones, to the most minute motifs. In his article “The Gothic-Romantic Hybridity in Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*,” Jerrold E. Hogle observes that

"Robinson is well known for writing her final volume of poems, the *Lyrical Tales* (1800), as a direct answer, sometimes poem by poem, to Wordsworth and Coleridge's 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*" (368). This purposeful imitation has led many critics to dismiss her work as a mere copy of the "greater" poets' genius, but "while *Lyrical Tales* clearly points to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* as a model of creative inspiration and imitation, it also established its own mode and voice in a complex act of poetic collaboration *and* rivalry with the Lake Poets" (Stelzig 119). By comparing individual poems from each collection, it is evident that while Robinson at times picks up the themes, subjects, and voices present in *Lyrical Ballads*, she almost invariably takes them in a new direction, sparking a fruitful conversation with Wordsworth's or Coleridge's original poem.

For instance, Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" and Robinson's "The Lascar" cover markedly similar subject matter in similar style and tone. The parallels between these poems are heavy-handed. For instance, "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" depicts the plight of a (presumably) Native American woman who has been abandoned to die and whose child has been taken from her, while "The Lascar" follows the titular Indian or Southeast Asian sailor, who was taken from his dying mother as an infant. Both the Native woman and the lascar are utterly despairing: Wordsworth's Native woman cries, "Before I see another day, / Oh let my body die away! / … Alone I cannot fear to die / … Too soon despair o'er me prevailed; / Too soon my heartless spirit failed" (Wordsworth 1-24), while Robinson's lascar says, "Another day, Ah! me, a day / Of dreary Sorrow is begun! / … curse the hour, when I was born / … O! darkness come! come, deepest gloom!" (Robinson, "Part One" 1-17) and likewise "pray'd for Death" (Robinson, "Part Two" 48). By the end of the poem, each is granted their dark wish, as the Native woman proclaims, "I feel my body die away, / I shall not

see another day" (Wordsworth 69-70) and the speaker of "The Lascar" declares, "*His wither'd Heart, is* DEAD,—*and* COLD!" (Robinson, "Part Two" 144). From beginning to end, "The Lascar" seems to follow in the footsteps of "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman."

However, while the tone and content of these and other passages in these two poems are remarkably similar, Robinson diverges from Wordsworth's template by redirecting the story's emotional power into an explicit criticism of British people and social structures, a theme that comes up again in her other similar poem, "The Negro Girl." In "The Lascar," bemoaning his treatment in the UK, the lascar exclaims, "And if I curse my fate severe, / Some Christian Savage mocks my tear!" (Robinson, "Part One" 48). This pairing of the word "savage," so commonly used in British society at the time to belittle Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world, with "Christian," is a sharp reversal of its typical usage. Further, the lascar repeatedly describes the UK climate derisively. For example, he says, "this northern, *sickly* light" (Robinson, "Part 1" 51, emphasis mine) and "here, amid the *blunted* ray, / *Cold shadows* hourly cross my way" (Robinson, "Part 1" 59-60, emphasis mine). Even more explicitly, "The Negro Girl" directly faults "The Tyrant WHITE MAN" (Robinson 78) and the "cruel WHITE-MAN" (108) for her equally tragic fate. Whereas Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" seems to blame the woman's fellow "Indians" for her deplorable fate, Robinson reverses this narrative, making it into a sharp social critique of the imperial British in both "The Lascar" and "The Negro Girl."

In another clear pairing, Robinson's "All Alone" is so obvious a reworking of Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" that it strikes an almost mocking tone. Each poem centers on a child who is unwaveringly attached to the grave(s) of their family member(s) and who is stubbornly unwilling to be dissuaded from this attachment. The "church-yard" and the "grave-

stone" are constant repetitions in both poems, and Robinson's description of her curly-haired child is a mirror image of Wordsworth's. The young girl in "We Are Seven" has hair "thick with many a curl / That cluster'd round her head / … Her eyes were fair, and very fair, / —Her beauty made me glad" (Wordsworth 7-12). Contrastingly, the young boy in "All Alone" has "wavy locks but thinly hide / The tears that dim [his] blue-eye's ray" (Robinson 3-4), his once "dimpled face, so fresh and fair" (Robinson 15) is "now grown deathly pale!" (Robinson 20), and his "eyes are dim, [his] looks forlorn" (Robinson 21). Robinson borrows the "wavy locks" from Wordsworth's hair that is "thick with many a curl" (7), but quickly turns Wordsworth's beautiful girl on her head with her boy's "tears" (3). Likewise, she counters Wordworth's "fair, and very fair" (11) eyes with the boy's eyes "dim" (4, 21) and "forlorn" (21) eyes. The exaggerated beauty of the girl in "We Are Seven" is thus reversed almost line by line in "All Alone."

This reversal serves a greater thematic purpose, however, as Robinson challenges Wordsworth's own answer to the question he poses in "We Are Seven": "A simple child… / That lightly draws its breath, / And feels its life in every limb, / What should it know of death?" (Wordsworth 1-4). Where "We Are Seven" seems to posit that a child does not truly understand and thus does not truly grieve death even when confronted with it everyday, "All Alone" argues the exact opposite—namely, that a child confronted with death is so consumed by grief that he can think of nothing else. In "We Are Seven," the little girl knows that "[t]wo of us [siblings] in the church-yard lie" (Wordsworth 23), but still "I sit and sing to them" (Wordsworth 44), "And eat my supper there" (Wordsworth 48), and "round her grave we played" (Wordsworth 55). The narrator insists, "'But they are dead; those two are dead!' / … 'Twas throwing words away" (Wordsworth 65-69), for the girl stubbornly maintains her conviction that her deceased siblings are still with her on some level. Conversely, Robinson's speaker says to the boy: "Oft I hear thee

deeply groan, / That thou, poor boy, art left alone," clearly signalling the orphan's knowledge that his parents are truly gone (Robinson 23-24). Rather than playing around the grave, "The church-yard is thy bleak abode; / Thy pillow now, a cold grave stone— / And there thou lov'st to grieve—alone!" (Robinson 28-30). While Wordsworth's girl insists that she still has six siblings, Robinson's boy plainly states: "I have no kindred left" (Robinson 147). According to scholar Ashley J. Cross, "his complaint suggests a stubborn despair and not the sustaining bond of Wordsworth's girl" (599). By so closely imitating "We Are Seven" but arguing against Wordsworth's conclusion, Robinson constructs his poem as woefully naive and sets her own up as the more honest and realistic portrayal of a child's reaction to death. In style, content, and theme, "All Alone" is a dark and eerie reflection of "We Are Seven," made all the more powerful by its relationship to the latter.

Time and again throughout *Lyrical Tales*, Robinson repeats the themes and voices of *Lyrical Ballads* not in mere imitation, but to build upon Wordsworth and Coleridge's collection. As Cross observes, many of the connections between the two volumes "are rendered subtly in linguistic echoes and thematic parallels. The language of Robinson's poems resonates throughout with that of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's, from the sea imagery and context of 'The Haunted Beach' to the ballads like 'Old Barnard,' from the nature imagery of 'To the Fugitive' to the isolation of 'The Alien Boy'" (594). She adjusts these themes to fit her own message, however, and her "poems shift focus slightly by placing more emphasis on the trauma and isolation that young people and women experience" (Cross 595). In addition, "Like Wordsworth, Robinson is concerned with poeticising the experiences of an underclass whose previous poetical representations had been largely sanitised and 'pastoralised.' Robinson, however, resists Wordsworth's alluring presentation of "rural folk" as natural, and often unwitting, exemplars"

(Labbe, “Deflected Violence and Dream-Visions in Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*” 163). As Cross, Labbe, and many other Robinson scholars hint (or insist), “Robinson ‘enlarges’ on the scenarios created by these male poets to include a specifically female point of view” (Labbe, “Deflected Violence and Dream-Visions in Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*” 167), thus adding an undeniably gendered component.

Indeed, it is undeniable that Robinson’s writings, both within and beyond *Lyrical Tales*, are to some extent influenced by her own perspective and experiences of marginalization as a woman. Cross, for instance, interprets *Lyrical Tales* as “Robinson’s attempt to show her poetic sensibility, to answer *Lyrical Ballads*, by heightening her attention to the otherness of marginalized individuals and announcing her superior sympathy” (599). For instance, by writing the tragic “All Alone” in imitation of Wordsworth’s much more optimistic (if still disturbing) “We Are Seven,” she draws attention to the plight of a boy marginalized from society by his parents’ deaths and implies naivety in Wordsworth’s work. This “puts Robinson, as poet, in an authoritative position; not only does she show her empathy with the outcast—the poet observer’s sensibility—but by absenting herself from the poems, she also reveals her identification with their otherness” (Cross 600). While “Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s outcasts are no less oppressed,” Robinson tweaks their formula by largely removing the authorial or narratorial voice that the two male poets consistently employ and instead presenting most of her poems directly through the outcast themself (Cross 600). In this way, “Robinson chooses to identify more fully, to blur the lines between poet/self and marginalized other… For Robinson, the female poet’s experience of dispossession tied with the feminizing dispossession of authorship create this identification” (Cross 600). In other words, Robinson is able to wield her personal experiences of

oppression and dispossession as a woman in a patriarchal society to write intense and personal poetry in a way that the privileged Wordsworth and Coleridge arguably never could.

Yet her differences in perspective do not inherently mean that she is part of a "separate" Romanticism or signal that the era is divided neatly along gender lines. Even as they acknowledge and appreciate her divergent and at times gendered approach, many Robinson scholars insist that rather than bisect Romanticism into "male" and "female" categories, the rediscovery of female Romantic writers like Robinson and many others requires an expansion of the definition of Romanticism. Labbe writes: "As we move progressively further from the notion that 'Romanticism' only means transcendence, 'sincerity', 'originality', and other abstractions *derived from exclusively male-authored texts*, it becomes easier to accept, even enjoy, Robinson's manipulations of form, selfhood, and identity" ("Mary Robinson's Bicentennial" 7, emphasis mine). Indeed, she goes so far as to suggest that Romanticism scholars might view "Mary Robinson as key to our understanding of the fluid, coy, slippery and multivalent aspects of what we now call Romanticism" ("Mary Robinson's Bicentennial" 7).

The all-important fact that Robinson's celebrity far exceeded Wordsworth's and Coleridge's is often overlooked but hugely significant in the debate over a gendered Romanticism. Cross writes that "in 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge were beginning their poetic careers and Robinson was finishing hers. To say this more bluntly, we should probably be reading Wordsworth and Coleridge through Robinson as much as the other way around" (579). Properly contextualized, "[T]he trajectory of her career does not fit the model of feminine and masculine Romanticism that Anne Mellor posits in *Romanticism and Gender*" (Lau 43), and "[t]hough she often underscores her feminine difference in poems written in exchange with Coleridge, Robinson, already a well-known writer in the late 1790s, writes with an authority that

disrupts the traditional gender pattern of female writers trying to make their way in a male-dominated market" (Lau 43). By extension, Robinson is a clear disruption of Mellor's theory.

As the feminist school of literary criticism has risen to prominence in the last few decades (not-so-coincidentally in conjunction with the rediscovery of the female Romantics), it has been closely tailed by the queer school of criticism, which would go so far as to call into question the very categories of "male" and "female" in the first place. In this view, the false gender binary would even further lose credibility when applied to a historical literary context and the abstract notions associated with it. Conceptions of gender and sexuality were so vastly different in the late 17th and early 18th centuries than they are today that to apply the same terms and pretend they had precisely the same meanings is to make an enormous and rather unfounded assumption. In *Lyrical Tales*, by "[m]aking herself both copy and original, Robinson affirms their reputation, reauthorizes herself and challenges the idea of separate, gendered literary spaces" (Cross 585). In her own life and work, "Robinson fought the very division into a feminine and masculine Romanticism that we have created," Cross writes (605). If nothing else, this imposed dichotomy deserves a close reexamination.

Works Cited

Cross, Ashley J. “From ‘Lyrical Ballads’ to ‘Lyrical Tales’: Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt.” Studies in Romanticism, vol. 40, no. 4, 2001, pp. 571–605. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25601532. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020.

Hogle, Jerrold E. “The Gothic-Romantic Hybridity in Mary Robinson’s Lyrical Tales.” The European Legacy: Improvisation and Hybrid Genres in British Romantic Literature 24.3-4 (2019): 368–379. Web.

Labbe, Jacqueline M. “Deflected Violence and Dream-Visions in Mary Robinson’s Lyrical Tales.” European Romantic Review 10.1-4 (1999): 163–174. Web.

Labbe, Jacqueline. “Mary Robinson’s Bicentennial.” Women’s writing : the Elizabethan to Victorian period 9.1 (2002): 3–8. Web.

Lau, Beth. Fellow Romantics : Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835 . Farnham, England ;: Ashgate, 2009. Print.

Mellor, Anne Kostelanetz. Romanticism & Gender . New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Robinson, Mary. Lyrical Tales, by Mrs. Mary Robinson. London: printed for T. N. Longman and O. Rees, Paternoster-Row, by Biggs and Co. Bristol, 1800. Print.

Stelzig, Eugene. “‘Spirit Divine! With Thee I’II Wander’: Mary Robinson and Coleridge in Poetic Dialogue.” The Wordsworth circle 35.3 (2004): 118–122. Web.

Wordsworth, William et al. Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems : in Two Volumes . Second edition. London: Printed for T.N. Longman and O. Rees, Paternoster-Row, by Biggs and Co, Bristol, 1800. Print.