Witnessing Suffering in Mary Robinson's Poetry of the 1790s

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It would be remiss of me to mention the fact that Mary Robinson is buried in a churchyard not far from Royal Holloway, University of London where I did my BA. In her essay *A Letter to the Women of England,* she advocates for women to be allowed a university education. It is particularly apt that this was one of the first institutions in Britain that allowed women to do so.

Short abstract

Witnessing Suffering in Mary Robinson's Poetry of the 1790s

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Recent years have seen a revival of interest in Mary Robinson's works, and it has become fashionable to suggest that the author casts herself as every wronged, victimised or suffering protagonist. Such readings overlook Robinson's concerns with politics, philosophy, and other central intellectual currents of her time. This thesis aims to demonstrate that in her poetry of the 1790s, Robinson's broader poetic project was to portray suffering in a way that resists redemption, consolation, or narrative closure. In doing so, she insists on the moral duty of witnessing suffering. The analysis combines close reading with contextual research, drawing on contemporary science, the gendered politics of the French Revolution, and literary traditions ranging from Miltonic monody to the emerging Romantic ballad. Across the corpus, Robinson deploys visual and bodily imagery and in order to portray suffering figures to probe the limits of reason, sensibility, and the mind itself in responding to human pain. The thesis is structured in five chapters, each focussing on an individual poem, 'Sight', (1793), *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793), *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), 'The Alien Boy' (1800), and 'The Savage of Aveyron' (1801). Taken together, these works illustrate the variety of forms in which Robinson's exploration of suffering appears, from representations of visual deprivation, through gendered embodiments of pain, to silenced or fragmented voices. This approach moves beyond biographical or sentimental

readings, positioning Robinson's late poetry as a site for exploring moral, philosophical, and formal questions, and opens a new direction for scholarship that attends to her engagement with suffering, voice, and the ethics of witnessing.

Long abstract

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When Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to Robert Southey that he 'never knew a human being with so full a mind – bad, good & indifferent, I grant you but full & overflowing'[1] he recognised not merely the intellectual breadth of Mary Robinson's writing, but also the variety and imaginative complexity that characterises her later poetry. This study focuses upon a small selection of Robinson's verse composed between 1793 and 1800, demonstrating how her work constructs a sustained labour of imaginative sympathy that requires the reader to witness suffering while withholding the consolatory mechanisms conventional to eighteenth-century sentimental literature. In this context, witnessing is not a passive engagement; it is a moral task that entails the recognition of suffering without the relief of narrative closure, divine recompense, or the resolution of moral conflict. This thesis therefore challenges prevailing assumptions about Robinson's writing, while acknowledging complicating dominant models of sensibility, moral philosophy, and theodicy.

The thesis focuses on five principal poems that constitute a thematic set: 'Sight' (1793), *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793), *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), 'The Alien Boy' (1800), and 'The Savage of Aveyron' (1800). Suffering itself is

[1] 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Robert Southey', *Collected letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966-71) I:562.

a prevalent theme in Robinson's works, and one only has to look at her early poems of sensibility to see that it is a topic that she engages with from the outset of her career as a writer. The five works chosen for this thesis explore Robinson's most complex engagements with suffering, examining what it means to witness pain and how the reader is called to respond. Together, these works demonstrate Robinson's coherent poetic project that explores bodily, political, and social vulnerability, and in which the representation of suffering is inseparable from moral responsibility. The poems are examined in chronological sequence, allowing the development of Robinson's ethical poetics to be traced from her early engagement with visual deprivation to her later interrogation of political violence, gendered agency, social alienation, and scientific discourse on disability and alterity.

The methodological framework integrates close textual analysis, historical contextualisation, and intertextual comparison. Close reading attends to the language that Robinson uses to portray suffering, including recurring terms such as 'pain', 'blindness', and 'alone', alongside the language of observation, including 'eyes', 'gaze', and 'vision'. Attention is paid to the structural and prosodic organisation of the texts, including Robinson's deployment of blank verse, heroic couplets, Petrarchan sonnet sequences, and balladic stanzas. These formal choices are examined for their capacity to shape the reader's experience and to portray the moral demands of witnessing. Historical contextualisation situates the poems within contemporary debates on sensibility, while also engaging with eighteenth-century moral philosophy, as discussed by Adam Smith (1723–1790), David Hume (1711–1776), and Edmund Burke (1729–1797) among others. Scientific discourses on vision and optics, exemplified in Newton's *Opticks* (1704) and contemporary medical treatises, are considered alongside

emerging ideas on disability to show the ways in which Robinson uses technical vocabulary to interrogate the limits of sensory perception and human knowledge. Archival sources, including contemporary periodicals such as the *Morning Post*, the *Journal de Paris*, and the *Monthly Review*, as well as her correspondence with figures including William Godwin (1756–1836) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), illuminate the social, professional, and intellectual networks that shaped her poetic practice. Alongside this, intertextual comparisons consider canonical literary models, including Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Lycidas* (1638), as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). These comparisons reveal the strategies thanks to which Robinson adapts, challenges, and reconfigures literary, philosophical, and scientific sources to articulate the ethical demands of witnessing.

'Sight' stages Robinson's moral arguments through a meditation on blindness, drawing together Newtonian optics, contemporary anatomical knowledge, and Miltonic blank verse. The poem presents visual deprivation as both a physical condition and a metaphor for the limits of comprehension. Recurring terms such as 'nerve', 'cataract', and 'vortex' articulate the complex interplay between empirical knowledge and lived experience. Robinson's blind protagonist cannot fully apprehend either light or meaning, and the poem offers no restorative vision. By linking the figure's deprivation to the constraints of ophthalmology and cosmology, Robinson challenges Enlightenment assumptions that reason or science can justify or eradicate suffering. The poem concludes with a gesture towards an 'eternal day', yet provides no immediate consolation, emphasising instead the ethical significance of recognising persistent and irresolvable human fragility.

The *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* extends this approach into the political and historical sphere. Robinson represents Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) as simultaneously a queen, a mother, and a woman, highlighting her maternal identity to evoke sympathy while emphasising the structural violence of revolutionary upheaval. The heroic couplets, arranged in twenty-four stanzas, juxtapose intimate depictions of personal anguish with stark representations of political turmoil. Images of blood-stained palaces, savage liberty, and the horrors of public execution invite the reader to engage with the full ethical weight of historical catastrophe. The poem deliberately withholds resolution; the queen's death on the scaffold is framed as an 'awful lesson for each future age,' and readers are called upon to recognise both her personal suffering and the wider consequences of revolutionary violence. In doing so, Robinson challenges conventional elegiac practice and the gendered assumptions underpinning political discourse.

Sappho and Phaon develops the moral poetics of Robinson's earlier work through its exploration of individual agency. The forty-four sonnets form a sustained narrative that charts the interplay of reason, emotion, and bodily experience. Visual imagery including references to 'eyes', 'sight', and 'gaze' is intertwined with physiological description of the heart, veins, and lungs, producing a nuanced map of the interior landscape of suffering. Suicide is presented not as sentimental melodrama but as an ethical and philosophical act, a negotiation between the rational expectations of eighteenth-century thought and the autonomy of the subject. Robinson's use of the Petrarchan sonnet sustains a narrative arc without closure, reinforcing the notion that suffering cannot be resolved through moral or sentimental consolation. The ethical

demands of witnessing extend to acts of personal agency, illustrating its complexities under conditions of extreme distress.

'The Alien Boy', from the *Lyrical Tales* volume, turns attention to the social and environmental conditions of suffering, tracing the exile of Hubert and his infant son, Henry, during the French Revolution. The sea operates as a reflective backdrop, its turbulence mirroring the instability and vulnerability of the protagonists. Henry's isolation, together with his father's journal, which documents suffering without offering remedy, emphasises the moral responsibility of both reader and author to witness conditions beyond human control. Robinson presents suffering through its immediate, external manifestations, emphasising observation over emotional mediation. By refusing to grant direct access to Henry's inner life, the poem foregrounds alterity and endurance, showing how political violence, social alienation, and environmental forces converge to shape experience and to demand careful, ethically attentive perception.

'The Savage of Aveyron' represents the culmination of Robinson's moral poetics of witnessing suffering. Drawing on contemporary reports in the *Morning Post* and the scientific investigations of Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre (1752–1804), Philippe Pinel (1745–1826), and Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1774–1838), Robinson depicts the feral child's mutism as a site of moral reflection. The single word that the child can say, 'alone', becomes an expression of both linguistic deprivation and moral weight. Biblical allusions, particularly to John the Baptist and to Christ's suffering, confer spiritual and ethical significance without offering narrative closure. By transforming the boy's silence into poetry, Robinson shows that even the inarticulate can be made perceptible,

and that witnessing suffering in this way constitutes both an imaginative and moral endeavour.

Taken together, these poems show Robinson making suffering the medium through which larger ethical and formal questions are tested. Physical pain, grief, exclusion, political upheaval, and states of vulnerability are repeatedly placed in relation to one another, so that no single explanatory system can contain them. Again and again, the poems place pressure on the vocabularies of moral philosophy, religious consolation, scientific enquiry, and sensibility, exposing what each can illuminate, and where each breaks down. Robinson's broader poetic project lies not in supplying a final answer, but in creating poems that hold distress in view without converting it into comfort or conclusion. Read this way, her later writing emerges as intellectually rigorous, formally inventive, and deeply alert to the moral demands of witnessing suffering.

This thesis contributes to scholarship in three principal ways. First, it provides a systematic account of a short selection of Robinson's late poetry, considering it as a sustained moral project. This highlights her persistent engagement with the demands of witnessing and the ethical demands it places upon both poet and reader. Second, it demonstrates that Robinson's attention to the material and social realities of suffering, including the body, illness, and political upheaval, functions as a deliberate poetic strategy, showing how literary form and imagery can register pain without offering resolution or comfort. Finally, it repositions Robinson within the Romantic literary landscape, showing that more attention needs to be given to the philosophical elements of her poetry.

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Introduction

> To poetry the native impulse of her genius appears to have been more peculiarly directed: even in the earliest of her productions, that fertility of imagination, and correctness of taste, were indicted, which, in her subsequent compositions, are so eminently displayed. *Memoirs*, p.175.

Mary Robinson (1757-1800[2]) describes the circumstances of her birth with characteristic drama, declaring in her *Memoirs* that, 'during a tempestuous night on the twenty-seventh of November 1758, I first opened my eyes to this world of duplicity and sorrow.'[3] The author, actress, and former royal mistress, had a short, but tumultuous life; she went from being described as 'a genteel Figure'[4] in her youth, to a 'positive prostitute character'[5] in 1790. By the end of her life she was simultaneously 'a human being with so full a mind – […] full & overflowing'[6] and 'a woman of infantine helplessness'[7] though she never stopped writing. Robinson wrote prolifically, publishing seven varied novels, a play, a translation of Dr Joseph Hager's *Gemälde von Palermo* as *Picture of Palermo*, a number of essays, and several hundreds of poems.

Robinson's life, marked by public scrutiny, personal upheaval, and physical pain, undoubtedly shaped her literary explorations of suffering, at least to some extent. I will

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[2] There is some debate over Robinson's precise date of birth which has been explored in detail by her biographers Paula Byrne, Sarah Gristwood and Hester Davenport. The published version of her Memoirs, which is the edition I quote here, includes the date 1758 however baptismal records from the church of St Augustine the Less in Bristol show that it could even be as early as 1756. Robinson claims to have been fifteen years old when she married Thomas Robinson in 1773 which would indicate a 1757 date of birth. For a more detailed discussion of debates regarding the author's date of birth see Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).

[3] Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself, with some posthumous pieces in verse*, ed. by M. E. Robinson, 4 vols, (London: R. Phillips, 1801); 'Memoirs of Mrs Mary Robinson', *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), p.194.

[4] *The London Stage 1660-1800. Part 5: 1776–1800*, ed. by C. B. Hogan (Carbondale, Ill, 1986), I. Quoted in Paula Byrne, *Perdita,* p.71.

[5] *Morning Post*, 9th October 1790.

[6] Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Earl Leslie Griggs, 'To Robert Southey', 25 January 1800, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), I, p.576.

[7] 'Continuation by a friend', *Memoirs*, II, p. 270. There is some debate as to who this 'friend' might have been. Generally, scholars presume this half to have been written by her daughter, Maria Elizabeth.

therefore begin by briefly outlining the poet's biography as it provides crucial context for understanding the ethical and imaginative concerns of her writing.[8] While an overtly autobiographical reading risks diminishing her work as mere self-representation, understanding the trials and tribulations of her life allows us to see how her engagement with suffering, sympathy, and morality is both informed by experience and transformed by literary and philosophical influence, rather than serving as a straightforward reflection of personal circumstance.

Robinson was born to a middle-class family in Bristol, her early life was comfortable, and she was well-educated: first by Hannah More and her sisters, and then by Meribah Lorrington.[9] This changed when her father, Nicholas Darby, abandoned their family to attempt to start a whaling business in Newfoundland on the southern coast of Labrador where he began an affair with an Inuit woman and had an illegitimate child. So began a period of significant hardship which characterised Robinson's short forty-three-year life. As a teenager, Robinson was apparently tricked into marrying Thomas Robinson who claimed to be an heir to a huge fortune, when he in fact had tremendous debts. Following a stint in the Fleet debtors' prison with her husband and sixth month-old daughter, she had to make her own living in the theatre, which was considered to be an improper career for a woman. Perhaps her most significant role was her performance as Perdita in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* on 3rd December 1779. After this, the Prince of Wales became besotted with her and she became his lover. Their

[8] For a more detailed biography see Paula Byrne's *Perdita* which I consider to be the authoritative one. Other biographies include Hester Davenport, *The Prince's Mistress : A Life of Mary Robinson* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004) and Robert D. Bass, *The Green Dragoon : The Lives of Banastre Tarleton and Mary Robinson* (London: Redman, 1959).

[9] Hannah More (1745–1833), writer, moral reformer, and educator, ran influential girls' schools in Bristol with her sisters, promoting a curriculum that combined learning with moral discipline. Meribah Lorrington, engaged by Robinson's mother after this period, is known mainly through Robinson's *Memoirs* (1801) as a resident companion and tutor who advanced her literary education; little independent evidence of her life survives.

short-lived affair, lasting around a year, left her with even more debt, a degree of celebrity, and to some extent, notoriety, that she used to further her ambitions as a writer. She was satirised in both word and image; one of the most notable pieces was a falsified pornographic memoir titled *Poetical epistle from Florizel to Perdita: with Perdita's answer*, written by the money lender John King in 1781.[10]

Nonetheless, Robinson was admired as much as she was reviled. During a visit to the French court in 1783, the poet was apparently singled out by Marie Antoinette as 'la Belle Angloise.'[11] On the other side of the Channel, she was considered by many to be the most beautiful woman in England and had some famous supporters from the beginning of her career as an actress, to her later reinvention as a serious poetess in the 1790s. For instance, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1754-1806), was Robinson's patron from the start of her career and subsequently, the two women became great friends.[12] Following Robinson's liaison with the prince which ended in 1780, her name was linked with those of other prominent men including Colonel Banastre Tarleton (1754-1833), with whom she had a relationship for almost sixteen years. It was during this period that Robinson became ill. The paralysis that she suffered from, possibly as a result of contracting rheumatism, undeniably had a huge impact upon her career, her poetry and ultimately her life. Though Paula Byrne argues that Robinson's illness stemmed from a miscarriage and a subsequent streptococcus infection, Maria Elizabeth tells a different story in the continuation of her mother's *Memoirs*:

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[10] John King (c. 1750–1824) was a London moneylender, political writer, and journalist; notorious for his financial dealings and periodic bankruptcies, he wrote for various newspapers and was the father of the novelist Charlotte Dacre (née Charlotte King).

[11] *Memoirs*, p. 24. We have no independent source to confirm Robinson's assertions about her encounter with Marie Antoinette.

[12] See Amanda Foreman, *The Duchess: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008).

> In 1784, her fate assumed a darker hue: she was attacked by a malady, to which she had nearly fallen a victim. An imprudent exposure to the night air in travelling, when, exhausted by fatigue and mental anxiety, she slept in a chaise with the windows open, brought on a fever, which confined her to her bed during six months. The disorder terminated at the conclusion of that period, in a *violent rheumatism, which progressively deprived her of the use of her limbs*. Thus at four-and-twenty years of age, in the pride of her youth and the bloom of beauty, was this lovely and unfortunate woman reduced to a state of more than infantine helplessness.[13]

I include these biographical details not to suggest that Robinson's poetry is simply a product of her life, for no author writes in a vacuum, but to show how her public reception shaped the evolution of her literary voice.

Following Robinson's affair with the Prince of Wales many of her literary and intellectual contemporaries, such as the Porter sisters, Jane (1749–1813) and Anna Maria (1752–1832), chose to distance themselves from her intellectually. Paula Byrne notes that 'in some circles Mary's name remained tarnished' and Rose Champion de Crespigny (1759–1832) encouraged Jane Porter not to publish her memoir of Robinson warning that 'she should be shunned by all decent people' if news of her friendship [with Robinson] became public.[14] Robinson nevertheless retained close intellectual relationships with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), William Godwin (1756–1836), and 'Peter Pindar', the pseudonym of John Wolcot (1738–1819), many of whom sought to support her both physically and mentally. Coleridge, for example, wrote to Godwin lamenting that:

> I wish I knew the particulars of her complaint, for [Humphrey] Davy has discovered a perfectly new Acid, by which he has restored the use of limbs to

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[13] *Memoirs*, p. 194.

[14] 'Diary of Jane Porter, 1801-1803', from the Folger Shakespeare Library Mb.15 fols. 2-3, https://catalog.folger.edu/record/228825?ln=en.
Porter took Crespigny's advice and did not publish the work.

> persons who had lost them for many years, (one woman 9 years) in cases of supposed Rheumatism. At all events, Davy says, it *can* do no harm, in Mrs Robinson's case– & if she will try it, he will make up a little parcel & write her a letter of instructions &c.[15]

Despite her disability, Robinson remained fully engaged in the intellectual life of her immediate circle. From 1797 she was a regular contributor to the *Morning Post*, and following Robert Southey's departure for Portugal in 1799 she became one of the principal poetry contributors alongside Coleridge. Though Southey likely never actually met Robinson, they admired each other's work. Indeed Coleridge told him in a letter dated February 1800 that 'she idolizes you and your doings'.[16] Robinson's relationship with Coleridge, by contrast, was more directly literary and reciprocal, marked by mutual praise and the exchange of poems such as his work 'A Stranger Minstrel' (1800) which was included alongside her *Memoirs*. During her time at the *Morning Post*, Robinson published prolifically until her death on 26th December 1800, and the pressure to write between one and three poems per week certainly took a toll upon her already declining health. Maria Elizabeth, notes that:

> The mind of Mrs Robinson, beguiled by these pursuits from preying upon itself, became gradually reconciled to the calamity of her health: the mournful certainty of total and incurable lameness, while yet in the bloom and summer of life, was alleviated by the consciousness of intellectual resource, and by the activity of a fertile fancy.[17]

This observation emphasises how Robinson confronted the certainty of her illness while sustaining her intellectual powers and creativity. The description of her 'activity of a fertile fancy' shows that she continued to direct her attention outward, towards work and writing. The passage highlights that Robinson's engagement with suffering was not

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[15] 'Coleridge to Godwin, 21 May 1800', in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, E. L.Griggs, ed., (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956), I, p.589, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198187424.book.1.
[16] 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Robert Southey', in *Ibid*., p.562.
[17] *Memoirs*, p. 138.

passive or self-indulgent; rather, her pain became a site for disciplined mental and creative activity.

Why poetry?

In her 1797 novel *Walsingham*, the eponymous protagonist witnesses a landlord evicting a writer, while berating him: 'Why are all poets poor? Why are all poets ragged? Why are all poets miserable?—Because they are of sin! the dealers of the devil's cards! The makers of diabolical books, of lies, and wickedness! Robinson's satire is unmistakable, dramatising the social and economic marginalisation that haunted the life of the poet. As a poor and often suffering writer herself, she knew the precarity of artistic labour firsthand, and the scene underscores the persistent tension between moral and aesthetic value and financial necessity. Her first novel *Vancenza* (1792) was an immediate commercial success, securing her initial economic stability. Many of her other novels were equally popular, though Robinson remained first and foremost a poet.[18] Robinson began writing poetry in 1771, initially writing with sentimentalism associated with the decade, and eventually turning to the ornate lyricism of Della Cruscanism. She published her first volume, *Poems by Mrs Robinson*, in 1775 and a few years later followed this with *Captivity; a Poem, and Celadon and Lydia; a Tale* (1777) written in a decorative and ornamental poetic style.

The Della Cruscan 'school' (c.1785–1795) was a short-lived literary movement begun by Robert Merry (1755–1798) and his circle, characterised by floral and highly sentimentalised language. This trend began when, as Pascoe notes, 'in the summer of

[18] Robinson wrote seven novels: *Vancenza; or, the Dangers of Credulity* (1792), *The Widow; or, a Picture of Modern Times* (1794), *Angelina; a Novel* (1796), *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), *Walsingham; or, the Pupil of Nature* (1797), *The False Friend: a Domestic Story* (1799), *The Natural Daughter: With Portraits of the Leadenhead Family* (1799).

1785 a group of Britons including Hester Thrale Piozzi, Robert Merry, Bertie Greatheed, and William Parsons met in Florence and put together a volume of poetry predicated on a pose of graceful conviviality. [19] In 1787 Merry published a poem 'The Adieu and Recall to Love' in *The World*, followed by replies from Hannah Cowley, writing under the pen name Anna Matilda, among others.[20] Robinson herself entered these poetic dialogues under the name Laura Maria and these works appeared in newspapers such as *The World* and *The Oracle* in the late 1780s and were later gathered in *Poems* (1791), where she acknowledges that many had first circulated under such pseudonyms.[21] The movement drew sharp criticism; for instance the critic William Gifford (1756–1826) satirised the movement in *The Baviad* (1791) and *The Maviad* (1795) ridiculing its style as empty extravagance. Pascoe notes that, 'although the Della Cruscans did write more overtly political verse (poems such as Merry's *Laurel of Liberty* and Robinson's *Ainsi va le Monde*), the vast majority of their poetry exists at a considerable distance from the exigencies of everyday life.'[22] Even at the beginning of the decade, a contemporary critic writing in the *English Review* comments comments on Robinson's 1791 *Poems*:

> We cannot help regretting that the fair writer has too often imitated the new school of poets, which has lately appeared amongst us, and which sacrifices

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[19] But my thoughts neither beautiful are nor sublime,
So I wrap them in metre, and tag them with rhyme,
Like theatrical dresses if tinsel'd enough,
The tinsel one stares at, nor thinks of the stuff.
The Florence Miscellany (Florence: G. Cam, 1785), 6, 3.

[20] For more information see, Tanya M. Caldwell, '"A Lasting Wreath of Various Hue": Hannah Cowley, the Della Cruscan Affair, and the Medium of the Periodical Poem', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s*, Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell eds.,
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[21] For example, 'Lines to Him who will understand them' (first published 31 October 1788 in *The World*) and 'Ode to Meditation' (published 17 December 1789 in the *Oracle* as Laura Maria, later revised for 1791) , while *Ainsi va le monde* (1790) is explicitly attributed to 'Laura Maria' in its original publication.

[22] Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality : Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p.84.

> nature, simplicity, and passion, to luxuriant and ill-placed description, and to a load of imagery, and ornament of every kind. […] Mrs. Robinson should beware of this species of fascination.[23]

Such critiques help us to understand Robinson's movement toward a more serious, ethically and philosophically engaged poetry. Rather than indulging in ornamentation for its own sake, her later works direct attention to suffering, moral responsibility, and the conditions of perception, demonstrating that poetic form itself can be enlisted to explore ethical questions and the demands of witnessing.

Robinson's Poetry of the 1790s

This thesis centres upon her later works, beginning in 1793, as she moved toward a more serious, morally engaged mode of poetry which cannot be wholly disentangled from the scrutiny and bodily suffering she endured; this is one of the reasons I have chosen to structure this thesis chronologically. Robinson's poetry of the 1790s is marked by a steady succession of major collections that reflect her evolving voice. Her first volume of the decade, P*oems by Mrs. M. Robinson* (1791), was followed four years later by *Poems, Volume the Second*. Thematically and stylistically there are early indications of her interest in suffering insofar as she is concerned with the prevailing ideas of sensibility. In this period, she also wrote *Modern Manners* (1793), a satirical two-canto poem, as well as *Sight, The Cavern of Woe and Solitude*, and in 1796 published the sonnet-sequence *Sappho and Phaon*. The decade closed with *Lyrical Tales* (1800), a book of narrative poems written in the spirit of the new Romantic ballad form. This was her final major poetic work, and was published following Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Generally speaking, during this period Robinson's poetry moves from sentimental lyricism toward engaged social and political commentary, often with a

[23] 'Review of Poems (1791) by Mrs. M. Robinson', *English Review* 19 (1792) p.16.

moral undertone, while retaining the emotional resonance admired by her contemporaries.

Towards a definition of Suffering

For the purposes of this thesis, suffering can be understood broadly as both physical and emotional pain. In his 1755 *Dictionary* Samuel Johnson defines suffering simply as 'Pain suffered', noting that pain and its consequences naturally elicit sympathy. He defines sympathy itself as 'Fellow-feeling; mutual sensibility; the quality of being affected by the affection of another.'[24] These definitions establish a conceptual link between suffering and morality: to suffer is not only to endure, but also to participate in a network of reciprocal moral and emotional responsiveness. Dorinda Outram extends this framework by emphasising the body as simultaneously intimate and public:

> Like a prism, the body has a unique capacity to concentrate together in the same space different rays from the surrounding world, and to re-emit light re-charged and differentiated. Intentionality and episteme come together, and subjective experience can be assessed as something other than simply a personalized anarchy.[25]

In other words, suffering is never purely individual; it is enacted, observed, and interpreted, rendering it legible to others. This approach allows for the consideration of multiple forms of suffering in literature, while recognising that bodily, social, and ethical dimensions are inextricably linked. In Robinson's poetry, suffering operates at this intersection, becoming both a site for imaginative exploration and a mode of articulation through which private feeling is made legible.

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[24] Samuel Johnson, 'sympathy, n.s.' in A Dictionary of the English Language, (1755), accessed 2024/10/31 https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/sympathy_ns.

[25] Dorinda Outram, 'The Problem of the Body in Political Culture' in *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989) pp. 1-5, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003225560.

Of course, Robinson was neither the first nor the last poet to reflect upon the relationship between suffering, sympathy and morality in the long eighteenth century. Debates about sympathy and the role of the imagination, begun by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1621–1683) in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). They were continued by David Hume (1711–1776) in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and later refined in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Adam Smith's (1723–1790) *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) would have been particularly relevant to Robinson, given her wide reading and her personal and professional intellectual networks. Journals such as the *Rambler* and the *Spectator* also brought these ideas to a broader audience. Smith argues that natural sympathy stems 'from an involuntary feeling that the persons to whom we attach ourselves are the natural and proper objects of esteem and approbation; [it] can exist only among men of virtue.'[26] In Robinson's poetry, suffering often becomes a vehicle for sympathy: her poems repeatedly present characters whose pain demands recognition and imaginative engagement from the reader, connecting individual experience to broader moral reflection. As Smith observes:

> when we attend to the representation of a tragedy, we struggle against that sympathetic sorrow which the entertainment inspires as long as we can, and we give way to it at last only when we can no longer avoid it: we even then endeavour to cover our concern from the company. If we shed any tears, we carefully conceal them, and are afraid, lest the spectators, not entering into this excessive tenderness, should regard it as effeminacy and weakness.'[27]

[26] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Millar, Kincaid, and Bell, 1759); (London: Penguin books, 2009).
[27] *Ibid*., (London: Penguin Books, 2009), VI.ii.1, p.265.

Robinson's poetry operates within precisely this tension. Her writing makes the experience of suffering visible while negotiating the ethical and social expectations surrounding the expression of sympathy, particularly for women writers whose public display of feeling might otherwise be policed or diminished. Hume likewise emphasises the social and moral function of sympathy, arguing that 'a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society, does always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues.'[28] Human nature, he writes, makes it 'impossible for such a creature as man to be totally indifferent to the well or ill-being of his fellow-creatures'.[29] Robinson's poetry enacts this principle by extending imaginative and moral attention beyond the self, compelling readers to recognise the suffering of others. Her friendship with Godwin situates her engagement with sympathy in both a personal and literary context. In *Caleb Williams* (1794), the eponymous protagonist declares, 'to me the whole world was as unhearing as the tempest, and as cold as the torpedo. Sympathy, the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life, was extinct'.[30] Robinson's work can be read as a poetic response to this contemporary sense of moral and social alienation. By giving voice to suffering, her poetry restores the possibility of sympathy as both moral engagement and imaginative practice.

This literary and philosophical conversation was by no means insular within Robinson's poetry. She was writing in the wake of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), texts that taught readers to interpret

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[28] *David Hume: An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition*, Tom L. Beauchamp ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.45, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199266333.book.1.
[29] *Ibid*.,
[30]William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2000), p.308.

feeling as moral evidence, and alongside poets of sensibility such as Charlotte Smith (1749–1806), Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825) and William Cowper (1731–1800) among others. Robinson's work converses with these literary representations of sentiment. The second half of her *Memoirs* portray her illness as a sequence of sufferings that 'might disarm the sternest, soften the most rigid and awaken pity in the hardest heart,' therefore insisting that her own pain be read as a moral claim.[31] Robinson frequently articulates the restless pursuit of an ideal sensibility and the inevitable pain of its repeated frustration. In a letter to Godwin, she writes:

> Since I first felt the power of discrimination, since I adored the excellent part of mankind, and execrated the base, I have been a wanderer in search of some thing, approaching to my idea of a perfect being. I have found many objects who, on an early intercourse, have presented the semblance of the creature I longed to Idolize! – I have fancied that I found the graces of feeling and sincerity, in woman; the fascinations of Truth, Genius, and Sensibility, in Man. – Alas! if I were deceiv'd, – am I to blame in shrinking under the painful pressure of disappointment? I have, it is True, seen a few, a very few, in my journey through life, whose minds and sentiments, whose feelings and affections, have been such as I almost instinctively idolize. – But they have not honoured me with the title of Friend; – They have not been drawn towards me, by congenial, sympathetic intuition.[32]

This letter not only dramatises the oscillation of hope and disillusionment that pervades Robinson's poetry but also encapsulates contemporary disputes over sensibility. Its critics warned that an excess of feeling risked causing unremitting emotional suffering even as advocates upheld sensibility as the surest path to moral superiority. By framing disappointment as a kind of catalyst in which true sympathy must be tested, Robinson insists that suffering is not merely the price of sensibility, but its indispensable guide.

Robinson would have been aware that Christian tradition treats suffering, particularly the Passion of Christ, not merely as physical pain but as morally and

[31] *Memoirs*, p.292.
[32] Mary Robinson to William Godwin, Englefield Cottage, 24 August 1800, MS. Abinger b. 1, fols. 1–2, (Oxford: Bodleian Libraries).

spiritually significant. Christ's crucifixion was seen as a redemptive act in which bodily suffering became entwined with moral and spiritual exemplarity. The difficulty of both justifying and representing suffering is also a longstanding literary problem, dramatised by Milton in *Paradise Lost* where the existence of a benevolent deity is called into question by human pain and anguish.[33] Within this context, Robinson's engagement with pain may be read not as a reiteration of redemptive narrative but as a critical negotiation with it, attentive to the demands placed upon suffering to signify morally while remaining resistant to justification or consolation.

For Robinson the subject of suffering acquired particular urgency in the 1790s. This was a decade marked by the French Revolution as well as the ensuing long war which exposed European society to unprecedented violence and displacement. During this period, poetry for Robinson became the site in which sympathetic imagination, observation and reflection operate together to render suffering intelligible and to press moral claims upon her readership. Her poetry attends to, among others, the pain of blind figures, deposed queens, suicidal poets and to abandoned children. Robinson thus makes ethical responsiveness itself a poetic problem, meaning that she uses her poetry in order to raise questions regarding who is observing and who is voicing the narrative. In doing so, she reconceives the poet not merely as a witness or performer, but as a mediator whose writing, sometimes demands sympathy, at other moments requires responsibility and often simply asks for acknowledgment. Witnessing is central to this thesis, which asks: for Robinson, what does it mean to see suffering? How does her poetry engage with its moral dimensions? What is its role within her poetic narratives?

[33] See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008).

How does her understanding of its function change depending on cultural and political contexts?

Literature review

Recent years have seen a revival of interest in Mary Robinson's works. Scholarship by Daniel Robinson, Judith Pascoe, and W.D. Brewer has significantly shaped discourses around her fame and reception. For instance, in his complete edition of *The Works of Mary Robinson*, Brewer describes Robinson as a 'chameleonic celebrity', a framing that highlights the shifting performativity of her public identity.[34] Pascoe in her 2019 book *Romantic Theatricality: Gender Poetry and Spectatorship* similarly emphasises the self-fetishization that appears in Robinson's writing about Marie Antoinette.[35] There have been only two major book-length studies dedicated exclusively to Robinson's work; the first, Daniel Robinson's *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (2010) evaluates a poetics of fame but remains preoccupied with celebrity, often at the expense of Robinson's intellectual and literary achievements. He claims that 'her success as an actress, for instance, derived largely from her having a body that looked good in pants,' and elsewhere suggests that 'Robinson's poetry is like pop music: it is technically proficient—slick even—but not always intended to convey great profundity.'[36] Such remarks dismiss the poet's engagement with pressing political, cultural, and social concerns. Notwithstanding this, the book offers some compelling insights into how Robinson engages with the political, cultural, and social issues of her time specifically through her poetry. The critic argues, for instance that:

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[34] William D. Brewer, 'Introduction', in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, 4 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009-2010), I (2009), xv-xxxiii (p. xv).
[35] Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p.99.
[36] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p.4; *Ibid.*, p.11.

> writing ambitious poetry in difficult forms was always a way for Robinson to affirm her hold on the poetic laurel and to steal for herself —not to borrow—the poetic legitimacy that came more easily to male poets who, like Merry and Coleridge, had certain educational and cultural advantages denied to a woman such as herself.[37]

Here, Daniel Robinson shifts the focus from Robinson's celebrity to her deliberate, strategic use of form as a means of asserting authority and navigating gendered literary hierarchies. He highlights how Robinson's poetry actively negotiates social and cultural constraints, though he only hints towards her intellectual ambition that extends well beyond superficial notions of fame.

The second monograph devoted exclusively to Robinson's work is Ashley Cross's *Mary Robinson and the Genesis of Romanticism* (2016), which has been influential in framing the writer's literary agency within the networks of the 1790s. Cross argues that, although Robinson first achieved public attention as an actress and scandalous celebrity, she deliberately reconstituted herself as a poet and novelist of serious ambition, engaging in exchanges with writers such as Southey, Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft. These literary dialogues suggest that Romanticism developed through interactive and conversational practices rather than through solitary genius, and they position Robinson as a central figure in the formation of its thematic and formal characteristics. Building upon Cross's account, this thesis turns to Robinson's texts themselves, examining how her poetry articulates her own understanding of suffering, moral philosophy and the ethical demands of 1790s society. Through sustained close reading, it traces the ways in which her verse embodies a philosophically engaged, morally reflective voice rather than functioning merely as a product of literary networks or celebrity culture.

[37] *Ibid*., p.241.

This thesis therefore approaches Robinson's work differently to the aforementioned monographs. It treats her writing not as a passive reflection of her circumstances, nor merely as a product of celebrity culture or simply a dialogue with other more well-known authors. Her poetry registers and critically interrogates the aesthetic and philosophical currents of the 1790s, particularly the discourse of sensibility, moral philosophy, and the gendered politics of suffering. Robinson's poetic development during this period was shaped by personal affliction as a result of her debts and worsening health following her initial illness in 1784, disillusionment with revolutionary idealism after the Terror in 1792, and a rapidly shifting literary landscape through emerging Romanticism. Her work explores the limitations of reason, the power of imagination, and the moral demands of an unforgiving world. Crucially, her characters rarely achieve consolation or resolution; instead, they inhabit a state of sustained suffering to which the reader is asked to bear witness.

Corpus and thesis structure

The five poems in this thesis, 'Sight', *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France*, *Sappho and Phaon*, 'The Alien Boy' and 'The Savage of Aveyron' might initially seem disparate.[38] Yet together they reveal a coherent trajectory in Robinson's development as a poet concerned with suffering, moral imagination, and the role of poetic voice. Each chapter is devoted to a single poem and evaluates how Robinson negotiates the representation of suffering, while considering the political, social and literary influences upon her characterisation of it. By restricting the study to these five texts, the thesis discusses a representative sample that captures the full range of Robinson's formal experimentation and thematic preoccupations. Though I could have

[38] Although *Sappho and Phaon* is a sonnet sequence, I will refer to it as a poem for convenience's sake.

chosen other works (suffering is undoubtedly a problem that Robinson grapples with throughout the 1790s), the five selected poems best illustrate her interest in what it means to witness suffering, and the question of how the reader, or indeed the narrator, should respond having done so, while also developing a shared set of concerns and motifs that allow their progression and transformation across the decade to be traced.

The selected poems also establish a compelling typology of suffering figures whose experiences intersect across bodily, gendered, and familial forms of distress. Bodily suffering and its psychological afterlives permeate all five poems. In 'Sight', Robinson first exposes the relationship between corporeal vulnerability and mental anguish, establishing a dynamic that the later poems reconfigure through increasingly historically specific, politically charged, and emotionally complex scenarios. This logic is then developed through her representations of Marie Antoinette and Sappho, figures through whom female suffering becomes inseparable from questions of voice, power, and historical visibility. Robinson's well-documented concern with the social and intellectual condition of women, articulated in works such as *A Letter to the Women of England,* lends particular force to these portrayals. 'The Alien Boy' and 'The Savage of Aveyron', in turn, extend this enquiry through their recurrent focus on vulnerable children marked by bereavement, abandonment, and estrangement from familial structures. Together, these poems form a constellation of suffering figures through which Robinson interrogates sympathy, refines her moral and political thinking, and develops an increasingly assured and ambitious poetic style.

The first chapter examines ‘Sight’ and considers how Robinson situates blindness within a broader exploration regarding the morality and philosophy of suffering, establishing her initial arguments regarding witnessing pain. It explores the construction of a world withheld from the blind figure’s perception and reflects on what this deprivation reveals about the moral stakes of witnessing or giving voice to another’s pain. The chapter traces how ideas about vision shape Robinson’s understanding of loss, how the natural world is mobilised to emphasise what cannot be comprehended, and how the imagination mediates or intensifies suffering. It also considers how Robinson’s representation of sensory limitation illuminates broader philosophical and ethical questions about perception, attention, and redemption.

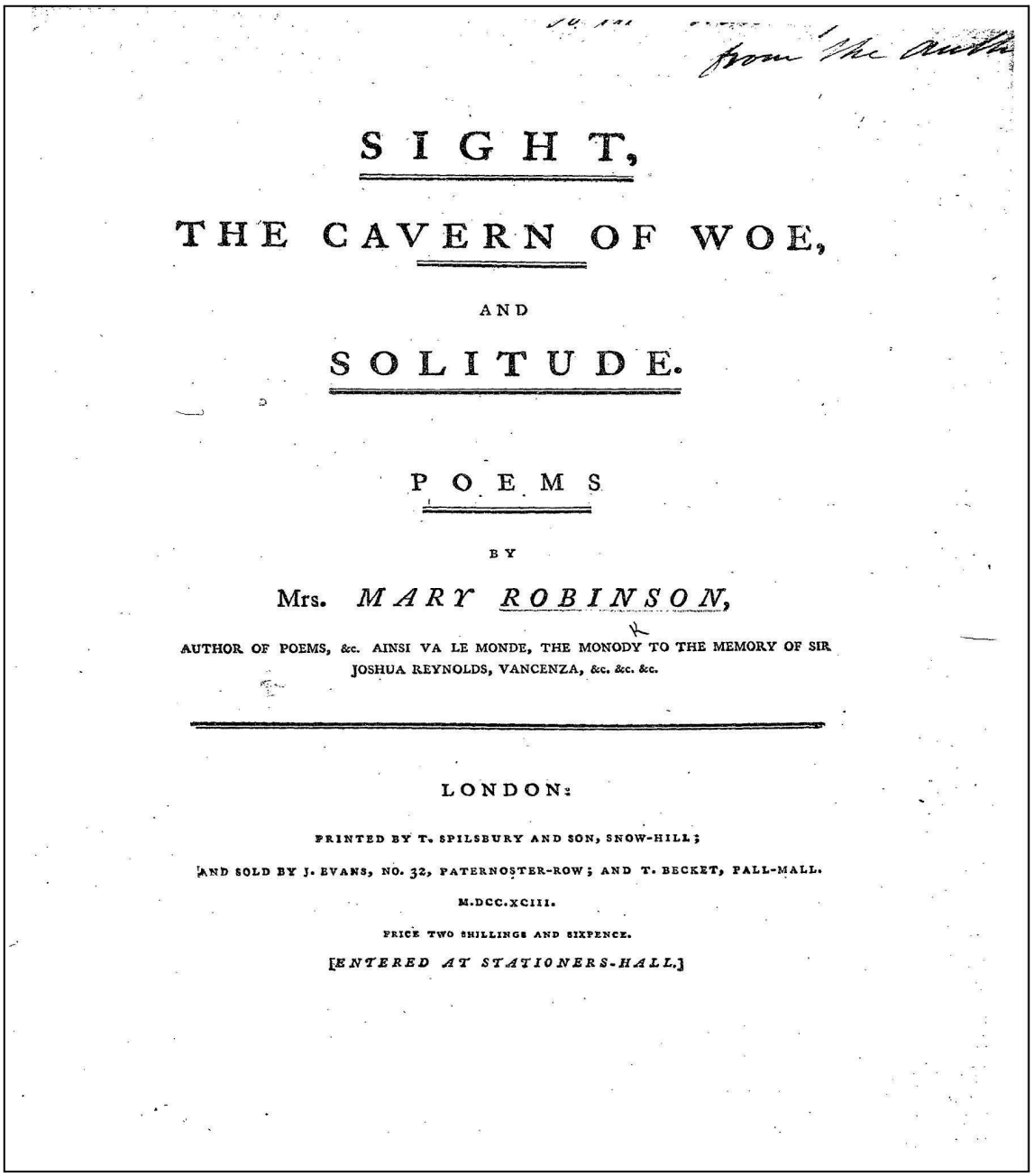
Chapter two turns its attention to Robinson’s portrayal of Marie Antoinette in the *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France*, examining how she represents the Queen’s suffering and creates sympathy for her. The chapter situates the poem alongside Robinson’s other writings on Marie Antoinette to demonstrate the poet’s sustained interest in her plight. It explores the Queen’s depiction as both woman and mother, humanising her while exposing the personal costs of revolutionary violence. It analyses the strategies Robinson employs to draw readers into identification with the Queen, engaging with discourses of sensibility, the sublime, and captivity to show how the poem frames the moral and emotional work of observation. The chapter concludes by considering the absence of consolation, reflecting on what Robinson’s refusal to offer solace reveals about the responsibilities of perceiving and attending to suffering.

Sappho and Phaon, one of Robinson's major poetic works, is the focus of the third chapter. I consider it to be a sustained exploration of feminine agency in the face of suffering, focusing on Robinson's imaginative reconstruction of Sappho's experience. In this poem, the poet complicates her notion of feminine suffering; the sequence is treated not as a simple cautionary tale about excessive emotion, but as a complex engagement with perspective, voice, and agency, emphasising the interaction of bodily and mental distress. The chapter explores the tension between reason and emotion, showing how Robinson negotiates moral reflection alongside eighteenth-century discourse surrounding female experiences of both reason and sensibility. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Sappho's suicide, examining how Robinson's treatment of this act illuminates questions about the limits of feminine agency, the ethical responsibilities of witnessing, and the moral and philosophical stakes of representing suffering.

Chapter four centres upon 'The Alien Boy', which was included in her larger *Lyrical Tales* volume. It begins by situating the poem in relation to *Lyrical Ballads*, showing how Robinson engages with Wordsworth and Coleridge without simply imitating them. It then considers the French Revolution as a shaping influence, exploring how Hubert's exile and aristocratic past inform Henry's suffering. The chapter next analyses the ocean and cliffside geography as a hostile and ever-present force that structures the ethics of perception. Finally, it examines Henry's isolation and eventual muteness, showing that the poem presents the act of witnessing as a moral responsibility rather than a source of consolation.

The final chapter explores ‘The Savage of Aveyron’, beginning with the role of newspapers in constructing the feral child’s public image and evaluating how his identity was shaped and perceived. It analyses how Robinson both employs and diverges from these reports to depict the child’s suffering, portraying him as neither fully human, according to eighteenth-century scientific discourse, nor simply animal, through her nuanced description of his consciousness. The chapter also considers the effects of religious motifs on the child’s characterisation, showing how they intersect with his mutism and confer a form of agency upon the suffering subject. It concludes by examining how Robinson encourages readers to view the child differently from contemporary scientific frameworks, attending to the moral and imaginative work of representing suffering.

Part I: At the limits of vision



SIGHT,

THE CAVERN OF WOE,

AND

SOLITUDE.

POEMS

BY

Mrs. *MARY ROBINSON*,

AUTHOR OF POEMS, &c. AINSI VA LE MONDE, THE MONODY TO THE MEMORY OF SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS, VANCENZA, &c. &c. &c.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY T. SPILSBURY AND SON, SNOW-HILL;

AND SOLD BY J. EVANS, NO. 32, PATERNOSTER-ROW; AND T. BECKET, PALL-MALL.

M.DCC.XCIII.

PRICE TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE.

[*ENTERED AT STATIONERS-HALL.*]

Figure 1: Title page of *Sight, the Cavern of Woe, and Solitude*, (London: T. Spilsbury and son, 1793). Image from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0110428782/ECCO?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=1998de2f&pg=1.

Chapter one: Portraying blindness in ‘Sight’

On 17th July 1793, a slim thirty-two-page volume titled *Sight, The Cavern of Woe, and Solitude* by Mary Robinson was published by John Evans and Thomas Becket for three shillings and six pence. The edition was relatively expensive for such a short work, though this was typical of Robinson’s publications during this period; everybody, friend or enemy, wanted to read what she had to say, as a result of a combination of her poetic renown and her personal scandals.[39] Earlier the same month on 5th July, the front page of *The Times* had announced that Robinson’s ‘THREE Poems’ were ‘in the press, and speedily will be published’. Subsequently, several advertisements were also placed in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Post* in the days leading up to the edition’s publication, just under two weeks later. Its reception was largely popular, due to the fact that, as Daniel Robinson notes, it is ‘ostensibly apolitical.’[40] The piece essentially turns its back upon news of the massacres occurring during the *Terror* in France, which is surprising given Robinson’s political interests. This may reflect a wish to reach a wider readership, since a less overtly political text could appeal more broadly, but it might also indicate an intent to examine the moral dimensions of suffering without necessarily anchoring them in contemporary events. Today, *Sight*, *The Cavern of Woe and Solitude* are relatively unknown in comparison to Robinson’s more famous collections such as

[39] *Monody to the Late Queen of France* (1793) retailed for four shillings and sixpence, *Poems* (1793) for one guinea. Gerald Egan notes that Robinson’s 1791 edition of poems was designed as a luxury object to reflect the progressive tastes of an exclusive, wealthy audience. Though the editions have different printers, some of the same print features can be found in her edition of *Sight, The Cavern of Woe and Solitude* such as the double thick and thin line under the title of each individual poem.Gerald Egan, *Fashioning Authorship in the Long Eighteenth Century: Stylish Books of Poetic Genius* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

[40] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 97.

Lyrical Tales (1800), her self-proclaimed 'favourite offspring, but they are no less poetically rich.'[41]

'Sight' is an unusual poem not least because it is Robinson's first to appear in blank verse. This choice situates the work within a prestigious literary tradition; Shakespeare used blank verse to give voice to serious and contemplative characters and she would have been aware that John Milton employed the same form in *Paradise Lost* (1667), which remained highly influential during the eighteenth century and beyond.[42] Traces of Milton's other texts such as *Comus* (1637), *Samson Agonistes* (1671), and *Lycidas* (1638) can be found throughout her corpus, though she does not always align with his arguments. In particular, Robinson's exploration of the nature of blindness in 'Sight' is underpinned by Milton's personal and poetic legacy; he dictated his epic poem to various amanuenses as a result of his rapidly degenerating vision and meditates upon his blindness within the poem itself. Robinson's presentation of suffering can be seen as reactive – sometimes aligning with Milton's construction of vision, blindness and inner light, and at other times contradicting it.

The structure of the poem, 219 lines broken up into nine verse paragraphs of irregular length (between ten and forty lines), seemingly follows no regular pattern. Usually, as Daniel Robinson points out, '[Mary] Robinson's lyrical ebullience is measured – literally metered – by a technical rigor that displays formal affinities.'[43] Due to her use of blank verse in 'Sight', it has a unique sense of movement that defies the

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[41] *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 1999), p. 370. In a letter to Jane Porter, which Pascoe includes as supplementary material to her edition, on 27th August 1800, Robinson informs Porter that 'I have also [something] at Bristol (in the beautiful press of Biggs and Cottle) Lyrical Tales ; my favourite offspring.' Biggs and Cottle printed the work for the publisher.

[42] Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[43] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 8.

'rigor' of her usual poems. This helps to emphasise and re-emphasise the suffering of the blind man while liberated from the poet's usual methodical rhyme as 'Sight' displays little, if any, of the characteristic discipline of Robinson's other poetry.[44] In the *Critical Review or the Annals of Literature*, a critic notes that in 'Sight','the varied cadence of this measure the lines are not sufficiently broken; and some are prosaic; but in general, the description is beautiful, and adapted to the subject.'[45] It is true that in this poem, there is a wealth of elaborate descriptive passages, such as 'the spangling legions of the sphery plains' and 'the gaudy-vested SUMMER's saffron glow' (59-60). This is perhaps thanks to Robinson's Della Cruscan heritage; however Robinson constructs a world in which human fragility, as represented by her portrayal of vision, is placed in direct opposition to other, much larger universal forces. This abstract philosophical undercurrent distinguishes the poem, both in relation to her own corpus and in its divergence from the prevailing concerns of many other women writers of the period. Robinson guides the reader on a meandering journey full of twists and turns while exploring various iterations of suffering. Specifically, she considers the imaginative and physical implications of blindness upon an anonymous protagonist. Rather than focusing on a specific figure such as Tiresias or Oedipus, the poem offers no indication that its subject is anyone in particular; the blind man's suffering is at once personal and universal. Robinson's protagonist is acutely aware of his condition, which serves to worsen the pain of his blindness particularly and the poem concludes by arguing that the only way he will be able to see again is in heaven.

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[44] For example, see *A Pastoral Elegy* (1775) and *The Adieu to Love* (1791) in Judith Pascoe, *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 1999).
[45] 'Sight, The Cavern of Woe, and Solitude', *The Critical Review, Or, Annals of Literature*, 10 (1794), 166-168 (p.166).

From sight to blindness

In his *Dictionary* (1755) Samuel Johnson presents seven different definitions of 'sight', which demonstrate the term's complexity to eighteenth-century readers.[46] Firstly, Johnson defines it as 'perception by the eye; the sense of seeing', referring to the physical capacity of vision itself.[47] His second definition is 'open view; a situation in which nothing obstructs the eye', emphasising clarity and unobstructed awareness. The third sense, 'the act of seeing or beholding', directs attention to the engagement of the mind with what is visible, the conscious apprehension of forms. In the next definition, sight denotes 'notice; knowledge', where to see is also to understand, to perceive meaning or circumstance. Fifth, it refers to the 'eye; instrument of seeing', the anatomical organ by which vision is possible, while the sixth, 'aperture pervious to the eye, or other point fixed to guide the eye', encompasses devices or guides that focus or direct vision. Finally, sight is a 'spectacle; show; thing to be seen', capturing objects, scenes, or events that attract attention and provoke observation. Taken together, these seven definitions reveal sight not as a single faculty but as a layered concept, combining the physiological, cognitive, and perceptual, and showing how the act of seeing is inseparable from understanding and interpretation. In depicting the failure of these abilities through blindness, Robinson is able to express not only bodily suffering in the literal sense of pain, but also abstract and psychological suffering as the connection between the mind and the body is fundamentally disrupted. Chris Mounsey warns that 'it is impossible to give a brief definition of blindness as it might have been understood in the eighteenth century, except that it appears it was not as a simple binary of "sight

[46] See Patricia Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) for more information and analysis about Johnson's definitions of Vision and its relationship to Romanticism.

[47] Samuel Johnson, 'sight, n.s.' in A Dictionary of the English Language, (1755), accessed 2026/03/25, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/sympathy_ns.

and no sight.”’[48] Certainly Robinson’s presentation of blindness as various manifestations of the lack of sight represents this viewpoint.

Robinson’s epistemological ideas about the nature of suffering also express a sense of tragic inevitability in the rest of the volume. In ‘The Cavern of Woe,’ a poem about reason under threat, she declares that ‘The CAVE of CURELESS WOE assail’d [Reason’s] wond’ring sight’ (10). As in Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1743), personified Reason comes under assault from malevolent forces that threaten the very foundations of logic. Robinson portrays an allegorical litany of miseries, though the poem lacks the subtlety and nuance that she expresses in ‘Sight’. Similarly, in ‘Solitude’, set during the Wars of the Roses, the poem recounts the tragic story of a retired soldier living in isolation with his son. The protagonist yearns for excitement and danger which ultimately results in his downfall. In each text, vision and the visual are crucial to Robinson’s construction of suffering, though she expresses it most complexly in ‘Sight’. Possibly this is why in her edition of Robinson’s *Selected Poems*, Pascoe does not include the other two works. Although this volume contains three poems concerned with suffering, my focus will remain on ‘Sight’, which develops these themes with greater complexity of form and affect than its companion pieces. Robinson’s attention is primarily focused upon physical vision, though she also considers how the imagination is affected by its loss; she is specifically concerned with the relationship between blindness, knowledge, religion, and philosophy, with particular reference to how it shapes bodily and mental anguish. This is important to the broader direction of the thesis because it demonstrates Robinson’s broader conception of what it means to be able to bear witness and the moral consequences of what happens when you cannot.

[48] Chris Mounsey, *Sight correction: Vision and blindness in eighteenth-century Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

This chapter examines how Robinson renders the blind figure's suffering through the creation of a world perpetually withheld from his perception. It argues that Robinson, somewhat paradoxically, anchors blindness in a visual metaphor. The chapter opens with an account of Robinson's engagement with, and understanding of, the anatomy of the eye and the physics of vision, establishing the intellectual framework within which she articulates visual loss. It then turns to her depiction of the natural world, demonstrating how she vividly portrays landscape to mark the extent of what the blind figure has been denied. The third section considers the role of the imagination in structuring, compensating for, or intensifying his suffering. The chapter concludes by assessing whether Robinson permits even the faintest trace of consolation, or whether her poetics insists on the irreducibility of the protagonist's blindness.

'Lines inscribed to John Taylor'

The volume is dedicated to Robinson's friend, the oculist turned journalist, Sir John Taylor III (1757-1832), and in the dedicatory epistle she pays tribute to his 'penetrating and enlightened mind'.[49] Robinson notes that '[Taylor's] acknowledged professional skill in the subject of the following POEM, would alone mark the propriety of inscribing it to [him]'.[50] In contrast to her novel *Walsingham* (1796), where Taylor appears as the kind Mr. Optic, 'Sight' makes no direct reference to Taylor, or his career as an oculist. The only possible connection is the subject of the first poem, as made clear by the title. Certainly, in a work called 'Sight', one might expect the majority of the text to reflect upon the capacity for vision itself. Rather the protagonist, a perpetually suffering anonymous blind figure, is constructed as an embodiment of all

[49] Mary Robinson, *Sight, the Cavern of Woe, and Solitude. Poems by Mrs. Mary Robinson, Author of Poems, & c. Ainsi Va Le Monde, the Monody to the Memory of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Vancenza, &c. &c. &c.* (London: T. Spilsbury and son, 1793), p. iv.
[50] *Ibid*., p. iii.

visually impaired people and their experiences. Robinson spends significantly more words lamenting the irreversible effects of blindness than celebrating the gift of sight. This is surprising, given the poem's dedication to a man from the 'aristocracy of genius'[51] whose initial career was based upon his ability to reverse eye maladies and restore sight. Additionally, Robinson and Taylor were both involved in the publication of various newspapers, and they likely became professionally acquainted with each other when he became general editor of the *Morning Post* in 1779. Due to the fragmentary nature of primary source material, it is difficult to say exactly when and how frequently Taylor and Robinson wrote to each other, but she sent him at least four letters in 1794.[52] Therefore we know that she corresponded with him until at least that year, and wrote of 'the links of that chain,' which she claimed would 'unite [them] in friendship forever,'[53] In her biography of Robinson, Paula Byrne claims that Taylor was a 'regular visitor' to the poet's home [54] and given the tone of Robinson's letter, it would suggest that they were close, at least for a while.[55] Taylor also mentioned her in his own memoirs, *Records of my Life* (1832), giving some details of his friendship with the 'Celebrated Mrs Robinson'.[56] In the second volume he describes a visit to the theatre to see William Smith perform in *A School for Scandal,* though we do not know the exact date it was likely during the early 1790s.[57]

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[51] *Ibid*..
[52] 'Robinson to Taylor, 3rd October 1794' in Alfred Morrison, *Catalogue of the Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents formed between 1865 and 1882 by Alfred Morrison*, (London: Privately printed, 1879) V, p.287.
'Robinson to Taylor, 5th October' in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 1999), pp. 365-367.
'Robinson to Taylor, 14th October 1794' from The Folger Shakespeare Library, W.b.112.
'Robinson to John Taylor, Summer 1794' from the Private Collection of Robert Woof, quoted in Paula Byrne, Perdita*: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) p.295.
[53] 'Robinson to Taylor, 5th October 1794' in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe, p.365.
[54] Paula Byrne, *Perdita*, p.257.
[55] For more information about the letters of Mary Robinson see for example Sharon Setzer, 'Original letters of the celebrated Mrs Mary Robinson' in *Philological Quarterly*, 88.3 (2009), 305-335.
[56] John Taylor, *Records of my Life* (London: Edward Bull, 1832), II vols., p. 39.
[57] *Ibid*., p.280.

Scientific developments and the press

Her friendship with Taylor was not the only way that Robinson would have been able to find out about eye diseases and their treatments. The press regularly reported on scientific developments, offering readers updates on novel inventions and medical advances, however as Fuson Wang notes, 'Romanticism's experimental culture led to both blatant quackery and medical breakthrough', a tension evident in the accessibility of knowledge, since even the layperson could purchase an up-to-date scientific text.[58] For example, anyone who read the *Morning Post* on 31st January 1786 would be faced with an advertisement for an essay by the surgeon Jonathan Wathen:

> This day is published, Price Three Shillings, A DISSERTATION on the THEORY and CURE of the CATARACT. In which the Practice of Extraction is supported; and that Operation in its present improved state is particularly described.[59]

Such advertisements for medical innovations and related literature were seen relatively often in newspapers. Cataracts, the obscurity of the lens, along with other common degenerative eye conditions, had plagued the population for centuries. Thanks to the import of foreign techniques, such as couching,[60] the practice of pushing the cloudy lens to the back of an eye with a sharp object, oculists took on a celebrity-like role within society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Perhaps one could even go as far as to say they achieved God-like status, as a consequence of the restorative effects of eye surgery. There were even reports of surgeons curing blindness such as in this advertisement on 3rd February 1791:

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[58] Fuson Wang, 'Romantic Disease Discourse: Disability, Immunity, and Literature', in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 33:5 (2011), 467-482.
[59] Jonathan Wathen, 'Advertisement', *Morning Post*, 31 January 1786.
[60] For more information on eighteenth-century eye surgery see Kirstin Hussey, 'Empire of the Eye: Race, Expertise and the (im)mobilities of Cataract Surgery' in *Imperial Bodies in London: Empire, Mobility, and the Making of British Medicine, 1880–1914* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021).

> FOR THE BENEFIT OF BLIND PEOPLE: DR ARNAUD continues restoring the Blind to Sight, re-establishing bleariedness, shortsightedness, also weakness of the Eye, and taking of webs and stains whatever left upon the Eyes, even by the Small-pox, without making use of any instruments, as is practiced for Cataracts, which he dissipates.[61]

Indeed, some of these acclaimed oculists, such as the (in)famous Chevalier John Taylor (1703–1772), the grandfather of Robinson's Taylor, forged names for themselves throughout Europe.[62] The Taylor family, consisting of at least four surgeons, is a fascinating mix of quacks, hacks and writers.[63] In his memoirs, Taylor III recounts the various surgeries that he and his family undertook such as his grandfather's 'operation of couching, or depression, of the cataract' and writes 'that he was most sedulous in his attention, and that his manual dexterity appeared like the touch of magic.'[64] It is widely accepted that Robinson's friend Taylor 'had the least distinguished ophthalmic career in the family.' Though he treated both George III and IV, he much preferred journalism to eye surgery.[65]

The physics of vision

Though Isaac Newton (1642-1727) died long before Robinson was born, his ideas were fundamental to the ways in which vision and visual disorders were understood and discussed in the eighteenth century. It is widely accepted that his ideas still influence physics to the present day. Newton's *Opticks: Or, a Treatise of the Reflexions,*

[61] 'Advertisement', *Morning Post*, 3rd February 1791.
[62] The Chevalier John Taylor had treated members of most of the royal families in Europe and is blamed for blinding George Frideric Handel and possibly Johann Sebastian Bach too, though there is no conclusive evidence for this. David M. Jackson, 'Bach, Handel, and the Chevalier Taylor', *Medical History*, 12 (1968), 385–93.
[63] For more information about the other Taylor Oculists, Chevalier John Taylor, John Taylor II and Jeremiah Taylor, see Stephen G. Schwartz, Christopher T. Leffler, Andrzej Grzybowski, Hans-Reinhard Koch and Dennis Bermudez, 'The Taylor Dynasty: Three Generations of 18th-19th Century Oculists', *Historia Ophthalmologica Internationalis*, 1 (2015), 67-8. For more specific information about John Taylor III see John Barrell, 'The Reptile Oculist: John Barrell on the trail of the mysterious John Taylor' in *The London Review of Books*, 26.7, 1 April 2004.
[64] *Ibid*., p.14.
[65] Stephen G. Schwartz, and others, 'The Taylor Dynasty: Three Generations of 18th-19th Century Oculists', *Historia Ophthalmologica Internationalis*, 67-81 (p. 75).

Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light (1704), Marjorie Hope Nicolson suggests, 'was even better known to laymen [than the *Principia*], since it was written in English, and dealt with processes of nature much more comprehensible and of more immediate concern, particularly to those poets to whom light and color have always been the stuff of poetry.'[66] As we shall see, *Opticks* is particularly influential for Robinson's construction of sight, as not only does it lend her ideas a sense of legitimacy, it allows her to demonstrate the vast power of the universe and to contrast it with the finite nature of the body; physical sight, as mediated through the structure of the eye, is fundamental to her presentation of suffering, and by extension human experience. Robinson also directly inherits some of Newton's vocabulary, employing descriptions of sight's 'narrow vortex' (167) which lends the poem a tone of authority. In the *Opticks* Newton writes:

> If many contiguous vortices of molten pitch were each of them as large as those which some suppose to revolve about the sun and fix'd stars; yet these, and all their parts would, by their tenacity and stiffness, communicate their motion to one another.[67]

Here he is explaining his theory of gravity by referring to the interaction between massive bodies in space. In this case he suggests that the sun and stars communicate this motion to one another through gravity. The celestial nature of the vortex is striking, particularly as in Robinson's poem, she chooses to relate it to vision and mediate it through human experience. For her, this is something that is incessantly in flux and the idea that sight is an active force helps her to contrast the bodily and mental stillness that

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[66] Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Opticks and the 18th Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.4.

[67] Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light, The Second Edition, with Additions* (London: 1718), III, https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/NATP00051, [accessed 02.03.2024].
It is also noteworthy that these lines are quoted in 'Vortex, n.s.,' 1773. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Accessed 18.01.2024, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/vortex_ns.

she feels blindness, or any form of vision loss, creates as the blind figure becomes 'insensible to colours, space or form' (69). Though there was certainly a trickle-down understanding of Newtonian physics within the educated population, it is not inherently implausible that Robinson is directly mimicking the language of Newton as by copying specific elements of scientific vocabulary, it roots her imagery in contemporary scientific discourse. She is able to use poetry as a way of relating complex ideas to visual metaphor in order to explore the relationship between the sufferer and the world around them.

Questions of light, dark and their metaphorical implications for reason and knowledge form a vital part of Robinson's argument about the inevitability of suffering. The poet demonstrates her comprehension of light rays and particles which help her to portray the disastrous consequences that occur when vision fails. She notes the eye's capability to mediate 'light sublime' (2) and describes vision as the 'vivifying lamp' (116). As well as acknowledging the metaphor of religious light, Robinson introduces the reader to the luminary qualities of vision; mental clarity, for her, is demonstrated through sight. This sets the scene for the rest of the poem in which she juxtaposes light with blindness and consequently its effect upon the mental and physical condition 'without one ray to dissipate its gloom' (51). This line parallels the Corpuscular theory of light that Newton puts forward in the *Opticks* as she represents the blind figure as defective, reducing him to a mere product of his component parts.[68] On the other hand, Robinson presents light as a powerful, other-worldly force. This simultaneously humanises and victimises those who are visually impaired by eliciting sympathy as

[68] The corpuscular theory of light suggests that light is composed of tiny moving particles (known as corpuscles) emitted by a light source, which travel in straight lines until they are either absorbed or reflected by objects.

there is no alternative for the sufferer – they can never experience the 'living ray' (6). Robinson reinforces this idea as she refers to:

> the 'Mind of MAN!
> Compos'd of atoms, exquisitely fine,
> Each moving in a dark obstructed sphere' (12-14)

Through this vivid image, Robinson argues for the physicality of consciousness. The body is constructed of atoms but if indeed, eyes are the windows to the soul, the poet seems to suggest that blindness obstructs this relationship permanently. What is compelling in Robinson's poem is not solely that it draws upon the physics of vision, though this is in itself intriguing, rather it is the way that she weaves these theories into a poem about suffering in order to consider not just the fragility of the body, but our tenuous connection to the world around us. Light is positioned as a primeval force with humanity presented as ephemeral. Newton's revelations about the workings of the Universe gave rise to mechanistic ideas, influencing thinkers, writers and scientists alike. In 1712, author and politician Joseph Addison (1672-1719) published a hymn in *The Spectator*, in which he marvels at the structure of the universe, writing:

> The Spacious Firmament on high,
> With all the blue Ethereal Sky,
> And spangled Heav'ns, a Shining Frame,
> Their great Original proclaim:
> Th' unwearied Sun, from day to day,
> Does his Creator's Pow'r display,
> And publishes to every Land
> The Work of an Almighty Hand.[69]

[69] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 465, Saturday, 23 August 1712.

Here, Addison reflects upon the intricacies of the world and suggests that they mirror a divine power. This view aligns with mechanistic philosophy, which sees the universe as a complex but ordered system governed by laws of physics but created by God.[70] J. R. Watson notes that Addison's hymn 'concludes a discussion on strengthening and confirming faith' as explored through the daily movements of the sun.[71] From this perspective it is easy to see that Robinson was influenced by both religious and scientific ideas that were circulating about the universe as she describes the world as an 'intellectual maze' (5). The rhetorical strategy that Robinson relies upon, uses these conceptions in order to demonstrate the suffering that is caused when humanity does not fulfil its role in the mechanistic universe and the cogs, namely the senses, fail.

The anatomy of blindness

The way that the anatomy of the physical eye mediates light is also important for Robinson's depiction of the suffering body as she relies on this metaphor to evoke a sense of tragic inevitability. The role and structure of the optic nerve were not fully comprehended during the eighteenth century, particularly as microscopes were not yet powerful enough to see them in great detail. But it is widely accepted that, in addition to the concepts about light, many writers also adopted ideas about the eye's anatomy from scientific discourse.[72] This can be seen clearly in the couplet, 'The nerve shoots forth a light ineffable | That marks the fount of science (164-5).' The image of the nerve as a channel of light reflects contemporary ideas about optical perception and the workings

[70] See for example, Newton's three laws of motion: the law of inertia, *F=Ma* and the law of action versus reaction. These laws can be found in Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (London: Jussu Societatis Regiae ac typis Josephi Streater. Prostat apud plures bibliopolas, 1687; Glasgow: Georgius Brookman, 1833).
[71] 'The Early Eighteenth Century' in *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns*, ed. by J.R. Watson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.153.
[72] Christopher U. M. Smith, 'Understanding the nervous system in the eighteenth century', *The Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, 95 (2009), 107-114.

of the eye. The lines contrast the apparent certainty of scientific knowledge with the incomprehensibility of light as a force. While the nerve conveys directed illumination, suggesting understanding and control, the light itself remains ineffable, signalling the limits of human comprehension and the persistent mystery of natural phenomena. Robinson's later description helps to build upon this idea as she notes, 'So exquisitely delicate each nerve | So subject to destruction and to pain' (206-7). In presenting light as an intangible, powerful force Robinson situates it in direct opposition to the delicate anatomy of the human eye, specifically the optic nerve. The fact that pain comes at the end in this couplet is significant, as it reflects a clinical and observational tone; the speaker initially seems to be more interested in the physical structure and workings of the eye. Moreover, the repetition of 'so' makes the second line feel like an afterthought as she balances the perfection of the nervous system with the certainty of anguish. Robinson is referring to the emotional distress caused by blindness, rather than the literal agony resulting from trauma to the eye. Gillian Beer notes that 'once scientific arguments and ideas are read outside the genre of the scientific paper and the institution of the scientific journal, change has already begun. Genres establish their own conditions which alter the significance of ideas expressed within them'.[73] Robinson transforms the medicalised language into an indication of the profound emotional pain of blindness. Though the poet uses the language of science, specifically medicine and physics, in order to set out power structures within her work, she layers these theories and manipulates them in order to craft a poem about the disconnection that suffering causes, rather than simply describing the breakdown of the body. Nonetheless, Robinson shows the reader that ultimately the physical body is vulnerable.

[73] Gillian Beer, 'Translation or Transformation? The Relations of Literature and Science', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 44:1 (1990), 81–99 (p.90).

Robinson expands her discussion of the optic nerve in order to consider the emotional and the corporeal pain experienced within the whole eye. The poet articulates the blind figure's plight declaring, 'To roll the aching eye, alas! in vain' (31). Here, she emphasises both the futility of the protagonist's attempt to see and his frustration through the exclamatory interjection 'alas!' This is a recurring theme throughout the poem as Robinson describes the 'straining eye' (102). The blind figure causes himself discomfort in desperately attempting to see what his body cannot. This presents him as a physical embodiment of desolation and pathos. Not only does this demonstrate the emotional and physical pain originating from within the body but it also hints at the senselessness of suffering itself. In Book III of *Paradise Lost*, Milton, referring to his own blindness, uses a similar image in his invocation to light:

> thee I revisit safe,
> And feel thy sovereign vital lamp; but thou
> Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain
> To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
> So thick a drop serene hath quenched their orbs,
> Or dim suffusion veiled (*PL*, III, 21-26)

Milton's eyes, like Robinson's protagonist's, roll as they try to see the physically impossible. They search for renewal through the 'dawn' but ultimately vision has been degraded, rendering his aspirations unrealisable. However, Milton's presentation of his futile attempts to see lacks the overt desperation that can be found in 'Sight'. From this perspective, Robinson's depiction of the relationship between bodily and mental suffering daringly, if subtly, contradicts Milton's portrayal of his intrinsic connection to the mind's eye. Erin Webster notes that:

> Instead of positioning the mind as a detached observer, separated from the natural world by the imperfect senses of the body, Milton re-creates the natural

> world inside his mind. When Milton's narrator invokes celestial light as a replacement for the sunlight denied to him by his blindness, he not only preserves sunlight's role as the active agent in vision but also its role as a force of warmth and of life in the natural world.[74]

In his text, Milton emphasises the power of inner light radiating from within. Robinson on the other hand illustrates the fact that the protagonist desires something he does not know exists, as it would seem that his blindness is congenital. Nonetheless Robinson notes that '[light's] pow'r he feels, diffusing its warm touch o'er every sensate nerve' (79-80). For Robinson, the comfort of light, and consequently vision, is not innate which is directly in opposition with Milton's argument in *Paradise Lost*:

> So much the rather thou celestial light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
> Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight. (*PL* III, 51-55)

For Milton, blindness is the condition of inner light – he is invoking the Heavenly Muse so that she can 'purge and disperse' his visual obscurity and gain a form of inner vision that supersedes normal sight. By alluding to *Paradise Lost* and also adopting blank verse, Robinson boldly sets up an expectation of Miltonic genius only to argue against the existence of inner light; in doing so, she offers a much more pessimistic outlook. Her protagonist is not an active participant, rather the power of light influences him. The innumerable ways of understanding light during the period help the poet to dwell upon its literal absence for her protagonist while also thinking about it in the abstract. In this sense, Robinson equates physical discomfort and blindness with mental ignorance – for her there is little distinction. This idea is reinforced as the poet describes:

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[74] Erin Webster, '"Presented with a Universal blanc": The Physics of Vision in Milton's Invocation to Light', *Milton Studies*, 56 (2015), 233-271 (p. 258).

That POW'R which marks
The varying seasons in their varying forms,
That tells him there is YET a sense untry'd
Ungratified, yet fraught with heavenly bliss
Distracts beyond the certitude of pain,
Chills the expanding source of mental joy
And deadens all the faculties of man! (80-6)

Though light still retains a sense of movement, it is no longer 'diffusing' through the body, rather it is 'expanding'. Robinson negates its warm and vivacious qualities. Light appears here as spectral as it both 'chills' and 'deadens' its victim. Robinson extends the numbing absence of sensation which is in contradiction with the pain caused by blindness that she describes at the beginning of the poem. She also contrasts the affliction with 'heavenly bliss' echoing Christian ideals about how the pathway to eternal life was not without worldly suffering. This idea is further emphasised by her meditation on the transience of life itself through her depiction of dust, which would have been a universally familiar biblical image. Robinson writes of 'the earth to [God] a solitary speck' (24) drawing attention to the fact that the world, and by extension humanity, is infinitesimally small, but so too are the things that have the potential to cause irrevocable damage. Robinson explores this idea in more detail towards the end of the poem, reflecting upon the fact:

That the minutest particle of dust,
Almost invisible to that it meets,
Obstructs the pow'rs; and o'er the visual ray
Rolls a huge mass of AGONIZING SHADE. (208-211)

In this passage, Robinson uses short line lengths to emphasise the insignificance of the dust, and in turn this resonates with the weakness of the body itself as it is vulnerable to

something that can barely be seen with the naked eye. The majority of the poem is centred around the vastness of the universe and its relation to mortal experience; however Robinson sharply contrasts this image through these couplets threatened by something essentially invisible. It is possible to go as far as to say that through this implicit fragility, Robinson is demonstrating the ephemerality of vision, and by extension life, as it too can be broken down to its smallest parts as she relates it back to rays, and particles. The poet also hints towards the religious notion that 'for dust you are and to dust you will return.' [75] The allusion reflects not only the inevitability of death but also the language of divine judgement. Dust for Robinson therefore becomes a symbol of human frailty, signalling both origin and end. She implies that bodily degradation is not merely natural but theologically ordained. This in turn reiterates the contrasting relationship between the miniscule versus the enormous which is demonstrated through her use of capitalisation to describe the 'AGONIZING SHADE'. Robinson makes other references in the poem to the corruption and obscurity of vision writing that, 'Nor yet alone the misery extreme | Of the dread gloom opake involves the mind' (76-7). She emphasises the potential for deterioration, describing both the aggression and progression of vision loss. Robinson uses this menacing image to exemplify the contemporary understanding of blindness as it cuts the sufferer off from the world around them. Milton before her had put forward similar arguments in his closet drama *Samson Agonistes* (1671).[76] In this text, the protagonist finds himself 'betrayed, captivated, and both [of his] eyes put out ' (33). Samson laments the consequences of his newfound blindness and questions the fragility of the eye itself, declaring:

[75] *Genesis* 3:19.
[76] J*ohn Milton: Selected Poems*, ed. John Leonard, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2007), pp.214-65.

Since light so necessary is to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the Soul,
She all in every part; why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th' eye confin'd?
So obvious and so easie to be quench't,
And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd,
That she might look at will through every pore? (90-7)

Here, Milton emphasises the delicacy of the eye's structure and the vulnerability of perception, imagining a body ill-equipped to accommodate light as fully as the soul might desire. Robinson inherits this conception of blindness, both in the literal sense of visual deprivation and in its more abstract implications for perception and cognition. These lines appear early in the drama, when Samson is at his most pessimistic, 'eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves' (41). Later, the semi-chorus offer an alternative vision:

But he though blind of sight
Despised and tough extinguished quite,
With inward eyes illuminated. (1687–9)

Like in *Paradise Lost*, Milton again returns to the idea of inner light, despite his initial musings about the limitations of physical sight. From this perspective, Robinson's poem aligns with Milton in portraying the corporeal limitations of vision but diverges in emphasis. Where he gestures toward spiritual illumination as a corrective to physical loss, Robinson presents blindness as immediate and inescapable, a condition whose psychological and symbolic effects on the sufferer are total. The focus remains on the fragility of perception, the progressive deterioration of the body, and the structuring of suffering as both material and existential, rather than remedied by inner light or divine forces.

Given that, for Robinson, the eye is the principal vehicle that mediates our experience of the external world, the suffering and isolation that stems from vision loss is presented as a consequence of our tenuous connection with the environment. Critics

such as Marjorie Hope Nicolson articulate that 'during the eighteenth century, this generation became so much more sympathetically aware than men had ever been of what blindness implied in divorcing man from external nature.'[77] Certainly Robinson evokes sympathy for her protagonist through their sensory isolation and resulting torment. She laments the effects of blindness and the disconnection she feels it can create from society writing, 'Oblivion horrible! to know no change | Nor light from darkness! nor the human form' (26-27). Robinson portrays the blind figure's static existence without the oscillation of light. While she acknowledges that the ability to see another human is important, her emphasis remains on the blind man's connection to the natural world. In doing so, Robinson frames his experience of suffering through his relationship to his environment rather than social encounter. The poet builds upon this catastrophic isolation just lines later as she creates a sense of detachment, highlighting the stasis that blindness initiates through being in a state of unyielding darkness. Robinson writes:

> And still to find the melancholy blank
> Of years, and months and days, and ling'ring hours
> All dark alike, eternally obscure! (29-34)

She portrays darkness euphemistically, while also depicting blindness as an immobilising force. The figure is unable to discern not only light and dark, but also time as a result of his disability. Edward Larissy notes that 'not only does Romantic writing figure the capability of disability, but it makes such conditional capability the very emblem of knowledge in the modern world, and even of knowledge in general.'[78] Robinson, however is doing something different as it is not the blind figure's ability that

[77] Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Opticks and the 18th-Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 82.
[78] Edward Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007), p. 204.

is at the centre of the poet's characterisation, rather his isolation as she demonstrates that he can never claim to know the universe; his inability to relate to the world around him results in a tragic and irresolvable loss. Whether or not she views it as justifiable suffering is unclear, but she presents it as inevitable. One might expect a build up from minutes, to hours, to years, but here Robinson does the opposite. This initially seems counterintuitive, but she is demonstrating that arbitrary time values are irrelevant to the blind figure. It is also crucial to note that Robinson's use of the word 'blank' harks back to Milton's lines from *Paradise Lost* where he notes:

> but cloud instead, and ever-during dark
> Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
> Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
> Presented with a universal blank
> Of nature's works to me expunged and razed
> And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (*PL*, III, 45-50)

Robinson draws upon Milton's depiction of the everlasting and unending darkness that blindness creates, but her portrayal is underpinned by a sense of sadness. Milton emphasises the absence of knowledge, but Robinson emphatically highlights the 'melancholy' and suffering that stems from it.[79] This raises the question as to why Robinson relies so heavily on Milton's text in order to challenge it. Just as Milton invokes a tradition of blind Prophets and Poets, she is doing something similar with her allusions to his words. Milton writes:

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[79] Patrick Hume, a contemporary critic of *Paradise Lost*, was not convinced that Milton intended to use the word 'blank'. He argues that: 'I cannot persuade myself but it should have been a Universal Blot, and that it is a mistake of the Printer. Blanc is Fr[ench] for White, and the Phrase, Donner la carte Blanche á, to send one a Blanc, is to submit absolutely to what Conditions the Conqueror shall set down. Now Blindness (as well described by Clouds and continual Darkness) does so fully import an entire Ignorance and Privation of Colour, that a Person born blind has doubtless no notion of any such thing; but for a Man that had for many years enjoyed his Eyes, to say, his Blindness had cut him off from the chearful ways of Men, and, instead of Nature's fair Book of Knowledge, had presented him with a Universal Blanc, like a piece of white Paper, unspotted and unstained with any Impression, his Memory retaining still the Ideas of all Things formerly seen, tho now as to his Eye-sight blotted out, seems absurd.' Patrick Hume, *Annotations on Milton's 'Paradise Lost'* (London: 1695), p. 100.

So were I equalled with them in renown
Blind Thamyris, and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old (*PL*, III, 34-36)

Like Milton, Robinson initially gestures towards themes of divine inspiration and religious consolation but ultimately, she deviates from his arguments and refuses to satisfy the reader's expectation for release. Instead, Robinson repeatedly emphasises the pain and deprivation associated with blindness which contributes to her poetics of suffering and denotes its inevitability, but also its necessary portrayal.

Natural pathologies

Having considered the way Robinson uses physics and medicine to reflect upon the suffering caused by blindness, it is now necessary to explore the way in which she reflects, and sometimes refracts, ideas about bodily suffering through her presentation of the natural world. Fuson Wang argues that 'within this nexus of disability, medicine, and literature, representation assumes a significant role in figuring the traumas and stigmas of disease.'[80] Indeed, Robinson describes:

The Outstretch'd OCEAN and the LANDSCAPE wide,
Diversified with craggy cliffs, whose heads
Hang fearfully sublime, half veil'd in clouds
O'er the low valley's solitary breast! (168 - 171)

She constructs this cartographical image of the natural landscape by relating it to the body: the soaring cliffs become 'heads' and the valley the 'breast'. In the following line Robinson develops her portrayal describing 'the mountain's dizzy edge' (172) which lends nature, and by extension the body, a symptomatic expression of suffering, hinting at the malady that underpins the poem. Ashley Cross describes such symptomatic expressions as reflecting the 'forlorn body':

[80] Fuson Wang, 'Romantic Disease Discourse: Disability, Immunity, and Literature', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 33:5 (2011), 467-482 (p.469).

> Neither monstrous, nor proper, not visibly deformed but not healthy either, the forlorn body occupies a liminal space. Subject and object, self and other, beautiful and pathological, abandoned yet a source of meaning, it is the sensible body become ill. As such its symptoms (weeping, fatigue, blushing, fainting) signify emotional and mental states, which the viewer gazes on in pity.[81]

In the case of 'Sight,' the landscape, too, can be seen as simultaneously beautiful and pathological. Robinson's diction emphasises the fragility of the body, linking it to the rocky, precarious terrain. The effect is to invite a kind of ethical witnessing: the reader is called to register the blind figure's distress with sympathy while the disabled body's alterity is mitigated by its integration into the liminal, expressive landscape. The protagonist is unable to see the sublime world around him and he is left as a representation of this 'forlorn body' as the boundaries between internal sensation and external perception collapse. Robinson is deliberate in her choice of words as she demonstrates the inextricability of man and nature, but also emphasises the sick body's fallibility. Consequently, the poet uses this relationship in order to increase sympathy for the blind figure while alleviating much of the disabled body's perceived otherness. In doing so, Robinson stages a form of moral engagement in which the audience is encouraged to recognise shared vulnerability. This aligns with Adam Smith's notion of 'fellow-feeling,' where pity and compassion are grounded in the acknowledgment of common human vulnerability.

Another instance in which Robinson plays upon the duality of the natural world in order to elaborate upon the complexities of suffering is through her description of bodies of water. A recurring image in Robinson's poetry is that of the cataract. Geographically, Samuel Johnson defines it as 'a fall of water from on high; a shoot of

[81] Ashley Cross, 'Sick of the Same Bruise: John Keats' in *Mary Robinson and the Genesis of Romanticism: Literary Dialogues and Debts* (London: Routledge, 2016) p. 233.

water; a cascade.'[82] Though it would seem that it forms part of Robinson's typical depiction of the natural landscape, it is possible to view this as another manifestation of the relationship between vision and the pathological body. In this instance, her inclusion of a cataract fulfils an ocular function as, given the poem's subject, Robinson subtly plays on the term's alternative meaning – a degenerative eye disease. In his dictionary, Johnson defines it as:

> A suffusion of the eye, when little clouds, motes, and flies, seem to float about in the air; when confirmed, the pupil of the eye is either wholly, or in part, covered, and shut up with a little thin skin, so that the light has no admittance.[83]

In 'Sight', Robinson describes, 'the lulling murmurs of the wand'ring stream | The ever rippling rill; the cataract fierce' (129-130). The sounds of the stream as presented in the first line create a serene atmosphere which is swiftly counteracted by her presentation of the waterfall. Given that her emphasis is upon the violence and destructive power of blindness, the fierceness of the water embodies the tenacity and aggression of disease. Furthermore, in relating it to the natural landscape, which is something Robinson constructs as beautiful, she is masking the non-normative characteristics associated with vision loss. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that in representing disability, the 'body is up against an abstraction with which it cannot compete because the norm is an idealized quantitative and qualitative measure that is divorced from (rather than derived from) the observation of bodies, which are inherently variable.'[84] In depicting blindness in abstraction through images of nature, it is possible to view Robinson's portrayal as a way of rejecting the singularity of the condition in order to demonstrate her perception of the inherently personal nature of suffering.

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[82] Samuel Johnson, 'Cataract', *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1773), Accessed 2024/01/18, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=cataract.
[83] *Ibid*..
[84] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p.7.

Cosmological vision

The poem does not just refer to vision within the realm of the 'Planetary world' (8) of Earth, or indeed Milton's hell, but 'Sight' also turns its gaze outwards to the 'starry worlds' (17). Kathleen Lundeen notes that:

> In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many astronomers served as custodians of Newton's cosmos and explored the universe within the parameters he prescribed. Although significant scientific events occurred during this period, such as the discovery of the planet Uranus, Herschel and others primarily filled the space already outlined by Newton.[85]

Therefore, it is unsurprising that Robinson's portrayal of the universe reflects his cosmological ideas. She describes the planet Venus, as 'golden clouds rush on the morning star, | and glow exulting, o'er its milder ray' (158-9). As Venus is the most visible celestial object at night, it would have been known to both Newton and Robinson as a bringer of light and, by extension, vision to Earth.[86] The poet presents the reader with a heliocentric universe, reflecting the principles central to Newtonian physics, in which the sun occupies a position of both authority and generative power. In this cosmology, light is not only a physical phenomenon but also a symbol of order, knowledge, and the sublime. She describes an image of light:

> When proudly gilded by its parent SUN,
> As through the flaming Heavn's his dazzling car,
> Burnish'd with sparkling light, sheds liquid gold
> O'er seas ethereal (62-4)

Here, Robinson dramatises the paradox of vision: the brilliant light from the sun that orders the cosmos also overwhelms human sight. The sun, while securing universal

[85] Kathleen Lundeen, 'A Wrinkle in Space: The Romantic Disruption of the English Cosmos', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 43 (2008), 1-19 (p. 5).

[86] Newton argues that 'Light is never known to follow crooked Passages nor to bend into the Shadow. For the fix'd Stars by the Interposition of any of the Planets cease to be seen. And so do the Parts of the Sun by the Interposition of the Moon, Mercury or Venus.' Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light*, The Second Edition, with Additions (London: 1718), III, https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/NATP00051, [accessed 02.03.2024], p.337.

order, becomes the agent of blindness, so that the absence of perception is not a negation of enlightenment but a necessary consequence of it. To perceive fully is simultaneously to be vulnerable, and to be illuminated is to risk being consumed by the force that enables knowledge. She applies cosmological imagery to the mind to comment upon both the vastness and limits of human perception, showing that it is both perilous and resilient. This is emphasised later in the poem, Robinson seems to suggest that the eye is perfectly designed, declaring:

> And YET! So wonderfully form'd to meet
> The cutting blast the winged light'ning's glare
> The painful radiance of the scorching Sun;
> To watch the midnight taper's glimm'ring flame
> O'er the long studious page, or power intent
> Upon the fine-wrought mysteries that lurk
> In art mechanical (193-199)

The passage mirrors her earlier presentation of the sun: just as solar light both illuminates and blinds, the eye is depicted as both vulnerable to extreme radiance and attuned to delicate, controlled light. Robinson's choice of adjectives such as 'cutting,' 'painful,' and 'scorching' here conveys the intensity and danger of light itself, but also implies that the body, if correctly functioning, is perfectly matched to receive it. She then shifts to the image of the solitary genius at work by the 'midnight taper's glimm'ring flame,' a light far less aggressive but still requiring a fully functioning eye. The contrast between violent solar radiance and soft lamp-light highlights the dual function of the eye: it is exposed to overwhelming force yet finely attuned, suggesting that intellectual labour itself relies on the eye's precision as much as on its resilience. In this way, Robinson dramatises the contradictory nature of perception, showing that the organ capable of being overwhelmed by brilliance is also capable of sustained intellectual scrutiny.

The fact that the protagonist is deprived of the beauty of the night sky and the cosmos further emphasises his sensory isolation. This idea is demonstrated through Robinson's portrayal of the moon and sky in the following passage:

> the wan MOON,
> Peering in a silv'ry panoply of light,
> Sails placidly sublime through the still air,
> And scatters round her imitative day (109-112)

Here, the poet demonstrates the mechanics of the universe, more specifically, gravity, as the moon orbits and illuminates the earth, but it is something that the blind figure can never see. Crucially, however, this elaborately staged sublimity is unavailable to the blind protagonist. The moon's 'imitative day', itself a figure of reflected rather than original light, becomes doubly ironic: even this secondary illumination cannot be seen or understood by the blind figure. Robinson's emphatic attention to celestial movement and luminosity therefore functions less to elevate the scene than to underscore its futility for the suffering subject. In dwelling on what cannot be seen, the poem exposes the limits of sublime language, which depend upon sensory excess and visual apprehension. Robinson thus gestures towards an anti-sublime position, in which cosmic grandeur is stripped of its redemptive power and instead serves to measure the protagonist's exclusion from both nature's beauty and the consolations traditionally afforded by it.

Visionary imagination or imaginary vision?

The relationship between the imagination and the functionality of the physical eye is a critical question for Robinson and intersects with contemporary debates upon the subject. She ponders, 'Can FANCY give the rainbow's lustre pure | To the cold vacuum of the sightless eye?' (67-68) Here the poet presents us with a sterile and clinical image as she puts forward the idea that without sight, there can be no imagination, as the

mind's eye has nothing to base its conception of vision upon. Terry F. Robinson and John Savarese note that, '"Vision" is a loaded word in Romantic studies' and they suggest that the term has come to mean significantly more than just 'visionary imagination.'[87] Indeed, the relationship between the imagination and vision had been a topic of discourse in the previous century. We can once again turn to the writing of Joseph Addison as in the *Spectator*, in 1712, he considers the relationship between sight, other senses and the imagination, arguing that:

> Our Sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our Senses […] The Sense of Feeling can indeed give us a Notion of Extension, Shape, and all other Ideas that enter at the Eye, except Colours; but at the same time it is very much streightned [sic] and confined in its Operations, to the number, bulk, and distance of its particular Objects. Our Sight therefore seems designed to supply all these Defects, and may be considered as a more delicate and diffusive kind of Touch, that spreads itself over an infinite Multitude of Bodies, comprehends the largest Figures, and brings into our reach some of the most remote Parts of the Universe.[88]

It is easy to see that the language that Addison uses is reflected in Robinson's ideas about vision within her poem. There are specific moments that demonstrate this clearly, for example, Robinson emphatically describes vision as 'THAT SENSE DIVINE' (23) using capital letters to demonstrate its superiority. Her poetic depiction of the relationship between sight and the imagination is much more hyperbolic and vivid than Addison's, but their emphasis on the co-dependency between the two entities is much the same. In the eighteenth century, debates flourished about how a blind poet like Thomas Blacklock (1721-91), who lost his sight as an infant after contracting smallpox,

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[87] Terry F. Robinson and John Savarese, 'Introduction: Romanticism and Vision', *European Romantic Review*, 33.4 (2022), 451-460.
[88] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 21 June 1712, *17th and 18th Century Nichols Newspapers Collection*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/UTSXUU781974083/NICN?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-NICN&xid=81671567, [Accessed 11 Mar. 2024].

could write imaginative poetry so rich with expressive imagery.[89] For example, in 'An Ode Written While Sick', Blacklock describes:

> THE beauteous progeny of Spring,
> That tinge the zephyr's fragrant wing,
> Each tender bloom, each short-liv'd flow'r,
> Still flourish till their destin'd hour:[90]

It is clear that the poet's elaborate natural descriptions raise the question of how someone without sight could accurately describe the visual. Blacklock's work intersected with contemporary interest in the *Molyneux problem* which considered whether a person born blind who gained sight could recognize objects previously known only by touch.[91] This philosophical question considers the relationship between vision and knowledge, querying whether the imagination is solely dependent on sight.[92] Robinson describes the blind figure:

> Stumbling and fearful, through a desart [sic] shade,
> man gropes forlorn, and lab'ring like the MOLE'
> He feels the vivifying glow divine;
> But 'midst the blaze of radiance infinite,
> An isolated being, wanders still (70-4).

Recalling previous discussion of the vivid colours that Robinson uses throughout the poem, the poet questions the function, or one could go as far to say existence, of the imagination without sight. She reflects the victimisation of the blind figure as he remains isolated through what she implies as his own bodily failings, and he is deprived of one of his core senses. The barrenness of the desert is at the heart of this image, but

[89] For detailed discussion regarding Blacklock's poetry see Edward Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007).
[90] Thomas Blacklock, *Poems on Several* Occasions (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour and Neill, 1754), p.70.
[91] In a 1688 letter to John Locke, responding to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, William Molyneux asked if a man born blind, who can distinguish a cube and a sphere by touch, could tell the difference between them if he suddenly gained sight. Locke argued that the man would not be able to do so without learning to associate his visual and tactile experiences. See *John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Pauline Phemister, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Other writers such as Leibniz and Berkeley also engaged with the thought experiment.
[92] For more detailed discussion of the Molyneux problem see Gabriele Ferretti, and Brian Glenney, eds. *Molyneux's Question and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2021).

instead of the warmth having a transformative effect, the oppressive heat and inner darkness amid the sunlight becomes an emblem of suffering. Furthermore, Robinson explicitly draws attention to the man's alleged ignorance and lack of humanity as he is reduced to an animal floundering in the dark, particularly as moles were thought to be blind. Robinson's choice of imagery, here, is crucial to our understanding of the multifaceted way that she views blindness and relates it back to previous depictions of the condition. In *An Essay on Man* (1734), Alexander Pope suggests that man should learn from nature, writing, 'Thy Arts of building from the Bee receive; | Learn of the Mole to plow, the Worm to weave;'.[93] The collective noun for a group of moles is a labour; though Robinson's presentation is much more scathing than Pope's, the two rodents are both presented as industrious. Therefore, the poet uses this metaphor to reflect the blind figure's enduring, though futile and feeble, attempts to see. Moreover, it is rather paradoxical that Robinson is using such striking metaphors to write about blindness. Nonetheless, it would seem that in this particular instance she is arguing that the fully formed imagination cannot exist without support from sight transmitted by a real eye which evokes sympathy for the suffering blind figure.

Dreams, too, exemplify a kind of imaginative vision in Robinson's works and her presentation of them is oriented by the image of the suffering body, both fictional and personal. Though, as previously mentioned, I would caution against reading Robinson's writing as primarily autobiographical, as has been the critical tendency, it is important not to overlook the connections completely. Due to her deteriorating health, she experienced 'extreme bodily suffering' and, as a result of the use of laudanum to

[93] *Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock and Other Major Writings*, ed. by Leo Damrosch, (London: Penguin Classics, 2011) 175-176. Subsequently, Pope returns to the mole as he considers the nature of sight more generally, writing, 'What modes of Sight, betwixt each wide extreme, | The Mole's dim curtain, and the Lynx's beam', *Ibid*., 204-205.

attempt to lessen her pain, as detailed in her *Memoirs*, she was plagued by terrifying dreams.[94] Robinson's portrayal of sleep is therefore central to our understanding of vision in a literal and metaphorical sense. She centres her own experience of dreams and torment as a catalyst for talking about the physical and mental turmoil that can occur as a result of nightmares or even sleep deprivation. By the end of her life, we are told that 'nights of sleepless anxiety were succeeded by vexation and dread.'[95] Dreams had long been considered to be types of diseases and this idea is illustrated clearly in 'Sight'.[96] Robinson describes the trauma of dreaming for the blind figure, noting that he 'Lives in the midst of Death; and when he sleeps, | Feeds a perpetual solitude of woe' (50). The dreams emphasise the protagonist's innate blindness. In the poem nightmares can be viewed as a personified form of malevolent, or even fraudulent vision in itself. Robinson portrays it as a spectral force referring to dreams as 'shad'wy hosts' (103). The poet implies that there is something lurking in the depths of the imagination as she plays on the word 'hosts' which could reflect the idea of an enemy army, or the fact that the protagonist is plagued by multiple nightmares. Even after awaking from his dreams the blind figure is reminded that true vision is something that he can never have as Robinson writes, 'Yet only for a time the spell controls, | And soothing visions gild the transient gloom' (42-43). She seems to suggest that all manner of dreams are only temporary whereas blindness renders its victims in a state of suffering long after they wake.

Robinson further reflects on the connection between vision and dreams through an allusion to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Since she made her theatrical debut aged fourteen as,

[94] *Memoirs*, p.289.
See also 'Stanzas. Written after successive nights of Melancholy Dreams'.
[95] *Ibid*., p.145.
[96] See Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

in her own words, 'the juvenile pupil of Garrick, − the promised Cordelia'[97], it is perhaps unsurprising that Shakespearean allusion permeates Robinson's writing. She describes the perpetual darkness that the blind figure experiences with such despondency and anguish, exclaiming:

> To such a wretch! Whose brightest hour of bliss
> is but the shadow of a waking dream,
> The sleep of DEATH, with all its start'ling fears,
> Would teem with prospects of ELYSIUM!
> For what is sleep, but temporary death;
> Sealing up all the windows of the soul,
> And binding ev'ry sense in torpid chains? (35-41)

The emphasis here is upon the paralysis of the senses, even when the blind figure wakes from a dream he is bound in 'torpid chains' unable to escape the darkness of sleep or blindness. It is easy to see the parallels between these lines and Hamlet's famous soliloquy from Act III, Scene I:

> 'To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream−ay, there's the rub:
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come'.[98]

For Robinson, sleep is a form of confinement, but it also, like in Shakespeare's depiction, has a sense of potentiality. She seems to suggest a kind of soullessness that stems from blindness, which within the realm of the poem, is the ultimate form of suffering. Later in the poem Robinson deals with this idea more explicitly, posing the question: 'How can the soul its energies sustain, | When REASON's crystal gates are clos'd in night' (89-90). But also, Robinson introduces the concept of redemption through the idea of 'Elysium' which hints at the poem's conclusion. She describes 'the vaulted arch | Of Heaven's eternal dome!'(56-7) and uses it in order to exemplify the

[97] *Ibid*., p.37.
[98] William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet' in *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), p.1802.

idea of sight as a divine entity and a gateway to heaven.[99] In a sense, death is presented as preferable to blindness as, without sight, the protagonist is disconnected from the divine and the only way to access it once again is in heaven. According to Robinson's *Memoirs*, religion was an influential part of her upbringing, so it is perhaps unsurprising that ideas about the nature of suffering appear in her works.[100] I would suggest however that the poet is being somewhat subversive as she seems to negate arguments about the sanctity of life through her insinuation that the blind would be better off dead. Nonetheless she argues that sight is a divine sense and emphatically notes the primary role that eyes play in mediating humanity's relationship with the divine, exclaiming, 'O Glorious SIGHT! Sublimest gift of God' (160-2). Those without it, can only suffer in the mortal realm. Robinson can also be read as being ironic here as the blind figure cannot ever experience the sublime. Throughout the poem she uses vivid descriptions of 'Creation's fair domain, its gems, its hues' (18). But in her opinion, knowledge of the world can only be seen to exacerbate the disastrous consequences that occur when vision does not function as it should, leaving the blind person 'sad, unillum'd, disconsolate, and lost!' (74-75). In its most literal sense, the eye cannot transmit light, but within the context of Enlightenment discourse the etymology of 'unillum'd' is

[99] *The Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson written by herself with some posthumous pieces in iv volumes*, ed. by Maria Elizabeth Robinson (London: Wilkes and Taylor for R. Philips, 1801), pp. 56-57.

[100] The way that Robinson articulates her experiences with various Christian denominations during her early life is detailed in her *Memoirs*. She describes begging to be taken into Bristol Cathedral as 'the nursery in which I passed my hours of infancy was so near the great aisle of the Minster that the organ, which re-echoed its deep tones, accompanied by the chaunting of the choristers, was distinctly heard both at morning and evening service.' *Ibid*., p.21. Additionally, she describes her education by the evangelical writer and actress Hannah Moore, writing that 'The early hours of boarding-school study I passed under the tuition of the Misses More, sisters to the lady of that name whose talents have been so often celebrated.' *Ibid*., p.22. Robinson was also taught by Meribah Lorrington whom she admired greatly but she noted that Lorrington's father was strict and also that 'he was of the anabaptist persuasion', *Ibid*., p.31. Robinson's mother permitted her 'to read sacred and moral lessons, on saints'- days and Sunday evenings' in her school. At her wedding she reveals that, 'I was dressed in the habit of a quaker; a society to which, in early youth, I was particularly partial.' *Ibid*., p.43. We do know however that she was buried in the Anglican Old Windsor churchyard near to Englefield Cottage where she died, so she did uphold the Christian faith, as evidenced by the religious moments that we see in her writing.

significant as it reflects an absence of knowledge. [101] Indeed, Robinson uses the prefix 'un' on several other occasions, while describing the effects of blindness such as 'undelighted' (15), unenlighten'd (47), 'undescribable' (153) and 'unutterable bliss!' (154) This helps to create a sense of potentiality, representing the beauty the blind figure could experience, but never does, which serves to further illustrate the tragedy of his situation. The prefix also extends his sensory deprivation; expression is rendered impossible as a result of blindness.

Consolation

Robinson does seem to offer the blind figure some worldly consolation as she admits that other senses, specifically hearing, can be viewed as sacred and powerful. Edward Larissy argues that 'in the Romantic period, the idea of aural compensation becomes particularly entwined with questions about such gain and loss.'[102] In 'Sight' this assertion is true as she juxtaposes the violence of blindness with the beauty of birdsong. In two consecutive verse paragraphs she uses the image of a bird, specifically a nightingale, and describes its mournful and haunting song to reflect upon the fact that sound, too, can mediate our experience of the world. It would seem initially that the poet is describing the temporary relief that can be experienced:

> When silence reigns despotic o'er the plain;
> Save where the BIRD OF SOLITUDE salutes
> The melancholy hour, and pours, alone,
> Her love be-wailing song. (105-108).

The nightingale's song is accessible to the blind figure, though it is saturated with sadness. The poet constructs a poignant image of the solitary bird, singing to itself,

[101] See Kate Tunstall, and Denis Diderot, *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay* (London: Continuum, 2011).
[102] E. Larrissy, 'The Enigma of the Blind' in *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2007) pp. 1-35.

however it represents a repeated motif within the poem. In the following verse paragraph, using similar language to her earlier lines, she complicates her portrayal of the bird, writing that:

> The melancholy void is subject still to
> the sweet magic of seraphic sounds;
> […]
> Or Philomena's[103] soul-subduing strain,
> That woos lone Echo from her viewless seat (122-127).

Within the couplets, the contrast between the oppressive barrenness and the generous overflow of the bird's song emphasises the pain and distress of the protagonist. Instead of the 'melancholy hour' in which the nightingale sings, here the poignancy stems from the blind protagonist themselves. The recurrence of this metaphor is further developed as Robinson deepens her layers of meaning by referring to two myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[104] Echo, a nymph cursed by Hera, could only repeat the last words she heard. Philomela was violated by her sister Procne's husband, Tereus. To ensure her silence, he cut out her tongue, but she communicated the tragedy by weaving a tapestry. The gods took pity on her and turned her sister into a swallow and her into a nightingale. The narratives of Echo and Philomela highlight the suffering of suppressed voices and its enduring impact upon their agency. Robinson includes these two allusions, once again to reflect upon the fallibility of the senses more generally and also to highlight the inadequacy of any possible consolation for blindness.

This is not the first time that Robinson includes the bird in her poetry as various incarnations of nightingales appear in her other works.[105] She in fact wrote two

[103] I would concur with Judith Pascoe that despite Robinson's nightingale being named Philomena and not Philomela as in Ovid's poem, she is still referring to the same story. See *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Toronto: Broadview, 1999), p.119.
[104] See *Ovid: Metamorphoses, The New. Annotated Edition*, translated by Rolfe Humphries, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).
[105] See for instance, *Sappho and Phaon*, 'Sonnet XIV' 'O! Prompt my Phaon's dreams with tend'rest lays,| Ere night o'ershade thee with its humid wings,| while the lorn Philomel his sorrow sings| In leafy

nightingale odes, the first was published in the *Oracle* in 1789 and the second in her 1791 *Poems*. Robinson's revisitation of the bird's song throughout her corpus can be related to Milton's and Charlotte Smith's birds, among others. Cross notes, '[Robinson's] first ode self-consciously situates itself within a history of nightingale poems that portray the myth of Philomela's rape and mutilation by Tereus as a narrative of beautiful song evoked by immense suffering.'[106] Indeed, in 'Sight' allusions to the stories of both Echo and Philomena reflect themes of violence and misery conveyed through their voices, which is perhaps surprising, given that the majority of the poem is about vision. [107] In a way, Robinson provides the blind figure with some solace in that he still has the capacity to hear and is not completely disconnected from nature. In the poem Robinson explicitly refers to, 'The love-taught minstrelsy of plumed throats; | The dulcet strains of gentle Consolation!' (133-34). But this is simply a fleeting moment of reprieve, in a comparable manner to when the poet describes the temporary relief of pleasant dreams. Though nightingales are known for their melodious nocturnal tune, her description of 'The soothing eloquence of sacred song; | The whispering gale, that mourns the declining day' (124-5) enhances the bird's symbolic representation of mystery, sadness, and the beauty of the natural world during the quieter, reflective hours of night. On a more fundamental level, however, the fact that the nightingale sings at the end of the day, is an apposite image for someone who lives in perpetual darkness. Given that Robinson's portrayal of blindness has been heavily influenced by Milton's writing,

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cradle, red with parting rays!' in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 1999), p.164.

[106] Ashley Cross, 'Sick of the Same Bruise: John Keats' in *Mary Robinson and the Genesis of Romanticism: Literary Dialogues and Debts* (London: Routledge, 2016) p.233.

[107] Echo is destined to a life of repeating what is said to her and has no individual voice, while Philomena's transformation from human to bird means that her voice becomes birdsong.

it is also significant that his invocation to Light in *Paradise Lost* includes a nightingale singing at night as he laments his own sensory limitations.[108] The poet declares:

> Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move;
> Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
> Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
> Tunes her nocturnal note. Thus with the year
> Seasons return, but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose (*PL,* III 36-42)

Like Robinson's portrayal of the bird immersed in nature, Milton offers the reader no worldly solution. There is another possible reason for the nightingale's inclusion. Not only does the bird symbolise suffering and melancholy, but also poetic voice. Fiona Stafford notes that 'If Milton cast himself as a nightingale, then anyone with poetic aspirations was likely to be attracted by an image of the poet, hidden from sight but singing with notes as near-heavenly as was possible in the darkness of the earth'.[109] For Robinson, whose aspiration was to consolidate her position as a serious author then, it can be said that the nightingale symbolises not only the plight of the songbird, but also the struggles of the poet.[110] Sophie Vasset suggests that in the eighteenth century, 'most diseases had a temporal structure that resembles a literary plot, with a sudden beginning, a crisis and a resolution.'[111] Robinson's literary representation of blindness in 'Sight' functions similarly, though it is not something that cures or resolves vision loss, despite what was promised by the newspaper articles and advertisements for oculists mentioned previously. Perhaps this is Robinson's way of critiquing those who claim to cure

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[108] Equally in his Sonnet 'O Nightingale', Milton notes that the bird again 'Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still,' In 'Il Penseroso' he also writes of the 'Sweet bird, that shun'st the noise of folly, | Most musical, most melancholy! | Thee, chantress, oft, the woods among, | I woo to hear thy evensong." *John Milton: Selected Poems*, Ed. by John Leonard, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2007) p. 24.
[109] Fiona Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2012), p. 169.
[110] This relationship also appears in *Sappho and Phaon,* and will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.
[111] Sophie Vasset, 'Medicine and narration in the eighteenth century', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 4 (2013), (p.10).

blindness but perpetually fail. In dwelling on someone whose blindness cannot, and can never be, be alleviated in the human realm, she is showing her readership that there are some forces beyond our comprehension, reflecting the certainty of a tragic outcome. In the concluding verse paragraph, the speaker does not attempt to alleviate any of the pain caused by blindness, rather she reaffirms the tragic consequences of it, noting:

> Such are the horrors, Such the pangs acute,
> That shroud the DARKEN'D EYE, whose mortal sense,
> Consign'd to one unbless'd and mournful night,
> Can by ETERNAL DAY alone be cur'd!
> Where the dim shade shall vanish from its beams,
> And bathing in a sea of endless light,
> The renovated ORB, awoke from Death,
> Shall snatch its rays from IMMORTALITY! (212-219)

After each instance of suffering, Robinson counterbalances it with the promise of 'ETERNAL DAY' and 'IMMORTALITY.' She inverts the notion of eternal night and mortality as representations of death in order to repurpose them. Therefore, it could be argued she presents the sufferer with a heavenly solution. Susannah Mintz argues that '[Milton] insists pain must have both a reason-why and a lesson-learned—a form of discourse that, as disability scholarship has taught us, entrenches the notion that pain and impairment are intolerable unless compensated for by insight or improvement.'[112] For Robinson, on the other hand, there is neither a reason why or a lesson learned though the telling of the sufferer's tale can itself offer a limited catharsis that functions less as consolation for the sufferer than as an ethical provocation for the reader. This produces a sustained tension between worldly affliction and the paradigm of redemptive, religious pain, most notably the Passion of Christ. Unlike *Paradise Lost*, the poem is not concerned with 'Justify[ing] the ways of God to men' (*PL,* I, 26);

[112] Susannah B. Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering Body*, (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.197.

suffering here is not rendered meaningful by divine redemption or future recompense. Although the blind man is promised sight in heaven, this deferred restoration is inadequate, offering no compensation for the deprivation endured in life. Robinson thus refuses the idea that suffering is divine altogether, presenting pain as irreducible, unjustified, and resistant to theological resolution.

Conclusion

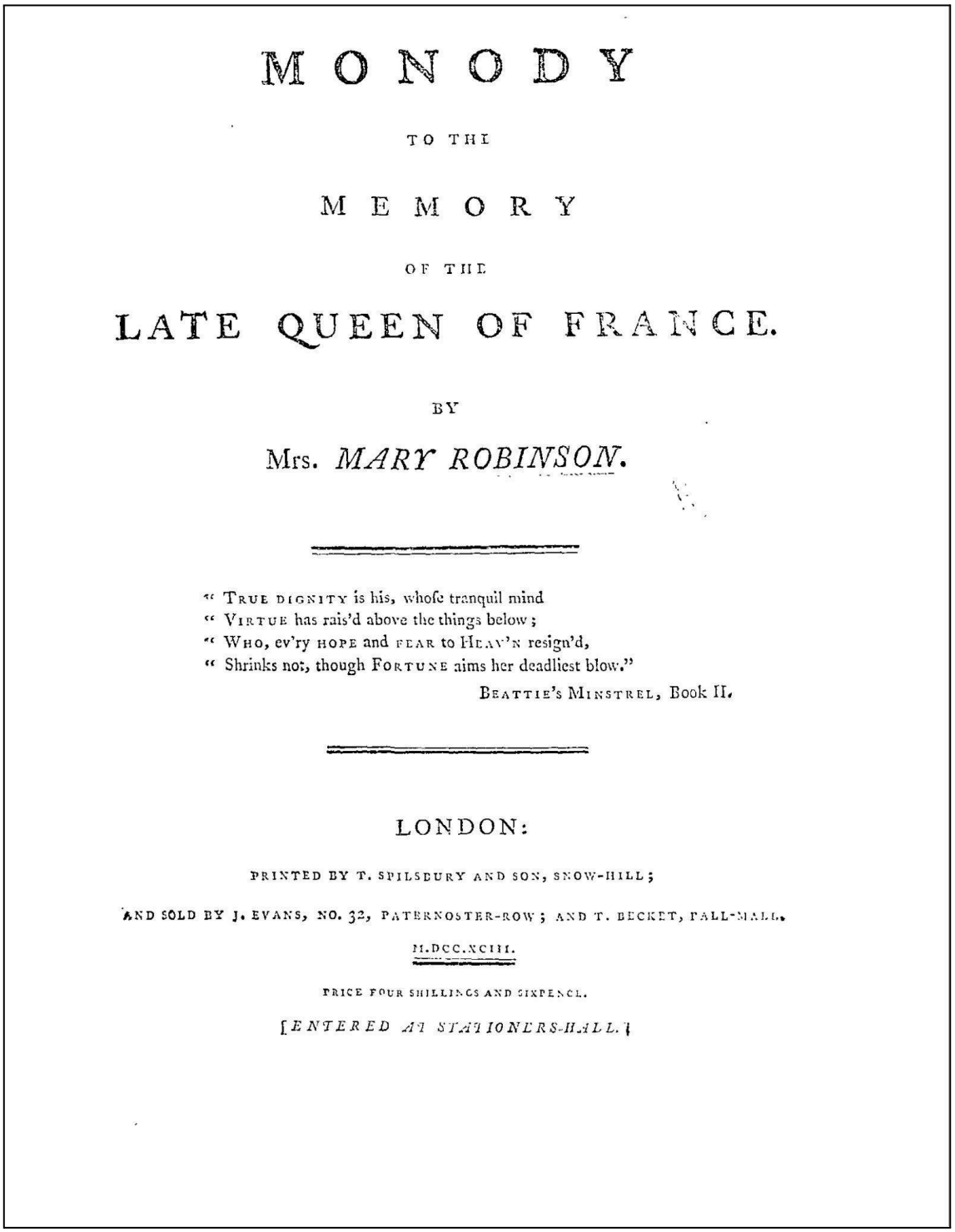
In many ways Robinson's portrayal of vision in this poem is palliative rather than curative. She suggests that after death the eye will be renewed and able to receive God's eternal light, reflecting both a sense of tragic inevitability and distant redemption. By presenting blindness as a profound and incurable condition, with the afterlife as the only consolation, Robinson depicts suffering as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition: harsh, painful, and undeniable. In insisting on portraying the reality of this experience, she emphasises that suffering must be acknowledged and voiced rather than silenced, and that its recognition carries a moral as well as an aesthetic significance.

The poem's sustained abstraction allows Robinson to address the problem of suffering in a universal register, rather than in terms of individual experience alone. Where poets like Milton and Pope seek to reconcile pain within a theodical or moral framework, Robinson offers the reader no such closure. Anne Davidson Ferry argues that '[Milton] can interpret to us Adam's story and our own share in it because, like a bird, he can soar beyond the limits of our mortal experience and our fallen vision'[113] Robinson's concern is not resolution but the sober recognition that suffering is inseparable from human existence and that it must be articulated. By highlighting both

[113] Anne D. Ferry, 'The Bird, the Blind Bard, and the Fortunate Fall', in *Reason and Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas 1600–1800*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo, (London: Routledge, 1962).

absence and presence, loss and perception, the poem shows that witnessing and voicing suffering are themselves ethical acts, demanding attention, reflection, and responsiveness. In this sense, Robinson's treatment of blindness exemplifies the broader concerns of the thesis, exploring the moral and philosophical stakes of suffering and the obligations it imposes on those who observe or give it voice. Her poetics insist that human vulnerability cannot be ignored, that suffering demands to be seen and articulated. Blindness, deprivation, and the impossibility of earthly consolation all serve to demonstrate that acknowledging suffering is not only a poetic imperative but a moral one; the protagonist cannot physically bear witness, but we must.

Part II: Writing feminine suffering



MONODY

TO THE

MEMORY

OF THE

LATE QUEEN OF FRANCE.

BY

Mrs. *MARY ROBINSON.*

" TRUE DIGNITY is his, whose tranquil mind
" VIRTUE has rais'd above the things below;
" WHO, ev'ry HOPE and FEAR to HEAV'N resign'd,
" Shrinks not, though FORTUNE aims her deadliest blow."

BEATTIE'S MINSTREL, Book II.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY T. SPILSBURY AND SON, SNOW-HILL;

AND SOLD BY J. EVANS, NO. 32, PATERNOSTER-ROW; AND T. BECKET, PALL-MALL.

M.DCC.XCIII.

PRICE FOUR SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE.

[*ENTERED AT STATIONERS-HALL.*]

Figure 2: Title page of *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France*, (London: T. Spilsbury and son, 1793). Image from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0112469915/ECCO?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=af17ffc0&pg=1.

Chapter two: Vindicating Marie Antoinette in *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793)

Having just examined 'Sight', in which suffering is portrayed in an ahistorical register, it is now necessary to turn to another poem from 1793, *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France*, which examines Marie Antoinette's suffering which stemmed from political violence enacted during the French Revolution. On a fundamental level, it is easy to see the parallels between Mary Robinson and the French Queen (1755-1793); they were both beautiful, polarising and both faced virulent misogynistic attacks upon their character.[114] Marie Antoinette is also Robinson's most frequently featured tragic protagonist appearing in no fewer than six works, all of which will be discussed later in the chapter in order to contextualise the *Monody*. Amy Garnai suggests that 'above all, the Marie Antoinette texts exhibit Robinson's preoccupation with the plight of the French Queen as a particularized, yet also emblematic, study of victimization and loss, perhaps even as an aggrandized version of her own story.' [115] To suggest that Robinson's portrayal of Marie Antoinette's torment during the French Revolution is simply a literary sublimation of the author's own misfortunes would be reductive and this chapter will show that the poet's representations of the French Queen suggest something else entirely. In order to understand Robinson's characterisation of Marie Antoinette, it is important to note that the poet was inherently against the brutality of the Revolution,

[114] Both Marie Antoinette and Robinson were featured in pornographic pamphlets. See for example, Chantal Thomas, *La reine scélérate : Marie-Antoinette dans les pamphlets* (Paris: Seuil, 2003). In 1771, A particularly vulgar piece was written about Robinson by John King, money lender titled 'Letters from Perdita to a Certain Israelite, and his answers to Them', *Westminster Magazine*, 1781, p.151.
[115] Amy Garnai, 'One victim from last despair: Mary Robinson's Marie Antoinette', *Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, 12.3 (2005), 381–98 (p.383).

and yet her portrayal of it stems from a radical cynicism about the nature of power – royal, political or otherwise.

As Simon Schama points out, 'in some depressingly unavoidable sense, violence was the Revolution itself.'[116] It is perhaps for this reason that on all sides, the rhetoric of suffering was so prevalent among revolutionary discourse in the 1790s; notable examples include Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Helen Maria Williams' *Letters from France (*1790), and, particularly apposite as, like Mary Robinson's piece, it relates directly to the Queen of France, Germaine de Staël's *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* (1793). Like many other commentators of the day, Robinson was moved to respond to the significant escalation of violence that was occurring in France during the Terror. Where Robinson stands out, is in her central preoccupation with Marie Antoinette which is reflected in the repeated discussion of the Queen's position, from political tracts to poems to personal anecdotes that the author published defending her from 1791-1800. This chapter will examine Robinson's final Marie Antoinette poem, *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* considering it as her most sustained portrayal of the Queen's suffering and reflecting upon her broader philosophical concerns about the violent direction that the Revolution had taken.

In order to analyse the ways in which Robinson characterises the suffering of the French Queen, this chapter first considers the *Monody*'s relationship to Robinson's other contemporary Marie Antoinette texts, demonstrating the author's sustained sympathy for the Queen's plight. It then turns to Robinson's portrayal of her as both woman and

[116] Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. xv.

mother, showing how she humanises the Queen while implicitly critiquing the violence of the revolution. The chapter subsequently explores the strategies by which Robinson encourages the reader to identify with Marie Antoinette, engaging with contemporary discourses of sensibility, the sublime, and captivity. Finally, it considers the absence of consolation within the poem, in order to address the question: why does Robinson refuse to offer solace, and what does this reveal about her understanding of suffering and moral responsibility?

The Marie Antoinette texts

Before examining the *Monody* itself, it is important to first situate it within Robinson's broader body of work that focuses on the French Queen. Despite the fact that the poet apparently met Marie Antoinette during her European travels in 1783, she did not publish any writing about this personal encounter until 1800. The story of their meeting appears twice in slightly different forms. The first of these two pieces, 'Anecdotes of Eminent Persons: Anecdotes of the Late Queen of France' was published anonymously in the *Monthly Magazine; or, British Register*:

> In the year 1783, Mrs Robinson (the English poetess) being at Paris, was induced by curiosity to attend at one of the public dinners of Versailles. The queen, who was always singularly courteous to foreigners, honoured our country-woman with particular attention. […] the following day [Robinson] received a message from the queen of France; [… requesting] that she would lend the miniature [of the Prince of Wales] which she had worn, to the queen for a few hours. Mrs Robinson complied: and, in return for what the amiable Antoinette termed an act of obliging politeness, she received a purse beautifully worked by the hands of her majesty.[117]

What is important to note is the fact that Robinson does not just see Marie Antoinette as an intensified version of herself, rather she emphasises their kinship and shared

[117] 'Anecdotes of Eminent Persons: Anecdotes of the Late Queen of France', in *Monthly Magazine; or, British Register* 10, (1 August 1800) 40-41.

appreciation for art. The miniature that the poet lends the Queen also appears in Robinson's famous portrait painted by Thomas Gainsborough where she is sat next to a large white dog holding the image of the Prince. It is striking that Robinson (assuming she is the author, or at very least the direct source of the anecdote) seeks to vindicate the late French Queen by celebrating her eye for beauty and finery; her spending habits were a source of discontent in Revolutionary France and that it was well known that one of Marie Antoinette's many nicknames was 'Madame Déficit.' Perhaps this is why, in the continuation of her *Memoirs*, where she describes this encounter again, Marie Antoinette is depicted in a much more frugal light in contrast to her husband:

> The grand couvert, at which the King acquitted himself with more alacrity than grace, afforded a magnificent display of epicurean luxury. The Queen ate nothing. The slender crimson cord, which drew a line of separation between the royal epicures and the gazing plebeians, was at the distance but of a few feet from the table […] She [Marie Antoinette] appeared to survey, with peculiar attention, a miniature of the Prince of Wales, which Mrs Robinson wore on her bosom, and of which, in the ensuing day, she commissioned the Duke of Orleans to request the loan.[118]

Marie Antoinette gave birth in 1778, 1781, 1785, and 1786, while Robinson places the visit in 1783, describing it as the queen's first appearance since her accouchement. This claim is difficult to reconcile with the historical record, and may reflect Robinson's broader indifference to precise chronology, not least in light of the uncertainty surrounding her own birth date. Chronological ambiguities notwithstanding, Robinson's emphasis upon Marie Antoinette's motherhood is important to her conception of suffering. Pascoe states that the 'queen's newly maternal status in its resemblance to an umbilical cord acts as a line of demarcation, separating the spectacle of the queen's

[118] *The Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson written by herself with some posthumous pieces in iv volumes*, ed. by Maria Elizabeth Robinson (London: Wilkes and Taylor for R. Philips, 1801), p. 269.

body from its spectators.' [119] However, I would argue that the crimson cord is a literal and clear marker of social separation, an emblem of class and hierarchy, rather than a symbolic maternal link between the Queen and her subjects. It is Robinson's encounter with her that imbues Marie Antoinette's plight with particular significance for the poet, who, through this exchange, underscores her inherent benevolence despite her royal status; indeed the Queen, herself initiates a form of kinship with Robinson as she breaches the barrier, as she alone could.

Chronologically speaking, Robinson's first publication about Marie Antoinette was an anonymous pamphlet *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France* (August 1791) and simply signed 'A friend to humanity.' This text, pro-revolution yet sympathetic to the French Royal family's position, likely responded to newspaper reports on 27th June 1791 that they had been captured in Varennes after an attempt to flee. For instance, in the *Morning Post*, one of the newspapers where Robinson published her own poetry, it was noted that:

> The Event which has just taken place in this kingdom [France] must amaze all Europe by the boldness of the Attempt, as much as it must agitate this Quarter of the Globe by its Consequences. Official letters were received in London on Saturday Morning, which contain the important information, that the KING of the FRENCH had abdicated his Throne and withdrawn himself from his people. […] On Further inquiry, it was found that he had been accompanied by the Queen, the Dauphin and the rest of the royal family.[120]

At this point, before the bloodshed of the Terror began in 1792, Robinson's broader attitude towards the Revolution was still positive. She does, however, still seek to vindicate Marie Antoinette from any perceived wrongdoing. Drawing the reader's attention to Louis XVI's status as both her husband and her King, Robinson states:

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[119] Judith Pascoe 'Embodying Marie Antoinette: The Theatricalized Female Study', in *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p.118.
[120] *Morning Post*, 27 June 1791.

> Whatever degree of criminality may be imputed to the event, certainly the QUEEN was not the aggressor; it was the criterion of conjugal virtue, to share the fate and follow the fortunes of a man who adored her to enthusiasm, and to whom she was united by every bond human and divine[121]

This is an unusual comment regarding Marie Antoinette's loyalty to Louis XVI as Robinson implies that it is the ultimate measure of conjugal virtue, rather than emphasising her political role or personal failings. By focusing on the emotional and moral bonds between the couple, she elevates private devotion above public scandal, countering the dominant revolutionary narratives that portrayed the queen as culpable or morally corrupt. From this respect, Robinson presents the Queen as a victim of her marital and royal status, both of which are seemingly unavoidable obstacles and ultimately lead to her execution.

After two years of intense Revolutionary brutality, Robinson composed her next three pieces focusing upon Marie Antoinette which all respond to the imprisonment and execution of the French Royal family. Robinson's 'Fragment, supposed to be written near the Temple, at Paris, on the night before the Murder of Louis the Sixteenth' was published in the *Oracle* on 27th February 1793 closely followed by 'Marie Antoinette's Lamentation, in her prison in the Temple' also printed in the *Oracl*e on 8th March 1793. Though the 'Fragment' is superficially about Louis XVI, the poem is as much about the ethics of the Revolution as it is about the King's predicament. These texts reflect the deep disquiet that Robinson felt about the profound atrocities that occurred during the period in which she was writing. Additionally, the frequency and speed of her publications gives us an indication of the extent to which Robinson was following the events of the Revolution and also demonstrates that she felt compelled by Marie

[121] 'Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France' *in The Works of Mary Robinson* ed. William D. Brewer. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009). p.127.

Antoinette's situation to respond immediately. A few months following Marie Antoinette's execution on 16 October 1793, Robinson published *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* which reflects upon both individual and philosophical suffering, setting the scene for more sustained political and feminist discussion in her later writing. In March 1799, Robinson published her feminist treatise *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustices of Mental Insubordination*. This text features several eminent women, including Marie Antoinette, who Robinson argues are worthy of emulation, Robinson writes that:

> the women of France have been by some popular, though evidently prejudiced writers, denominated little better than she-devils! […] If there are political sceptics, who affect to place the genuine strength of soul to a bold but desperate temerity, rather than to a sublime effort of heroism, let them contemplate the last moments of Marie Antoinette; this extraordinary woman, whose days had passed in luxurious splendour; whose will had been little less than law! Behold her hurled from the most towering altitude of power and vanity; insulted, mocked, derided, stigmatized, yet unappalled even at the instant when she was compelled to endure an ignominious death! Let the strength of her mind, the intrepidity of her soul, put to shame the vaunted superiority of man; and at the same time place the female character in a point of view, at once favourable to nature, and worthy of example.[122]

In this passage, Robinson presents Marie Antoinette as a paragon of virtue emphasising the queen's moral and intellectual courage rather than her social or political power. By contrasting Marie Antoinette's former life of 'luxurious splendour' with her composure in the face of death, Robinson recasts suffering as a site of exemplary virtue, demonstrating that true strength lies in the resilience of mind and character which is something she began to establish in the *Monody*.

[122] 'A Letter to the Women of England' in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer, D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009) Part II, Vol. 8, pp. 138-139.

Publication history, reception and the monody form

Priced at four shilling and six pence the *Monody*, like Robinson's other works during this period, was printed by T. Splitsbury as an individual poem and sold by J. Evans and T. Becket. [123] The poem targets the literate middle class rather than the mass public, appealing to readers with the time, income, and cultural familiarity to engage seriously with poetry; its price placed it above cheap pamphlets and ballads but below luxury editions. The five hundred-and-forty-eight-line poem is composed of heroic couplets, broken up into twenty-four stanzas of varying lengths, and centres around the anguish of Marie Antoinette towards the end of her life. As well as this, the poem ventures into a wider exploration of the injustices of the French Revolution, making numerous digressions spanning entire stanzas. [124] Robinson therefore considers the morality of suffering, and by extension, sympathy within a wider philosophical context.

Unsurprisingly, the *Monody* received mixed reviews, as a result of the politically contentious nature of the subject matter, as well as misogynistic attitudes directed towards both the author and Marie Antoinette. A review in *The Critical Review or the Annals of Literature* asserts that 'the poem's subject, being suggested by a real and striking fact, it is not liable to the censure of vague declamation and unmeaning images, to which some of her [Robinson's] Poems have given occasion' The reviewer also laments that 'We only wish the fair author had confined her praise to the attractions, and

[123] Mary Robinson, 'Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France' in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer, D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009). The poem was also included in her *Poems* 1793. It was then reprinted posthumously in 1806 with a slightly amended title 'Monody to the Memory of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, Written Immediately after her Execution'. Given the temporal distance from the Revolution, perhaps it could be said that the new title reflects the duality of Marie Antoinette's cultural identity. As both a woman and a Queen, this is a complex concept that critics grapple with, even today.

[124] For example from line 42-64 Mary Robinson laments the brutal treatment that Marie Antoinette experiences at the hands of the revolutionaries, then in the following stanza from line 65-90 she describes a mountain stream flowing through a forest and then in the next stanza from line 91-112 she returns to her discussion of revolutionary violence.

her sympathy to the sorrows of Antoinette, without claiming for her the wreath of domestic virtues, without speaking of the wonders of her mind, of her peerless virtues, and enumerating amongst those virtues her truth and sincerity.'[125] It also was noted in *The Annual Review*, that:

> It has sometimes been weakly enough pretended, that the private character of an author signifies nothing to his works; but can it be supposed safe for the herd of readers, that they should remain in doubt whether high-wrought effusions which claim their admiration, their sympathy, even their esteem, for the Queen of France, the Duchess of D[evonshire], [Thomas] Chatterton, and Wert[h]er, proceed from the pen of vice or virtue.[126]

These critiques are directly tied to Robinson's portrayal of Marie Antoinette. By presenting the Queen as a model of moral fortitude, her courage, composure, and loyalty under extreme adversity, Robinson asserts a female perspective on political and ethical judgement, inviting readers to admire and sympathise with Marie Antoinette as a woman. The reviewer's anxiety that the poem's praise might reflect the author's own morality underscores the period's gendered constraints: Robinson's moral authority to evaluate and elevate such a politically and socially scrutinised figure was itself contested. In effect, the review illuminates the risks Robinson faced in positioning Marie Antoinette as a virtuous exemplar; it exposes the tension between her impulse to vindicate female moral and intellectual strength and contemporary expectations that women remain cautious, modest, and deferential in matters of public and political judgement; this is perhaps why Robinson places so much emphasis upon the fact that Marie Antoinette is first and foremost a woman and a mother before anything else. This is similar to what Staël does in the *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* which she signs 'par une femme.'

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[125] 'Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France', *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature* (1794), p.305.
[126] 'The Poetical works of the Late Mrs Mary Robinson' in the *Annual Review* 5 (1806) pp.516-19.



Figure 3: Marchioness de Marnesia, in *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France*, (London: T. Spilsbury and son, 1793).

The *Monody'*s paratextual apparatus includes an engraving of a portrait of Marie Antoinette by the emigrée Marchioness de Marnesia.[127] The publication notices described the image as 'a splendid engraving […] conveying a perfect likeness' of the Queen.'[128] Rather than choosing to use an image where she is dressed in regal finery, Robinson selects a portrait of the Queen at the height of her suffering, shortly before her execution. Though it would have depended upon which portraits the poet had access to,

[127] The Marchioness de Marnesia, Marie Claudine de Nettancourt-Vaubecourt (1746-1794) was a pupil of the miniaturist Jean Baptiste Jacques Augustin (1759 – 1832). Her eulogy in the True Briton describes ' The Marchioness de MARNESIA, an emigrant who enjoyed distinguished rank and affluence in France before the detestable Revolution died last week, at her lodgings in Poland-street. This Lady possessed very great talents in the art of Painting and has left some beautiful specimens of her skill. The delicacy of her frame, agitated by the sad change in the state of her Country was too much for her feelings, which, after a lingering struggle, overcame her to the regret of all who knew her virtues. 'News' in *True Briton*, July 5, 1794 issue 475.

[128] 'Advertisements and Notices' *Star and Evening Advertiser*, 16 Dec. 1793.

Robinson might have chosen an image closer to the infamous Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun painting 'Marie Antoinette en Gaulle' which would have drawn a striking parallel between the two women as Robinson was famed for popularising the *Chemise de la Reine* in England.[129] Hester Davenport describes Robinson wearing the *robe à l'anglaise* (a simple white muslin dress that Marie Antoinette started wearing in the 1770s) to the opera in the autumn of 1782.[130] Davenport points out that 'what made it so startling [was] that it clung to the figure without the support of pads or hoops.'[131] Robinson was accused by the press of making it a 'favourite undress among the fashionable women' in England.[132] Instead, the poet chooses a portrait by a relatively unknown (probably amateur) artist which helps with her aim to portray Marie Antoinette as a tired, long-suffering victim, rather than emphasising her personal fashion-related connection to the Queen. Harriet Guest notes that Robinson 'did of course use her [own] reputation to sell her work and took advantage of the opportunities for the commodification of herself as an author […] her portrait was regularly offered as the frontispiece and portal to collections of her poetry.'[133] For example, Robinson's 1791 volume of *Poems* was issued with a stipple-engraved portrait frontispiece of herself after a likeness by Sir Joshua Reynolds, executed by T. Burke and based on a portrait she had sat for in the early 1780s. In this case, Robinson's use of the image of Marie Antoinette fits in with her own strategy of using portraiture as a means of definition though this time she takes

[129] Robinson would have known of the portrait and it was exhibited in public briefly at the Salon of the Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture in 1783, though it is unclear whether the poet would have had access to an engraving of it when she published the *Monody*.
[130] Hester Davenport, *The Prince's Mistress: a life of Mary Robinson* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p.121.
[131] Ibid..
[132] *Morning Herald*, 20 November 1782.
[133] Harriet Guest, 'Mary Robinson in the Metropolis' in *Unbounded Attachment : Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.68.

the opportunity to capitalise on the polarising contemporary public opinion on Marie Antoinette. Underneath it is noted that

> 'MRS. ROBINSON is extremely happy in having an opportunity of embellishing this Poem with so fine a Resemblance of the QUEEN OF FRANCE, taken from a Portrait by the MARCHIONESS DE MARNESIA, whose exquisitely beautiful Paintings are so much admired and so justly celebrated'.[134]

The author is sure to let the reader know that the choice is deliberate, which further demonstrates her intention to depict Marie Antoinette as a pitiful subject. Also prefacing the poem is a stanza from James Beattie's *The Minstrel; or the Progress of Genius*. Robinson quotes a stanza from Book II of the work:

> TRUE DIGNITY is his, whose tranquil mind
> VIRTUE has rais'd above the things below;
> WHO, ev'ry HOPE and FEAR to HEAV'N resign'd,
> Shrinks not, though FORTUNE aims her deadliest blow.'

Beattie was a Scottish Enlightenment moral philosopher whose poem celebrated natural genius and defended the moral value of feeling. By including these lines Robinson attempts to align her work with Beattie's ideals, setting the stage for a meditation on suffering as a noble and transformative experience, situating her work within the broader late eighteenth-century discourse of sensibility. The epigraph also implies that Marie Antoinette also fulfils Beattie's definition of a person with 'true dignity' indicating Robinson's stance on the Queen's fate before the main poem has even begun.

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[134] 'Monody to the Memory the Late Queen of France,' in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer, D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009) p.410.

Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France is the third time that Robinson had used the form, the first being her 'Monody to the Memory of Chatterton' dedicated to the celebrated Bristol-born poet Thomas Chatterton who is thought to have committed suicide in 1770 at the age of 17, and it was included in her volume *Poems* (1791).[135] Her second, 'Monody to the Memory of Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy' (1792) mourns the loss of her friend and portraitist while exploring themes of mortality and artistic legacy. Just as Robinson felt she had a close personal connection with Reynolds, the same can be said for her relationship with Marie Antoinette. A poem such as Robinson's *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* significantly differs from a political pamphlet in both form and function. Whereas the pamphlet is constructed as an argument, linear, polemical, and designed to persuade, the monody seeks to move rather than convince. Poetry also had a wider reach than pamphlets: verse circulated through periodicals, anthologies, and oral recitation, giving Robinson access to audiences beyond the politically inclined. In the *Monody*, coherence does not come through sustained political reasoning but through the act of mourning itself with emotion conveyed through verse. The poem unfolds through shifting images of Marie Antoinette's suffering, degradation, and remembered splendour. Its apparent incoherence, oscillating between sympathy, accusation, and moral reflection, is precisely the work of grief, which resists neat argument. The poem coheres, then, not as political tract but as affective performance, portraying the complexity of mourning while situating Marie Antoinette in the broader cultural memory.

[135] Chatterton's death inspired a host of elegies long after his death. Significantly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge also wrote his poem 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' aged seventeen, while he was at Christ's Hospital School in 1790, but it was not published until 1794.

As noted in the previous chapter, Miltonic allusion appears frequently throughout Robinson's writing, so it is no stretch to suggest that her choice to write a monody for Marie Antoinette was shaped by *Lycidas* (1638). A monody is traditionally a poem written for a single voice. Milton's monody is an elegy for his friend Edward King. Its epigraph highlights his intentions for the work, informing the reader that, 'In this monody the author bewails a learned friend, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637. And by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height.'[136] Though they held different political beliefs with Milton actually defending Regicide in his book *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), it is noteworthy that, respectively, Milton and Robinson were both writing at particularly tumultuous moments in history, and the connotations of her use of the monody form would have been evident to the attuned reader. Charles I's execution in 1649 dramatised the existential stakes of political authority and the consequences of contested sovereignty. Though *Lycidas* is a pre-civil-war elegy, Milton's later republicanism retroactively casts its moral and formal anxieties in a political light.[137] Andrea Brady notes that 'eighteenth-century imitators regularly attempted to bottle Milton's "melodious tear" commodifying his style while ignoring his prophecy.'[138] Certainly the mournful tone is present in Robinson's *Monody*, but so too is her inherent criticism of contemporary social and political structures. I would suggest that Robinson avoids the trap Brady points out, instead using echoes of Milton's form to draw attention to the urgency of the political situation in France. Such a lament is in itself a political statement. Far from indulging in royalist nostalgia, Robinson channels Milton's lament

[136] John Milton, 'Lycidas', in *Selected Poems* ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2007) p.26.
[137] Justin Clemens, '"Yet Once More": John Milton's *Lycidas* as an Assault on the Ordinary', *Philosophies*, 9.4 (2024), p.131, https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9040131.
[138] Andrea Brady, 'From Grief to Leisure: 'Lycidas' In the Eighteenth Century' in *Modern language Quarterly,* 77.1 (2016), 41–63, p.42, https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-3331586.

while simultaneously adapting it. In doing so she foregrounds the moral paradoxes of her own revolutionary moment, offering the monody as a vessel for urgent ethical and political reflection. Stephen Prickett notes that:

> the Milton that had been adulated by earlier generations of the eighteenth century was a carefully sanitised version; Milton the religious heretic, the social, political and sexual rebel had been tacitly allowed to drop from sight […] the re-invocation of Milton after the French Revolution never lost sight of the fact that his poetry was inescapably bound up with his attack on the political and social status quo.[139]

Fundamentally, this association with Milton is central to Robinson's portrayal of suffering, and her subtle criticism of the misogyny and violence that she viewed as stemming from the French Revolution. Robinson does not attempt to 'sanitise' the political from her poem. She engages with it directly in order to problematise the role of power, while mourning the loss of a figure that she greatly admired.

Marie Antoinette and feminine suffering

For Robinson, Marie Antoinette is undoubtedly the central tragic heroine of the French Revolution. In the *Monody*, she constructs a compelling binary between her protagonist's role as Queen, and as a woman, but the poem also looks back to her girlhood. Robinson would have been aware that Marie Antoinette's mother, the former Holy Roman Empress and Archduchess of Austria, Maria Theresa, had strategically married her off in order to guarantee an alliance with France. This is particularly evident when Robinson describes Marie Antoinette as being, 'Nurs'd in the cradle of IMPERIAL STATE, | HER infant dreams proclaim[ing] a milder fate! (191), euphemistically referring to her later imprisonment and execution. The poet reflects upon her uncertainty about the ethics of the Revolution as she creates a sense of pathos

[139] Stephen Prickett, *England and the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1989) p.139.

for the Queen, and at the same time, she subtly criticises the structures that ultimately result in her downfall. The poet reminisces about 'the dawn of joy that usher'd [Marie Antoinette's] career' (32). When 'all was pleasure, adoration, ease; | For POW'R was temper'd, by the wish to PLEASE' (37-8). Here, Robinson creates tension between the two lines of the couplet as she emphasises the innate potential for catastrophe that is wielded by unmoderated authority. This statement is deliberately vague on Robinson's part as it could imply that Marie Antoinette's temperance was only fleeting, mellowed by her desire to fulfil her duty, or on the other hand perhaps the more convincing interpretation is that she kept the powerful political forces at bay initially by yielding to them. The poem continually returns to this image of Marie Antoinette where she is:

> Too young to play the subtle courtier's part,
> She charm'd all eyes, and gladden'd every heart!
> Too innocent, deceptive wiles to plan!
> (Her pow'r acknowledg'd e'er her reign began) (205-208)

The repetition of 'too' intensifies her virtue as it portrays a sense of gratuitous excess; for Robinson Marie Antoinette is simply a victim and any accusations otherwise are argued away. The poet's emphasis upon this image of the Queen in a state of naïve childhood innocence, though still in a position of power, is vital to her portrayal of her suffering. Here, the brackets imply a shared knowledge between the poet and the reader, almost as a form of dramatic irony. The subtext implies a form of underlying knowledge of Marie Antoinette's power that she is not aware of, perhaps functioning as a form of vindication in that it reveals her virtue. Jerome McGann asserts that:

> Art functions as representation—reflection—and as revelation. Its office is to show and tell, nothing more is required. Part of what it may show and tell are moral realities, but in so far as these come in the form of art, they come as representations and revelations, not as ethical standards or even models.[140]

[140] Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) p.5.

For McGann, art does not prescribe ethics or offer models to follow; it makes moral realities visible by presenting them as experiences to be apprehended. Meaning emerges not through instruction but through imaginative engagement, requiring the reader to witness and interpret rather than be told. In Robinson's case, instead she invites the reader to consider critically the role of power and the ethical consequences of its misuse through her characterisation of Marie Antoinette's youth. Rather than defending her politically, Robinson renders the conditions of the Queen's youth as a scene of innocence The poet therefore relies on the imaginative sympathy of the reader in her poetic project to make the Queen's suffering palpable. The poem's moral emerges from this act of witnessing, as Marie Antoinette's virtuous character and then life of pain reveals, rather than dictates, the stakes of her suffering.

For those who were against Marie Antoinette, her alleged penchant for immorality overshadowed any arguments about her youthful innocence. Adriana Craciun suggests that during the 1790s 'anxiety was focused on the Queen's body, depicted as sexually insatiable, vampyric […] perverse […] bestialized and incestuous.'[141] Robinson works against these unnatural identities, by evoking sympathy for Marie Antoinette and contrasting it with violence. The poet describes 'th'insulting cruelty' (47) of the Revolutionary 'Tyrants – dead to all the feelings NATURE owns' (48) which reinforces the idea that they are disconnected from goodness and the natural order. Furthermore, Robinson seems to emphasise the Rousseauvian idea of état de nature.[142] In spite of the revolutionaries' brutality, Marie Antoinette on the other hand 'sought no plaudits from obsequious pride! | She paid HERSELF – for NATURE was her guide!' (168-173).

[141] Adriana Craciun, 'The aristocracy of genius': Mary Robinson and Marie Antoinette' in *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.78.
[142] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, ed. Heidi Barré-Mérand, and Bertrand Leclair, (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

Having a close relationship with nature offers an instant vindication of the Queen which would have required no explanation or justification to her contemporary readership given that Rousseau's arguments about it being the purest state of being were widely circulating. Katherine Binhammer's observation that Marie Antoinette is seen both as 'a woman unlike others' and 'a woman like every other woman' reflects the conflict between her symbolic role as queen and her private role as a mother.[143] Given that Marie Antoinette was the parent of the future king of France, her role, unlike that of other women, was not entirely private. Throughout the *Monody*, Robinson places a significant emphasis upon Marie Antoinette's innate maternal instincts, and the threat that the Revolution poses to her husband and children in order to evoke sympathy. This is striking as Lynn Hunt points out:

> French queens often attracted considerable attention—usually negative attention [for example Catherine de Medici and Mary Queen of Scots among others]. As in the case of Marie-Antoinette, they were often foreign and frequently portrayed as evil influences. They never seemed to qualify as mothers of the people.[144]

Given that in many anti-monarchical circles Marie Antoinette was referred to as *L'Autrichienne*, which insists on her non-Frenchness, it is perhaps unsurprising that she was viewed as an other figure, and most certainly not a 'mother of the people'. Robinson does her best to rectify this in the *Monody*. In 1793 Marie Antoinette's children were no longer infants, yet the poet describes them as though they were still babes at their mother's breast, being dragged away: she refers to the tyrannical forces who 'tore the pale darlings from thy panting breast | And made MATERNAL woes the rabble's jest (49-51).' Upon first glance, this would seem like a comment upon the

[143] Katherine Binhammer, '"Marie Antoinette Was "One of Us"": British Accounts of the Martyred Wicked Queen', *The Eighteenth Century*, 44.2/3 (2003), 233–55.
[144] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.89, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315003306.

discordancy between Marie Antoinette's public and private persona. However, there are wider philosophical issues at stake here that Robinson engages with in order to exonerate the queen and present her as an ideal mother; she is not a political manipulator she is simply a woman. This is an idea that we have seen before in 'Marie Antoinette's Lamentation' where she writes:

> Think on the GLORIOUS TIDE that fills each VEIN,
> And throbbing bids ME tremble not, TO DIE!
> YET, shall I from my FRIENDLESS CHILDREN part?
> 'Oh! all the MOTHER RUSHES TO MY HEART '(63-6)

The 'GLORIOUS TIDE' that 'fills each VEIN' figures her attachment to her children as a form of vital circulation, suggesting that maternity is not merely an emotional state but a physiological condition, bound up with blood, bodily sensation and being itself. In this formulation, Marie Antoinette's identity as mother precedes and exceeds her political identity as queen, rendering her suffering immediate and irreducible. The threatened separation from her children becomes a form of corporeal rupture, as though the life force that sustains her were itself under assault. Robinson thus reframes the queen through the language of embodied sensibility, insisting upon a maternal subjectivity that resists abstraction and exposes the violence of a revolutionary discourse that denies the legitimacy of such feeling.

In the 1790s, Rousseau's ideas continued to circulate. In *Émile, ou de l'éducation* (1762), he considers the role and ethics of breastfeeding and wet nursing, the practice of having one's baby breastfed by another, often lower-class woman. He ponders, 'Celle qui nourrit l'enfant d'une autre au lieu du sien est une mauvaise mère ; comment sera-t-elle une bonne nourrice?'[145] Marie Antoinette did not breastfeed her

[145] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation* ed. André Charrak (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p.14.

children and as Antonia Fraser notes after the birth of Louis 'there was no talk […] of the Queen nursing him.'[146] Given her status, this is unsurprising. Though, in presenting Marie Antoinette's children at her 'panting breast', Robinson dramatises the physical and emotional strength of the Queen's care. The image captures her bodily exhaustion and the anxiety of sustaining her children amid imprisonment, while the revolutionaries' attempts to remove them underscore the violent severing of maternal bonds. Laura Brace argues that for Rousseau, 'Breastfeeding […] reflected a natural sentiment that could be guided by reason and modified by pity to become a virtue. [147] Though Robinson's personal views on breastfeeding are unknown, she was well versed in his philosophy. Therefore Robinson is playing upon these ideas to evoke sympathy for the Queen's position as a mother like anyone else. As Catriona Seth notes 'friend, wife and mother, she suffered in all these roles, roles with which any woman could identify more easily than with that of the queen. The considerable trauma she underwent suggests a proximity with other suffering figures like the *Mater dolorosa*.'[148] Indeed, this domestic projection is also part of Robinson's strategy for her portrayal of the Queen. In the *Monody*, Marie Antoinette's anguish is transformative as the poet turns her from political target into a figure of sacred endurance, which is further emphasised by lines such as 'Then JUSTICE shall the dreary spot illume, | Where PITY lingers on the MARTYR'S tomb' (7-8). Therefore, the Queen's private pain evokes a certain degree of universal sympathy which would have especially resonated with Robinson's female readership. It is also significant that during this period, following the etymology, 'martyr' was used to refer to one who bore witness to something. Samuel Johnson

[146] Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), p.179.
[147] Laura Brace, 'Rousseau, Maternity and the Politics of Emptiness', in *Polity*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2007, 361–83, p.364.
[148] Catriona Seth, 'Germaine de Staël and Marie-Antoinette', in *Germaine de Staël: Forging a Politics of Mediation*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011).

defines the martyr as 'One who by his death bears witness to the truth.'[149] Martyrdom thus becomes inseparable from witnessing: the Queen's pain does not instruct or persuade, but renders injustice visible, demanding recognition from the reader who is positioned as the ultimate witness. This produces a subtle slippage, as the reader witnesses the witness, compelling them to confront the suffering directly while also recognising their own role in observing it, and thereby heightening the moral urgency of the poem without offering solace.

In the *Monody*, Robinson intertwines figurative representations of familial structures with the concrete details of Marie Antoinette's victimisation, using these images to expose the corruptive and catastrophic effects of the Revolution. At times, she abstracts the family unit from its domestic context, transforming it into a symbol of societal breakdown. The poet describes a vision of chaos and destruction writing that:

> While, in one horrid mass, ALL miseries blend;
> Each shuns his BROTHER, and each fears his FRIEND!
> The SON, with blood-stain'd faulchion, strikes the SIRE!
> The PARENT smiles, to see the SON expire! (103-106)

The poetic focus is transferred away from Marie Antoinette to reflect upon the broader implications of subversive morality. These relationships are unnatural which help to portray Marie Antoinette's superiority and the broader implications of the Revolution's perversity. This unsettling image of the family dynamic is exacerbated by the rigorous couplets that create a sense of unyielding movement within the poem as the lines feel almost like a list based upon cause and effect to depict a latent issue – violence leads to suffering, and by extension invites sympathy and morality. Robinson is also critical of those who accuse Marie Antoinette herself of impure moral subversion. Robinson

[149] 'martyr, n.s.', *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson, 1773, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/martyr_ns, [Accessed 2026/01/18].

exclaims 'SHUNN'D be the FIEND, who, in these dreadful times, | Would brand HER mem'ry with INFERNAL CRIMES!' (177-8) It would seem logical to suggest that the accusations of incest levied against Marie Antoinette by her own son during her trial and spread by the revolutionaries are the 'infernal crimes' and is unsurprising that Robinson attempts to rehabilitate the Queen's image as an innocent mother throughout her Marie Antoinette poems.[150] Clare Marrone asserts that:

> As one moves beyond the exaggerated accusations and outright fabrications which became part and parcel of Marie Antoinette's image during her lifetime and beyond, one sees that the core of these criticisms centered on topics dear to feminists old and new: women's activity in the public sphere, role in the family, and sexuality.[151]

Such charges reveal how Marie Antoinette's image was manipulated to attack not only her political authority but also her maternal identity, striking at the very core of eighteenth-century ideals of womanhood. The revolutionary press, fuelled by misogyny, repeatedly cast her as a monstrous mother whose alleged incest with the Dauphin epitomised corruption, echoing wider efforts to expel women from political life, from the suppression of female clubs to the execution of Olympe de Gouges. In the *Monody* Robinson counters this vilification by sanctifying Marie Antoinette's maternal role, presenting her not as a corrupted mother but as a figure of innocent suffering whose grief and dignity further expose the cruelty of revolutionary misogyny.

Robinson uses similar language to Milton's narrative of the Fall to describe the events that preceded the Queen's downfall. She implies that Marie Antoinette's

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[150] In the 'Lamentation', for example, embodying the persona of the queen, she describes the 'MATERNAL SORROWS' (28) that she feels when her children 'ope their eyes to gaze on ME | And fondly press me in their dear embrace' (25-26).
This may also be a reference to the anti-Marie Antoinette text attributed to Louis Marie Prudhomme, *Les crimes des reines de France, depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'a Marie-Antoinette* (London: n.p., 1792) https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64385236.

[151] Claire Marrone, 'Women Writing Marie Antoinette: Madame de Staël and George Sand', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 94 (2011), 113–22, p.113 http://www.jstor.org/stable/41705588.

suffering, much like Eve's, is not only the result of personal betrayal but also a consequence of the corrupting forces around her, echoing her earlier discussion of the Queen's childhood innocence. The poet writes that Marie Antoinette:

> trod the flow'ry paths of bliss supreme;
> Delight her guide, and gratitude her theme!
> Till, 'midst its sweets, the SERPENT, ENVY, grew,
> Hating her charms, and sick'ning at their view! (217-220)

The serpent, here equated with envy, externalises the corrupting influences that surround Marie Antoinette, suggesting that her suffering is not purely the result of personal failings but is also determined by the hostile structures of court and society. This aligns with a broader preordination of suffering: just as Eve's fall is framed by divine and external pressures, the Queen's happiness in Versailles is inherently fragile, subject to forces beyond her control. As she walks the 'flow'ry paths' of Eden, or in the Queen's case, Versailles, her happiness is tainted by the serpent which acts as a metaphor for the external factors that ultimately lead to her demise. The diction here is distinctly Miltonic. For example in *Paradise Lost*, the poet describes the moment:

> Eve separate [Satan] spies,
> Veiled in a cloud of fragrance, where she stood,
> Half spied, so thick the roses bushing round
> About her glowed (*PL,* XI, 424-6)

By employing a similar style in the Monody, with its elevated tone, archaic syntax, and moralised imagery, Robinson lends the Queen's suffering a preordained quality, transforming her death from a political downfall into a spectacle of moral exemplarity. Just as with the blind figure in 'Sight,' Robinson situates Marie Antoinette's personal suffering within a Miltonic cosmological framework, portraying it as the product not only of immediate betrayal but of external forces beyond her control. Moreover, the contrast between presenting Marie Antoinette as both the Madonna in her innate

maternity, and Eve in her transgressions would not have gone unnoticed by the eighteenth-century reader. Robinson elevates Marie Antoinette's suffering, framing it as not just an individual tragedy but a reflection of moral failings that resonate beyond her personal fate. As a Queen, she is both a symbol as well as an individual but Robinson's portrayal of Marie Antoinette as a wife and mother is central to her evocation of sympathy for her. Robinson presents a form of feminine suffering (different from male suffering which would often be depicted as courageous or patriotic), that her contemporary readers could recognise and respond to, positioning her sorrow as morally and socially meaningful within the gendered expectations of the period.

Tears and Sensibility

James Averill describes 'the tears that flow like a great river through late-eighteenth-century literature' reflecting upon their prolific presence and their relationship to suffering.[152] Throughout the *Monody*, tears serve as a literal representation of profound pain and sadness, they also fulfil a metaphorical function thanks to their role within the cult of sensibility. For Robinson, the tear is a multifaceted symbol. Specifically the poet uses frequent images of tears to portray Marie Antoinette as a tragic figure deserving of sympathy. Robinson emphasises that the tears shed for Marie Antoinette were not just as an emotional response, but a moral act. The poet exclaims, 'Who can reflect, nor drop the tenderest tear | On the dread progress of thy fate severe!' (43-4) Here, Robinson demonstrates her own capacity for sympathy as she rhetorically considers her emotional response to the Queen's fate. She invites readers, no matter their politics, to recognise Marie Antoinette's tragic fall from 'the LOFTIEST

[152] James Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (New York; Cornell University Press, 1980), p.24.

height of human BLISS | TO the WORST horrors of Despair's abyss!' (45-6) as something that should elicit sympathy. Robinson was not alone in her desire to depict Marie Antoinette from this angle. For example in Germaine de Staël's anonymous 1793 pamphlet, published before the Queen's execution, *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine*, she tells the women of France that:

> [L]a destinée de Marie-Antoinette contient tout ce qui peut toucher votre cœur : si vous êtes heureuses, elle l'a été ; si vous souffrez, depuis un an, depuis plus longtemps encore toutes les peines de la vie ont déchiré son cœur ; si vous êtes sensibles, si vous êtes mères, elle a aimé de toutes les puissances de l'âme ; et l'existence a pour elle encore le prix qu'elle conserve, tant qu'il peut nous rester des objets qui nous sont chers.[153]

Staël invites her female readers to identify with the Queen's suffering, emphasising their potential shared experiences. She presents it as both recognisable and morally instructive, linking private pain to broader reflections on human feeling. Robinson also uses this strategy, though she directs it at a broader audience in the *Impartial Reflections:*

> THERE is not a doubt that all good men, whatever their political sentiments may be, feel deeply interested in the fate of the captive Queen. Every impartial eye has a tear for her sufferings and looks forward with eager solicitude to a DECISION, that, it is to be hoped for the honour of human nature, will add dignity to the French nation, and stamp immortal celebrity on the WISDOM, VIRTUE and JUDGMENT of the NATIONAL ASSEMBLY.[154]

As Catriona Seth argues, Staël 'considered her attempt at saving Marie-Antoinette as a triple defeat: a defeat for words, for women, for liberty.'[155] The same could be said for Robinson, as by the end of the *Impartial Reflections,* as in the *Monody*, she presents the

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[153] Germaine de Staël, *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine par une femme* (Paris: n.p., 1793), p.6.
The destiny of Marie Antoinette contains everything that can touch your heart: if you are happy, she was happy; if you have been suffering for a year, or even longer, all the sorrows of life tore her heart apart; if you are sensitive, if you are mothers, she loved with all the power of her soul; and existence still has the value for her, as it does for us so long as we still have things that are dear to us. (my translation)
[154] 'A letter to the women of England' in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer, D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009) Part II, Vol. 8, (p.128).
[155] Catriona Seth, 'Germaine de Staël and Marie-Antoinette', in *Germaine de Staël: Forging a Politics of Mediation*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011), p.62.

queen's fate as unavoidable: a convergence of personal, gendered, and political misfortune which has consequences for all women. In doing so, the poet demonstrates how female voices that attempted to rehabilitate Marie Antoinette were themselves constrained by the misogynistic discourse of the Revolution. Robert Brissenden argues that 'the sentimental tribute of a tear exacted by the spectacle of virtue in distress was an acknowledgement at once of man's inherent goodness and of the impossibility of his ever being able to demonstrate his goodness effectively.'[156] Tears do not merely represent sorrow; they also embody a recognition of human virtue. However, from Brissenden's perspective they also reflect a deeper, bittersweet truth that while humans may possess goodness, they are often powerless to act on it in the face of overwhelming adversity. In the *Monody*, the Queen's tragic fall is a spectacle designed to elicit a tear that symbolises the reader's inherent compassion, although such tears reflect an acknowledgment of human goodness that, while genuine, cannot be fully demonstrated or acted upon in the face of such immense tragedy.

In the second stanza of the *Monody*, Robinson introduces a tearful wandering 'HOLY' (13) exile who fled the Revolution. Although he has endured hardship, and is described as 'sad, forlorn, a stranger to repose,' he finds solace in 'Celestial Faith' and 'ETERNAL DAY.' Rather than dwelling on his own misfortunes as an émigré, the 'pious sufferer' 'only WEEPS' for Marie Antoinette's pain' (20). We are therefore also implicitly invited to align ourselves with this holy individual as his 'pious' response is positioned as not only moral, but aspirational. Robinson seems to adopt this traditional sentimental formula, positioning Marie Antoinette's suffering not just as a personal tragedy but as a catalyst for the reader's imaginative sympathy. The Queen's pain

[156] Robert Brissenden, V*irtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.29.

becomes not just a historical or political event, but a moral spectacle, where the emotional response, the tear, signals the moral engagement of the reader. In this way, Robinson uses the Queen's suffering to invoke a deeper sympathy, one that aligns with the ideals of sensibility. Differing from those shed for personal grief, these tears signify an elevated form of compassion, valuing outward-facing sympathy.

Robinson's portrayal of Marie Antoinette's own tears is vitally important to her characterisation as both a victim but also a moral figure as they are emblematic of her suffering. In contrast to the *Monody*, her earlier work 'Marie Antoinette's Lamentation' is written from the perspective of the Queen herself and described as 'A dreadful record – WRITTEN WITH MY TEARS!' (6) At this stage in March 1793, Marie Antoinette is still alive but widowed, as Louis was executed in January earlier that year. The Queen's emotional state is much more woeful in this poem as Robinson reflects on Marie Antoinette's immense loss. She informs the reader that she, in the persona of the French Queen, is weeping 'because inhuman hands unite, | To tear from my fond soul ITS LAST DELIGHT!' ('Lamentation' 28-30). The dual meaning of 'tear' here cannot be overlooked as she is both torn away from her family and also sheds tears as a result of her emotional turmoil. On the other hand, in the *Monody*, Robinson subverts this conventional image of tears as mere symbols of victimhood by depicting Marie Antoinette's stoic resilience towards 'the tortures of [the revolutionaries'] direful plan' (61). She writes, 'Not all the rage of HELL'S abhorr'd decree | Could force one SUPPLICATING TEAR from THEE!' (63-4) Here, the absence of tears becomes a demonstration of the Queen's strength suggesting a morality rooted not in emotional release, but in dignified endurance. The tear is transformed from a weak symbol of suffering into one of noble strength, reframing Marie Antoinette's pain as morally

elevating as she does not beg for mercy from the unworthy revolutionaries. Robinson presents this fortitude as a different kind of morality, where restraint and resilience are also worth celebrating.

Celestial imagery and the Sublime

There are moments in Robinson's writing that share striking parallels with both Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), though she initially disagreed with his anti-revolutionary sentiments set out in the latter. Daniel Robinson asserts that due to their shared sympathy for Marie Antoinette, Robinson had an 'uneasy alliance with Burke's *Reflections*.'[157] She was certainly familiar with Burke's arguments as her poem *Ainsi va le Monde* (1790) responded to Robert Merry's The *Laurel of Liberty* (1790) which in turn was a reaction to the *Reflections*. [158] The parallels between Burke's description of entering Marie Antoinette's bedroom in his *Reflections* and Robinson's depiction of being assailed by a group of men on her sickbed in her *Memoirs* have been noted.[159] As well as this, there is a broader intellectual and stylistic affinity with Burke in the *Monody,* despite their differing politics. He casts his mind back to a more peaceful time:

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[157] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p.96.

[158] 'History will record, that on the morning of the 6th of October 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite, and troubled melancholy repose. From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the centinel at her door, who cried out to her, to save herself by flight—that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give—that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.' from Edmund Burke*, Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L. G. Mitchell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.71.

[159] See Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 20.

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what an heart must I have, too.[160]

For Burke, this image helps to reflect the catastrophic dimensions of the Queen's fall from grace. Robinson alludes to this starry metaphor writing in the same exclamatory tone 'OH! I have seen her like a SUN, Sublime!' (58) She was once ethereal, existing beyond the realms of human comprehension and by Burke and, it would seem Robinson's, definition, she is presented as something infinite. It is therefore unsurprising that contemporary reviews, after the poem's publication in 1793, also link the *Monody* to Burke's *Reflections*. *The Critical Review* suggests that in the poem, 'the portrait of the Queen of France, at the time when she charmed all eyes and gladdened every heart, may be considered as a kind of paraphrase on Mr. Burke's celebrated eulogium.'[161] Robinson goes beyond mere depiction of suffering, using celestial imagery to elevate her subject's pain to a broader, metaphysical realm.

Anikó Hankovszky suggests that for Burke, 'possibly the most significant affections, such as the feeling of the sublime and dreadfulness, are expressed by indefinable yet powerfully obscure images mediated by words.'[162] The Queen's death is not only a personal tragedy for Robinson, but a cosmic event, as she transforms it into something otherworldly. She describes how 'Those eyes! Like SAPPHIRE gems were wont to shine; | Bright beaming samples of their NATIVE MINE!' (151-2). The tragedy

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[160] Edmund Burke*, Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L. G. Mitchell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.76.
[161] 'Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France', *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 10 (1794), 304–06 (p.305).
[162] Aniko Hankovszky, 'The Aesthetics of Catastrophe – Edmund Burke on Sympathy' in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises,* ed. by Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 251-262 (p.253).

euphemistically manifests itself within the discernible universe as Robinson transposes it beyond bodily human experience and into the realm of the sublime. She writes:

> Yet, as the tempest threaten'd their abode,
> A stream celestial from their radiance flow'd!
> Like setting STARS, they left their humid spheres,
> And their last fainting lustre gleam'd through TEARS! (155-158)

Here, the use of celestial metaphor highlights the Queen's elevation beyond earthly concerns reflecting the convention of apotheosis, the literary or artistic elevation of a figure to divine or heroic status, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. But this also contrasts with Burke's vision of monarchy. Despite their shared reliance upon starry metaphor, the contrast between Burke and Robinson's portrayal of the French Queen is palpable. Burke sees the Monarch in a vision-like moment which occurs years before the tumult of the revolution, whereas Robinson subverts the starry image in the wake of the Terror in order to concretise Marie Antoinette's suffering. The poet centres her portrayal upon the physical body, specifically the eyes as she describes the tears that leave 'their humid spheres' as they close in the 'sleep of Death!' (153) Jessica Goodman argues that 'unlike at the revolutionary tribunals at which [women such as Marie Antoinette] were tried in life, the physical body is entirely missing in the afterlife: we might imagine these executed women as either disembodied heads, or mere formless spirits or ideas.[163] Robinson's depiction is unusual in this respect as she challenges this abstraction by blending the physical with the transcendental. She offers an image of the Queen's suffering that remains grounded in both the body and the sublime. In doing so, Robinson transforms individual anguish into a broader ethical and aesthetic encounter. The Queen's anguish becomes both an intimate, sensory experience

[163] Jessica Goodman, 'Talking Heads? Guillotined Women in the Revolutionary Afterlife', in *French Studies*, 76.3 (2022), 350–65 (p.362).

and a morally and metaphysically charged spectacle, prompting the reader to reflect on the nature of injustice and the vulnerability of human life. Suffering is presented not only as personal torment but also as emblematic of the destructive forces of power and social upheaval, reinforcing the ethical and affective weight of the poem.

Captivity

Let us now turn to Robinson's depiction of the French Queen in captivity. Artistic and literary representations of the imprisoned Marie Antoinette were frequently circulated, and Robinson centres on this image in numerous poems.[164] Early on in the *Monody*, relying on conventional gothic tropes, she describes Marie Antoinette 'On a straw pallet, in a dungeon laid – | By ALL suspected and by ALL betray'd!' (57-58) As Guest notes, the poet's emphasis on the 'lurid perils' of imprisonment is notable, but Robinson simultaneously considers the irredeemably tragic nature of the situation, emphasising that the Queen is both physically and socially trapped. [165] A particularly elaborate, though somewhat ambiguous scene depicting Marie Antoinette's captivity occurs when Robinson imagines an exchange between the Queen and a robin. The poet frequently wrote about birds, particularly in her early Della Cruscan works. For instance, 'The Linnet's Petition' which was published in her 1775 poetry collection is full of classic sentimental tropes and directly parallels Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 'The Mouse's Petition' (1773) as both creatures plead for their freedom. In the *Monody*, Robinson reverses the power dynamic seen in these poems as Marie Antoinette watches while:

> Upon the iron window's triple grate,
> The chirping RED-BREAST hails his freezing mate;

[164] See for example, 'A Fragment Supposed to be Written near the Temple, At Paris, On the night before the execution of Louis XVI' and 'Marie Antoinette's Lamentation In her Prison of the Temple'.
[165] Harriet Guest, 'Mary Robinson in the Metropolis' in *Unbounded Attachment : Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.56.

Spreads his weak wing, to meet the SUN'S faint ray,
And sweetly twitters forth his matin lay: (351-354)

The aural and visual elements here stand in stark contrast, emphasising the Queen's vulnerability. The robin's song, with its 'chirping' call and quasi-religious 'matin lay,' offers a brief moment of beauty and freedom against the harshness of the prison's 'iron window's triple grate.' This fleeting relief in the face of imprisonment could be seen as evidence of Marie Antoinette's spiritual communion with nature as she awaits death, reinforcing her moral sensibility. Yet Robinson's depiction of the robin with a 'weak wing' (351) complicates this image. The bird is not a straightforward symbol of liberty, but one that is itself diminished by the environment. The 'freezing mate' and the 'faint ray' of the sun may also carry political significance. Marie Antoinette, once the radiant symbol of French royalty, is now depicted as losing her connection to the natural world. The 'freezing mate' could symbolise the Queen's own isolation—her 'mate' (Louis XVI) is no longer by her side, and like the sun's 'faint ray,' the power of the monarchy is in decline. Furthermore, Robinson's use of images such as the sun seems to deliberately evoke the lost splendour of the French court of the Sun King. Once associated with the power of the French monarchy, sunlight is now 'faint,' mirroring the waning strength of the Royal Family and the robin, though still in flight, is also incapacitated, presenting a somewhat hopeless image.

Robinson reflects upon the emotional torment of Marie Antoinette's imprisonment as the image of the robin highlights the cruel contrast between the Queen's captivity and the bird's freedom. As she watches the robin, Marie Antoinette envies its liberty, lamenting her own plight. Robinson writes:

While the FAIR VICTIM of supreme despair
Beholds the free-born commoners of air

Envies their happy lot, and feebly cries,
Ye little harmless trav'llers of the skies,
Why quit your leafy bow'rs, your verdant plains,
And wing your flight to Mis'ry's dread domains? (355-60)

It is significant that Robinson uses language typical of the Revolution to refer to the robin using loaded class-based descriptions such as 'free-born commoners.' The bird no longer is positioned as an equal to Marie Antoinette – it is able to escape. Its freedom, even as a 'commoner' serves to exacerbate the suffering of the Queen and the reader can only feel sympathy as, despite her royal status, she remains trapped and powerless within 'Mis'ry's dread domains.' Despite this, there is a more positive element to Robinson's depiction of Marie Antoinette and the bird; though in captivity, the natural world has not totally abandoned her. The Queen is portrayed as moral as she can still feel compassion for the robin. In this way, both Robinson and the reader become spectators of suffering—trapped in the same cycle of observation and helplessness. This moment, steeped in sentimental tradition, presents Marie Antoinette as a figure of sensibility, able to connect with the natural world despite her own pain and suffering. Her compassion for the robin contrasts with the cruelty of her political circumstances, aligning with Robinson's broader themes of sympathy. As Brissenden rightly notes, 'The theme of virtue in distress for instance, and the figure of the powerless but well-intentioned observer, the helpless man of sentiment, have an immediate eighteenth-century relevance: the image of the suffering heroine at the mercy both of her own delicate sensibilities and the cruel world is a potent symbol of moral uneasiness and dejection.[166] In the case of the *Monody*, it would seem that Robinson is positioning the reader as the 'helpless man of sentiment' which evokes a sense of imaginative sympathy.

[166] Robert Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.155.

It is also possible that the poet's description of Marie Antoinette's interaction with the robin contains allusions to Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). In this popular eighteenth-century novel, Sterne describes a moment where his protagonist Yorick tries in vain to rescue a caged bird after hearing its cries to 'get out' while attempting to acquire a passport in Paris. He declares:

> I vow I never had my affections more tenderly awakened; nor do I remember an incident in my life, where the dissipated spirits, to which my reason had been a bubble, were so suddenly call'd home. Mechanical as the notes were, yet so true in tune to nature were they chanted, that in one moment they overthrew all my systematic reasonings upon the Bastille; and I heavily walked upstairs, unsaying every word I had said in going down them.[167]

This moment exemplifies the power of sensibility, where raw emotional reaction overrides intellectual reasoning. Sterne ironically invokes the royal prison of the Bastille to dramatise Yorick's excessive sentimental response, juxtaposing a site of real political suffering with the triviality of his emotions. Perhaps more pertinently, Sterne's description of the bird's plight as a catalyst for moral reflection resonates with Robinson's depiction of Marie Antoinette, where the Queen's suffering similarly awakens a deep, sympathetic response from the reader. Although Marie Antoinette was never held in the Bastille (she was imprisoned in the Temple and then in the Conciergerie), it had long served as the most notorious emblem of tyranny and carceral suffering in France. By alluding to this moment from *A Sentimental Journey*, the *Monody* frames Marie Antoinette's captivity within a wider architecture of oppression, much as Sterne evokes the Bastille as a space that overwhelms rationality and even awakens sympathy. Jim Owen suggests that that the plight of the caged bird in Sterne's work represents a broader existential condition:

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[167] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.57.

> The bleakness of this world occasionally gives way to moments of human communion which result from sudden sparks of sympathy […] The caged bird's plight suggests that such moments might be impossible. Without the ability to reach out sympathetically or imaginatively to others, each of us would be like the caged starling, enclosed within the prisons of ourselves, unable to 'get out'.[168]

In the *Monody*, there is also a sense, or one could even go as far as to say accusation, of responsibility directed at the reader, who, like Yorick, lacks the agency that they need in order to rescue the trapped creature. At the same time, the poet herself is not exempt from this charge, for in recording the scene she too is caught between the imperatives of witness and the dangers of aestheticising another's suffering. In the penultimate stanza, Robinson returns to the bird metaphor but layers it with additional symbolic weight:

> Let not the poison of a REPTILE'S sting
> Contaminate the lustre of THY wing!
> But from each flaming plume indulgent give
> A pitying ray, to bid the INSECTS LIVE (ll. 519–22)

Robinson deliberately stacks imagery she has used throughout the poem, including reptiles, serpents, flaming plumes, and rays of light, to intensify the portrayal of Marie Antoinette's suffering. The 'REPTILE'S sting' once again evokes both revolutionary slander and the Edenic serpent, while the 'flaming plume' and 'pitying ray' recall earlier motifs of moral and aesthetic redemption. By combining these images, Robinson heightens the emotional and ethical stakes, presenting the Queen's grief as both overwhelming and morally resonant. In doing so, she simultaneously channels the Burkean sublime, as Marie Antoinette's endurance and maternal pity inspire a mixture of terror and admiration, emphasising the power of heightened feeling while also signalling the limits of human agency in the face of relentless suffering.

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[168] Jim Owen, 'Laurence Sterne and the Caged Starling of *A Sentimental Journey*', in *CEA Critic*, 64.2 (2002), 22–34, p. 26.

Wider revolutionary forces

The forces that victimise Marie Antoinette are, for Robinson, the fundamental cause of both the Revolution's brutality and the broader suffering it engenders. One of the main examples of this is when Robinson sets up poetic tension between images of Enlightenment reason and idiocy in order to illustrate the potency of the ignorant revolutionaries. Drawing a parallel with Alexander Pope's description of the goddess Dulness in *The Dunciad* (1743) where, 'Beneath her foot-stool, Science groans in Chains, | And wit dreads Exile, Penalties and Pains'[169] (21-2), in the *Monody*, Robinson writes that:

> The lawless IDIOT lifts his ruthless arm
> To tear from SCIENCE every graceful charm
> While GENIUS from the madd'ning tumult flies,
> Weeps o'er her WITH'RING BAYS and SEEKS the SKIES (109-12)

Though, as we have seen, weeping and tears are an important part of the sentimental tradition, what is especially important in this stanza is the flight of 'Genius' which is a recurring motif in Robinson's poetry. In 'The Cavern of Woe' published just a few months before the *Monody*, it is 'Reason' that takes flight:

> ALL LESSER FIENDS their heads in sorrow hung;
> OMNIPOTENT IN ILL, [Ingratitude] grasp'd th'INFERNAL THRONE!
> Then REASON mark'd her blest ASSOCIATE fly ;
> And shudd'ring at the SCENE, RESOUGHT HER NATIVE SKY! (141-146)

This theme is certainly a preoccupation of Robinson's and the exodus of both Genius and Reason represents the collapse of rational thought and ethical boundaries under the overwhelming influence of violent emotion. Robinson critiques the chaotic and destructive power of boundless feeling and passion, which is a direct result of the

[169] Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad* in Four Books ed. Valerie Rumbold (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p.275.

emotional extremes that often characterise the sentimental tradition. In the *Monody*, the poet specifically addresses France as a whole, writing:

> Such is thy lot, O GALLIA! Such the RAGE
> that blurs, with crimson spots, fair NATURE's page!
> That leaps the bounds of REASON and destroys
> The law's strong barrier, and the subject's joys! (91-4)

Garnai suggests that 'Robinson's representations of the French Queen exemplify her focus on the existential condition even as it is embedded in a narrative of political currency.'[170] The poet's sympathy for the French nation as a whole is palpable as the tone of this address reflects a sense of finality. Here there is also a sense that perhaps Robinson is sympathising with the anger of the Republicans, though she implies that it has exceeded the limits of righteousness. The 'crimson' blood spatter obscures the natural order and lends the image a corporeal quality. In this way, Robinson's preoccupation with fleeing intellect and reason suggests that the qualities which sentimentalism holds up as virtuous; sympathy and sensibility can themselves become dangerous when they overwhelm reason and lead to immorality. Therefore, Robinson presents a paradox: while the sentimental tradition calls for deep sympathy, the poet also warns of the damaging potential when these feelings are unchecked by reason or guided by political violence. This also complicates any simple appeal to 'reason', for reason was also the rhetoric of revolution; Thomas Paine, for example, mobilised appeals to reason in support of radical political change.[171]

The poet's portrayal of violence under the guise of the Revolution is further developed through the personified abstraction of Liberty. Robinson relies upon the

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[170] Amy Garnai, '"One Victim from Last Despair": Mary Robinson's Marie Antoinette', in *Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period,* 12.3 (2005), 381–98 (p.382).
[171] See for example. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, ed. by Claire Grogan, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2011).

ferocity and brutality of her characterisation to demonstrate contradictory definitions of freedom during the period. She writes:

> All smear'd with GORE, pale LIBERTY appears,
> Her smiles contending with repentant tears;
> No more her hand fair flow'rets scatters round;
> Her faulchion steams from many a recent wound: (377-80)

Here, Robinson provides the reader with an image of 'Liberty' unleashed, though it has been subverted. Hankovszky argues that during the 'revolution the new language dispossesses concrete beings from their identity, altering meanings and references – as the expression of 'liberty' does not refer to the same as before, the revolution changes the sense of 'reason' and 'property' as well.[172] Certainly, for Robinson, conceptions of liberty find themselves rooted in abstraction and poetic imagery rather than in concrete terms, though violence is certainly concrete and indiscriminate while it wields its transgressive power. Barbara Stafford writes that:

> It is also through metaphors that unclear emotions and mixed experiences – disdained by a rationalist philosophy – can be configured in a way that is unattainable through bodiless concepts […]. Rhetorical or dialogically communicative and unifying they call on the beholder to combine and synthesise experiences that analysis has fragmented or dissected.[173]

In Robinson's poem, the idea of liberty is both an embodied and disembodied concept. The poet demonstrates that the Revolution's initial promise of freedom becomes paradoxical: as a physical force, liberty is a destructive agent, but as an abstract ideal, it remains an unattainable, hollow concept. The literal personification of liberty serves as a reminder of how revolutionary power can physically manifest as violence, while its intangibility calls attention to the ways in which the idea of it has been distorted. In

[172] Aniko Hankovszky, 'The Aesthetics of Catastrophe – Edmund Burke on Sympathy', in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. by Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 251–262, p. 256.
[173] Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the unseen in Enlightenment art and medicine*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p.3.

using the personified abstraction as a way of representing the usurped definition of liberty, she is able to present a sense of universal suffering as any hope of freedom in the traditional sense has been 'fragmented.' From this perspective, metaphors have the capacity to represent complex and ambiguous emotions or experiences so in portraying liberty in direct opposition to the virtuous and moral nature of Marie Antoinette, Robinson is able to draw the reader's attention to the immoral direction that the Revolution had taken and by consequence, its brutal potential to induce suffering.

Consolation

Throughout the poem Robinson evokes a world seemingly without redemption other than at certain fleeting moments of relief. For the poet, this presentation is not merely a reflection of the tragic demise of Marie Antoinette but an exploration of political ideas, which are sometimes rooted in the expression of moral sentiments, and at other moments depicted in abstraction. Marilyn Butler suggests that 'analysing polemical prose will include identifying the author's self-characterisation (sane, tolerant, public-spirited, harmless), and noting [her] devices […] and then considering how the persona and the devices function on behalf of his chosen cause.'[174] In texts such as *Impartial Reflections* and *A Letter to the Women of England*, Robinson carefully constructs a public persona whose moral and affective credibility underpins her political argument. This technique equally informs her polemical poetry, where the interplay of sentiment and reason allows her to critique social and political injustices while cultivating an ethically authoritative voice. In the *Monody*, Robinson is not casting herself as Marie Antoinette. Rather, she positions herself, like the reader, as someone

[174] Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.16.

who is bearing witness to profound atrocities and responding to them as anyone, in her view, should. Through this approach, Robinson crafts a meditation on the power of suffering and the enduring questions of sympathy and moral reflection. She also attempts to elicit a sympathetic response to the Queen's anguish while simultaneously examining the boundaries of consolation and the implications of moral sentiment. Her declaration, 'And DEATH, DEATH ONLY, ends the REIGN OF GRIEF!' (369) reflects the elusive nature of consolation as it would diminish both the Queen's suffering and the reader's sympathetic engagement.

In a poem that focuses so profoundly on the nature of suffering, one might expect the author to offer the reader a glimmer of consolation amidst the destruction, violence and chaos of the Revolution. The opening couplet hints at Robinson's aspirations for the poem: 'WHEN, the dread scene of death and horror o'er, | Reason's calm eye, TIME's tablet shall explore;' (1-3). Though she describes a kind of political and emotional turbulence, there is an underlying sense of restlessness. She portrays the Revolution as a kind of theatrical 'scene' to be witnessed, thus allocating some of the emotional burden of historical suffering to the reader as they engage with the poem. By the final stanza, the author is hopeful, though she is unable to provide consolation, only a moral as she addresses Marie Antoinette herself 'Thy SUFFERINGS left on TRUTH's recording page | An AWFUL LESSON FOR EACH FUTURE AGE!' (457-8) There is a certain degree of poignancy to the French Queen's story here. Robinson seems to rebel against the fatalistic vision of the Revolution as she illustrates the speculative potential for a more moral future. This is exemplified through the declamatory couplet 'And, scatt'ring Sorrow's incense, sighing, say – | Thy Fame, ILLUSTRIOUS SOUL! shall NE'ER DECAY!' (9-10). This notion of fame outlasting physical decay is a familiar trope, but

Robinson roots it in a vision of bodily ruin, a powerful reminder of the inequities that led to Marie Antoinette's tragic end. In a way, I would suggest that the Queen's immortalised suffering – her 'fame' – acts as a form of pseudo-consolation.

Conclusion

Marie Antoinette's torment is, in a sense, eternalised through the sympathy of others. After all, as Robinson asks the reader, 'WHO, blest with conscious innocence, can smile, | Unstain'd with blood, and unreproach'd with guile' (129–30). This also gives the poem a secondary motive: its reason for coming into being is not only to deplore the late Queen's suffering but also to preserve it, helping to promote the memory of Marie Antoinette through the very extremity of her pain. Robinson achieves this through sustained attention to the Queen's bodily and emotional anguish, her moral sensibility, and her human vulnerability, drawing the reader into close engagement with the victim's personal experience of the Revolution. In this way, the poem resists allowing historical violence to remain distant or abstract, insisting instead upon its intimate human consequences.

The poem thus transforms historical tragedy into a literary spectacle in which Marie Antoinette's anguish is both witnessed and felt, so that her pain itself becomes the medium through which sympathy, reflection, and cultural memory are sustained. Yet this spectacle is not merely elegiac. By preserving the Queen's suffering in poetic form, Robinson ensures that the affective force of revolutionary violence continues beyond the immediate historical moment, allowing private pain to acquire a broader political and cultural afterlife. Marie Antoinette's suffering comes to signify not only individual torment but also the moral disintegration of the revolutionary era that produces it. The

Queen's vulnerability, repeatedly emphasised, therefore becomes central to the poem's larger work of memorialisation, transforming suffering into the condition through which remembrance itself becomes possible. In this way, Robinson also forces the reader to confront the limits of compassion and the moral complexities involved in responding to suffering that is at once deeply personal and irreducibly political.

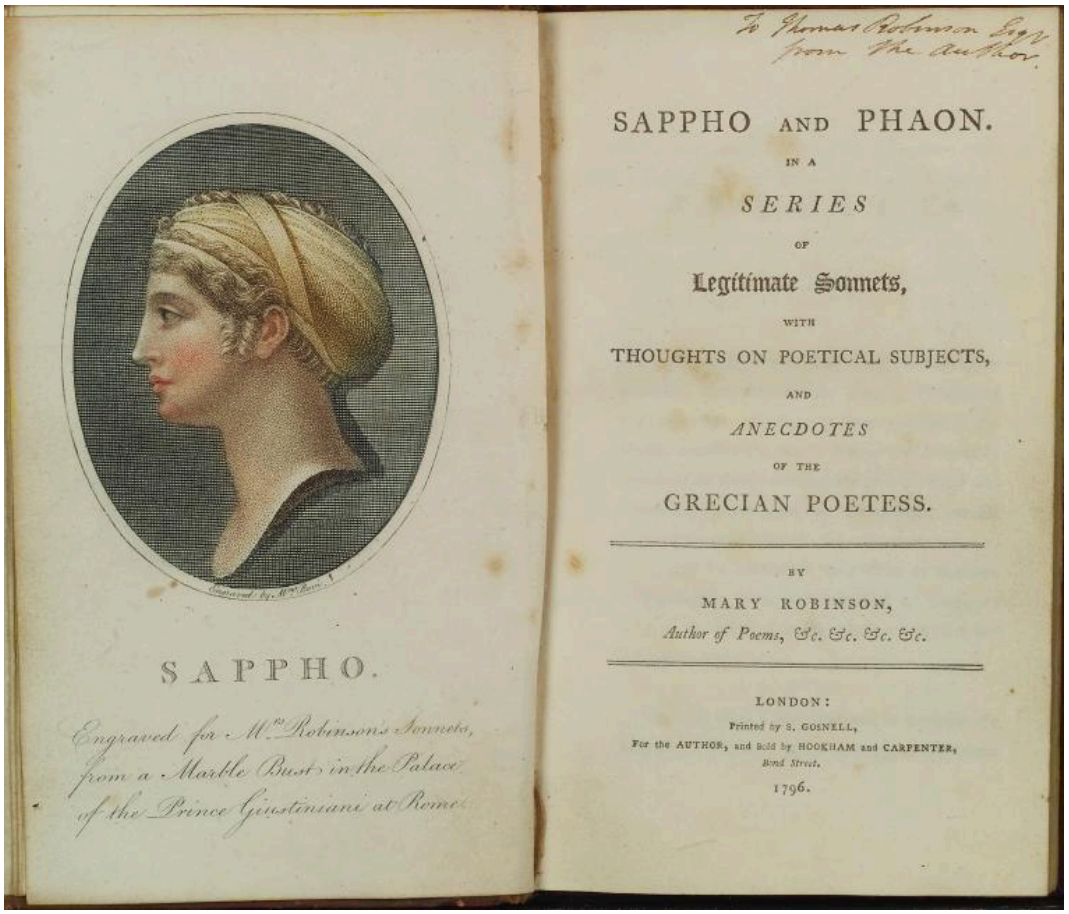


Figure 4: Title page of *Sappho and Phaon*, (London: S. Gosnell, 1796). Image from https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/4ff0a2d0-c604-012f-dab3-58d385a7bc34.

Chapter three: Negotiating agency in *Sappho and Phaon*

In the penultimate sonnet of *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), standing upon a cliff, Mary Robinson's tenth muse[175] stares into the 'Leucadian deep' contemplating suicide.[176] Fourteen lines later, the reader serves as the only witness as Sappho takes a fatal leap into the wild rolling ocean below, drowning herself. This moment would have been familiar to an eighteenth-century audience thanks to what Helen Deutsch describes as 'the long history of the appropriation and transformation of Sappho's poems and persona by both male and female writers' during the eighteenth century and beyond.[177] Robinson's portrayal of Sappho's death has been seen as either an archetype of feminine madness by some, or a rational choice by others. This chapter offers an alternative interpretation.

Before delving into the poem itself, it is first necessary to understand the inspiration behind Robinson's portrayal of Sappho (fl.ca.610-ca.580BC). The Greek poet, as opposed to the fictionalised version, was born on the island of Lesbos and was thought to run an academy for unmarried women. Robinson describes her as 'the unrivalled poetess of her time' but also acknowledges the fact that 'no particulars have been transmitted to posterity.'[178] Martha Rainbolt notes that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth century portrayals of Sappho were based on only 'dimly accurate

[175] It is thought that Plato originally termed Sappho the tenth muse.
[176] Mary Robinson, 'Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets. With Thoughts on Poetical Subjects, and Anecdotes of the Grecian Poetess', in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Toronto: Broadview, 1999), p.151.
[177] Other long eighteenth-century authors who wrote about Sappho include Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), Madame Dacier (1654–1720), Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Ambrose Philips (1674–1749), Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), Charlotte Dacre (1771–1825), and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802–1838).
Helen Deutsch, 'This once was me': Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Ecstatic Poetics', *The Eighteenth Century*, 53.3, 331-55 (p.333).
[178] Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon* pp.150-1.

biographical information' as in reality, extremely little was known about the writer and there were only fragments of her poetry available, and most were in Greek.[179] Many presumed facts are speculative, pieced together from her writing, later commentaries, and centuries of mythologising.[180] The 'scarce specimens' available to Robinson include 'Ode to Aphrodite', a poem titled 'Peer of the Gods' and several fragments.[181] Judith Pascoe notes that Robinson uses a line from the real Sappho's fragment, 'Peer of the Gods.' in the poem: 'BLEST as the Gods! Sicillian Maid is he' (XXXII). The poet acknowledges this line as a direct borrowing from the Grecian poetess, writing 'Vide Sappho'. While she most likely encountered it through one of the many English or French translations circulating in the eighteenth century, its inclusion points to Robinson's deliberate reclamation of Sappho not only as a figure of feminine suffering, but as a foundational presence in the poetic canon.

Robinson's work chronicles a fictionalised Sappho's physical and emotional journey from the thralls of passion to the deep despair of abandonment, following the psychological unravelling after being abandoned by her lover, Phaon. Ultimately, Sappho's suffering leads her to commit suicide, echoing the myth of her fatal leap from the Leucadian cliffs. Alongside the forty-four Petrarchan sonnets, Robinson includes a substantial paratextual apparatus, consisting of an elaborate essay on the sonnet form; she includes shorter poetic examples from Milton's 'O Nightingale', William Cowper's *Table Talk* as well as shorter references to Samuel Johnson, Edmund Spenser, and Alexander Pope among others. She also includes a letter to the reader, and a description

[179] Martha Rainbolt, 'Their Ancient Claim: Sappho and Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Women's Poetry', *The Seventeenth Century*, 12.1 (1997), 111–34 (p. 128).
[180] For more detailed analysis regarding Sappho in literature see, Huguette Krief, *La Sapho des Lumières: Mlle de Scudéry, Fontenelle, Gacon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Pesselier, Moutonnet de Clairefort, Barthélémy, Lantier, Mme de Staël* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2006).
[181] Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon* p.152.

of the real Sappho's life where Robinson sets out her aims for the work. It would be remiss to ignore the influence of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) particularly as she is the only one of Robinson's contemporaries whom she quotes in the introduction, and whom she views as a proponent of the 'legitimate' sonnet. Smith in the preface to her volume writes that 'THE little Poems which are here called Sonnets, have, I believe, no very just claim to that title: but they consist of fourteen lines, and appear to me no improper vehicle for a single sentiment.'[182] Robinson too, clearly valued the form, and concurred with Smith's opinion regarding its capacity to portray emotion, though her portrayal of sentiment is by no means singular.

As previously noted, Robinson's work is frequently read, at least partially, as autobiographical and, with particular reference to this poem, some of her contemporaries even referred to her as the 'English Sappho' both in relation to this poem, and as a way of making Robinson's other work seem more legitimate; calling a female poet Sappho would have had the same connotations of genius as likening a male poet to Homer or Milton, for instance[183] Robinson also used the pen-name for some of her newspaper poetry[184], and other critics have argued that Robinson deliberately styled herself as Sappho in a bid for critical acclaim, For instance Marguerite Johnson asserts that the persona 'was something Robinson cherished, and like the prima donna she was, performed to the best of her ability.'[185] This risks simplifying the poem's layered constructions of identity – there is more complexity to the poet's identification with her

[182] Charlotte Smith, 'Preface to the First Edition', in *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays*, (London: J. Dodsley, 1784), p.3.
[183] Quoted in Paula Byrne, Perdita*: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 323.
[184] Robinson's earliest use of 'Sappho' as a pseudonym was her poem 'Sappho to Lesbia' published in 1793.
[185] Marguerite Johnson, 'Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Sapphos in France, England, and the United States', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed. by P. J. Finglass and A. Kelly, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 361–74 (p. 361).

subject than straightforward self-projection. Whilst this chapter resists an autobiographical reading of *Sappho and Phaon*, it is nonetheless necessary to acknowledge a critical tendency to interpret the poems as obliquely narrating Robinson's abandonment by Banastre Tarleton. Stuart Curran has described the sequence as a *sonnet sequence à clef*.[186] Though this may be true, I will avoid drawing such conclusions in this chapter in order to examine her more philosophical ideas about the nature of female agency and suffering. I am also not trying to suggest that there are no parallels between Robinson and Sappho, and I would agree with Daniel Robinson's description of Robinson as the 'poet-narrator'.[187] Mary Robinson's portrayal of Sappho comments upon the boundaries of voice and agency through a figure whose name has come to embody both excessive passion and poetic tragedy, while simultaneously describing her suicide within the frames of reason. She knows the mortal significance of the Leucadian cliff, her emotional state leaves no room for dispassionate reflection, and yet Robinson does not condemn her for this.

This chapter explores *Sappho and Phaon* as a complex examination of feminine agency in the face of suffering, focusing on Robinson's imaginative reconstruction of Sappho's experience. Rather than offering a simple cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive feminine emotion, the sequence engages with questions of perspective and voice, particularly through its depiction of both bodily and mental distress. The chapter begins by considering the work's publication history and context, tracing the cultural and literary frameworks within which Robinson shapes Sappho's story. It then examines the tension between reason and emotion, showing how Robinson negotiates the

[186] Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson and the New Lyric' in *Women's writing : the Elizabethan to Victorian period* 9.1 (2002): 9–22.
[187] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p.138.

interplay of moral reflection and sensibility. The analysis subsequently turns to bodies of water as sites of agency, exploring how their presence structures Sappho's movements, choices, and expression. Finally, the chapter considers Robinson's portrayal of Sappho's suicide, addressing how her treatment of this act illuminates broader questions about the limits of feminine agency, the ethical stakes of witnessing, and the responsibilities inherent in giving voice to suffering.

Publication history and literary heritage

The volume was published by S. Gosnell and was printed at Robinson's own expense. On the title page, Robinson claims ownership of the piece, instead of using a pseudonym as she had done previously with many other works. Notably, the volume declares her as 'Author of Poems, &c. &c. &c. &c' Given that the poem focuses upon the work of a female writer, it is significant that she chooses the poet Sappho as the protagonist of her own personal revisionist project. This work also marks a further significant shift in direction from her earlier Della Cruscan works seen in her newspaper poetry.[188] Some contemporary reviewers noted the difference between her earlier more flowery writing and the seriousness of her subject matter. In the *Analytical Review*, this departure was celebrated:

> the subject of these sonnets is certainly well chosen to suit the powers of the writer. The varieties of Sappho's passion are expressed with tenderness and harmony not unworthy of the theme. If the poetess has not attained the simplicity of her model, she has at least the merit of avoiding, in a great measure, those playful conceits, with which her earlier pieces too much abounded.[189]

[188] For more information about Robinson's earlier style see Claire Knowles, 'Stuart's *Post* and the Reign of Mary Robinson' in *Della Cruscan Women and the Romantic Newspaper* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp.125-155.
[189] 'Review of *Sappho and Phaon* by Mary Robinson', *Analytical Review*, 24 (December 1796), p.605.

Despite this, her earlier association with the Della Cruscans was something from which she struggled to escape. Other reviewers disagreed with the assessment that Sappho and Phaon was a move away from her earlier writing. For instance, in the *English Review*, the reviewer asserts that:

> Mrs. Robinson is most unfortunate in having adopted, as a model, the contortions and dislocations of Della Crusca. If she had followed nature, seldom more justly or elegantly represented than in her own mind, free from the shackles of imitation, she would have produced sonnets nearer akin to the natural, pathetic, and passionate Sappho […]. Her course would be more graceful, if she would not so often start aside to hunt after flowers.[190]

The divergence in reception illustrates the difficulty Robinson faced in finding her poetic voice amid the lingering weight of literary fashion and intense public opinion. While one set of critics read her return to classical inspiration as a maturation of form and feeling, others remained preoccupied with her stylistic inheritance, resisting the possibility that a woman writer could self-consciously transform her voice without merely echoing earlier styles. The tension reveals as much about anxieties around female authorship as it does about Robinson's evolving poetics. Her voice, caught between accusations of artifice and the desire for expressive freedom, becomes in itself a site of contest as she also rejects the singular portrayal of female authorship, which can also be seen through her portrayal of Sappho's agency.

Indeed, as W. D. Brewer notes, 'The Sappho [Robinson] knew was largely the invention of male authors, some of whom ventriloquize the Greek poet's voice in epistolary poems, imitations, or translations that purport to express her thoughts and feelings.'[191] Robinson explicitly acknowledges this inheritance by prefacing *Sappho and*

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[190] 'Review of *Sappho and Phaon. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets; with thoughts on Poetical Subjects, and Anecdotes of the Grecian Poetess* ' in the *English Review* (Dec.1796): 583-4.
[191] W. D. Brewer, 'Copies, Protean Role-Players, and Sappho's Shattered Form in Mary Robinson's *The False Friend*', *European Romantic Review*, 22.6 (2011), 785–800 (p.792).

Phaon with a quotation from Ovid's *Heroides*: 'Flendus amor meus est; elegeia flebile carmen | non facit ad lacrymas barbitos ulla meas', and its English translation by Alexander Pope: 'Love taught my tears in sadder notes to flow, | And tun'd my heart to elegies of woe.'[192] Pope and Ovid's texts, among others, mediate Robinson's access to Sappho's story, shaping a poetic inheritance already laden with gendered assumptions about feminine passion and abandonment. She signals both her alignment with, and revision of, this tradition in her paratextual remarks, stating that 'OVID and POPE have celebrated the passion of Sappho for Phaon; but their portraits, however beautifully finished, are replete with shades, tending rather to depreciate than to adorn the Grecian Poetess.'[193] Robinson intends not only to restore Sappho's reputation, but to defend her in view of what Claire Knowles has described as Ovid's 'deep ambivalence about Sappho and her poetic powers.'[194] Pope, too, in his heroic couplets portrays Sappho as a woman who is irrefutably destroyed by her unrequited desire for Phaon.[195] In part, Robinson aligns herself with both Pope and Ovid to gain from their cultural capital, in her own way cultivating a form of agency. By situating herself within this tradition, even as she critiques its limitations, Robinson legitimises her own poetic project, asserting both her place in the canon and the integrity of the female voice it so often obscures.

One of the most influential commentators on the poet Sappho and her symbolism during the eighteenth century was the essayist Joseph Addison (1672–1719) and

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[192] Ovid, *Heroides XV, 7-8,* quoted in *Sappho and Phaon* p.157.
[193] Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, pp.150-1.
[194] Claire Knowles, 'Sap(p)hos and Phaons: Robert Merry, Mary Robinson and the Romantic History of the Lesbian Poet', *Romanticism*, 28.1 (2022), 87–98 (p.89).
[195] Alexander Pope influenced Robinson's writing throughout her life. In her *Memoirs*, Robinson tells her reader that, 'a story of melancholy import never failed to excite my attention; and, before I was seven years old, I could correctly repeat Pope's lines the the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady.' Mary Robinson, *The Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson written by herself with some posthumous pieces in iv volumes*, ed. by Maria Elizabeth Robinson (London: Wilkes and Taylor for R. Philips, 1801), p.269.

Robinson acknowledges his contribution in the preface to *Sappho and Phaon*. As mentioned in the previous section, in *The Spectator*, Addison considers the possible dangers that Sappho represents, including the potential pathology of female imagination and emotion, particularly sensibility. He describes Sappho as one of the 'mutilated Poets of Antiquity' perhaps acknowledging the fact that so little of her writing has survived. Her soul, he claims, 'seems to have been made up of Love and Poetry: She felt the Passion in all its Warmth, and described it in all its Symptoms.'[196] Here, Sappho becomes not just a poetic influence, but a body of symptoms to be read. Contemporary medical discourse, such as *The English Malady: A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds* (1733) by George Cheyne, similarly pathologised disorder.[197] Melancholia, fainting, and weeping were routinely considered to be symptoms of female fragility. Robinson acknowledges this sentimental framing of Sappho's story, yet refuses contemporary scepticism of emotion, noting that:

> Addison was of the opinion that the writings of Sappho were replete with such fascinating beauties, and adorned with such a vivid glow of sensibility, that, probably, had they been preserved entire, it would have been dangerous to have perused them.[198]

Her tone is subtly ironic, acknowledging Addison's hyperbolic fears about Sappho's sensibility. Robinson goes on to completely undermine his argument, adding that Sappho's actions 'possessed none of the artificial decorations of a feigned passion; they were the genuine effusions of a supremely enlightened soul, labouring to subdue a fatal enchantment.'[199] Her portrayal of Sappho's emotional anguish on the other hand firmly

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[196] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, vol. 2, ed. by Donald Frederic Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 335–36.
[197] George Cheyne, *The English malady: Or a Treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds; as spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal, and hysterical distempers, etc, 4th ed.* (London: G Strahan and J Leake, 1734).
[198] Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, p.152.
[199] *Ibid*..

situates her within this sentimental framework but also resists its reduction of female experience to hysteria or lovesickness. Addison's ambivalence reflects a broader cultural tendency to view female feeling as both dangerously potent and inherently suspect. Whereas Robinson's portrayal is based upon the idea that suffering is not merely a response to unrequited passion, but signals a more profound alienation, one rooted in the irreconcilability of agency, and virtue. Therefore, throughout the poem, Robinson engages with the vocabulary of sensibility, while also exposing its limitations as a model for female subjectivity.

Exploring the tension between emotion and reason

Robinson relies on elements of sentimentalism in order to express the importance of emotion, as acknowledged in her preface where she explicitly informs the reader that 'the sensibility of SAPPHO was extreme!'[200] Nonetheless, the complex and often conflicting relationship between reason and feeling is at the forefront of *Sappho and Phaon*, as Robinson writes, 'O! How can LOVE exulting Reason quell! | How fades each nobler passion from its gaze!' (V, 1-2). In some ways, Sappho's agency emerges from their irresolvable balance. Her suffering is not the result of one faculty's triumph but of their ongoing negotiation, and it is through this tension that she asserts control over her own fate. Jerome McGann argues that 'while Robinson by no means wants to undermine this culture of sensibility, she is intent upon arguing its largest philosophical and social claims' and perhaps this is why Robinson chooses to place such an emphasis upon sentimentality.[201] Robinson's decision to include Milton's work 'O nightingale' in full as an example of a sonnet by the 'Sublime Bard' is therefore significant not just in

[200] *Sappho and Phaon*, p.154.
[201] Jerome McGann, 'Mary Robinson and the Myth of Sappho', in *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.105.

relation to its form, but also its subject.[202] The relationship between suffering, sensibility, and birds during the eighteenth century has been discussed in previous chapters and certainly captured Robinson's imagination.[203] The nightingale appears throughout the poem as an embodiment of the suffering that Sappho experiences with lines such as 'the lorn Philomel his sorrow sings' (XI, 7) punctuating the poem. Unlike in the previous chapter where Robinson appropriates Ovid's version of the myth, here she uses the zoologically accurate fact that only male nightingales sing. Her references are not always as simple or explicit as this, for example she rejects 'Philosophy' and directs it to:

> Go where the bird of sorrow weaves her nest,
> Cooing, in sadness sweet, through night's dim hour;
> Go, cull the dew-drops from each potent flow'r
> That med'cines to the cold and reas'ning breast. (XXVI, 5-8)

Robinson's avian metaphors in Sappho and Phaon function not simply as ornamental devices, but they also dramatise the tension between emotional vulnerability and intellectual restraint. The figure of the 'bird of sorrow', 'Cooing, in sadness sweet, through night's dim hour', merges sound with nocturnal suffering, creating an image that is at once melodious and melancholic. The alliteration of 'sadness sweet' disorients conventional affective hierarchies by aestheticising pain as sorrow becomes something to be softly sung, a music of affect rather than a something to be silenced or shouted. The fact that the bird 'weaves her nest' at night suggests an active labouring within darkness as a feminine resistance to the empiricism embodied by 'Philosophy', whom Sappho sends away to 'cull the dew-drops' in a futile search for rational cure. Here, Robinson is staging a critique of Enlightenment models of knowledge, where the

[202] *Sappho and Phaon*, p.144.
[203] For more information on their significance see Brycchan Carey, Anne Milne, and Sayre N. Greenfield, eds. *Birds in Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reason, Emotion, and Ornithology, 1700-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

'dew-drops' of feeling cannot be reduced to medicinal substance without a complete rejection of interiority. The image of weaving can also be linked back to Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* where she describes the muse who, 'still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers,| to weave fantastic garlands for my head.'[204] She reflects upon poetic creativity, simultaneously noting that 'while it decks the head with many a rose, | Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart.[205] In these lines, Smith reflects upon the inherent pain that the female poet potentially exposes herself to which aligns with Rohinson's views regarding creativity. Robinson also uses the bird to foreshadow Sappho's suicide writing, 'Lulled by the Nightingale, I sunk to rest' (XXIX, 2). 'Sunk' subtly anticipates her final act of jumping from the cliff but also hints at the potential dangers of succumbing to the nightingale's song, and by extension, to sensibility.

Robinson describes another type of bird to reflect the fragility of emotion later in the poem as she implores 'delusive phantoms' to 'Tempt not the weakness of a lover's breast; | The softest breeze can shake the halcyon's nest' (XXXIII, 9-10). The halcyon, a bird associated with tranquil seas and mythical stillness, is here made fragile – its peace easily corrupted. In this moment, Robinson undermines the sentimental tradition's reliance on bird imagery as symbolic of transcendence or inner peace. Instead, she

[204] Charlotte Smith, 'Sonnet I', *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays*, (London: J. Dodsley, 1784) p.13. The full sonnet is as follows:

> THE partial Muse, has from my earliest hours,
> Smil'd on the rugged path I'm doom'd to tread,
> And still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers,
> To weave fantastic garlands for my head:
> But far, far happier is the lot of those
> Who never learn'd her dear delusive art;
> Which, while it decks the head with many a rose,
> Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart.
> For still she bids soft Pity's melting eye
> Stream o'er the ills she knows not to remove,
> Points every pang, and deepens every sigh
> Of mourning friendship or unhappy love.
> Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost,
> If those paint sorrow best who feel it most!

[205] *Ibid*..

incorporates metaphorical instability, aligning poetic voice with the delicate architecture of the nest which can be easily dismantled by external forces. Kate Singer argues that:

> Robinson indicts the tyranny of sensibility to suggest how feeling becomes so strong as to overwhelm any other thought. Such mental enslavement restricts the mind's ability to think otherwise, and ultimately suicide provides the only decisive escape that would clear the mind of its reigning, repetitive ideas by permanently shutting down the sensing mind and the feeling body.[206]

In this sense, the imagery of the nest, fragile and vulnerable, becomes a powerful symbol not only of the poet's emotional state but also of the fragile boundary between feeling and thought, where the collapse of one results in the destruction of the other. As Singer suggests, the restriction and captivity of the mind results in the compulsion to escape though this is a strong sensation that is decisively at odds with the language that Robinson uses to convey it. The poet's subtle critique, therefore, lies not just in the evocation of emotional torment but in the portrayal of a culture that elevates feeling to such a height that it cannot coexist with reason, and thus leaves the individual with no other option but to escape entirely from both mind and body.

In Sonnet VII, which Robinson titles 'Invokes Reason', she also reflects its oppressive nature and its innate capacity to cause suffering. Sappho appeals to Reason, positioning it as both the remedy for her emotional turmoil and the force that should restore control over her unruly passions. This moment, early in the sequence, sets the tone for the ongoing negotiation between intellect and feeling, a central theme in the poem. Sappho declares:

> COME, Reason, come! Each nerve rebellious bind,
> Lull the fierce tempest of my fev'rish soul;
> Come, with the magic of thy meek controul,

[206] Kate Singer, 'Mary Robinson and the Idiot's Guide to Sensibility and Oblivion', *Literature Compass*, 12 (2015), 667–74 (p. 668).

And check the wayward wand'rings of my mind:
Estrang'd from thee, no solace can I find, (VII, 1-5)

Her use of the imperative, 'Come, Reason, come!', stresses absence, desperation, and dependence; Reason is not an internal faculty but a desired external influence, summoned to impose order, almost as one might call a doctor. McGann argues that 'in Robinson's work Sappho becomes a kind of Promethean figure who will inaugurate a new age of enlightenment and higher "Reason"'.[207] The language of restraint such as 'bind', 'lull', and 'check' casts Reason as less of a guiding, enlightening force than as an oppressive one. Yet this paradoxically conveys relinquishment as Sappho seems to desire anaesthesia rather than clarity. Feeling, meanwhile, figures as a 'fierce tempest', unruly but vividly alive. Neither offers Sappho relief: Reason is 'meek', feeling, pathologised and unstable. What emerges is a divided self, caught between competing forces with no capacity for agency or coherence. Furthermore, she is 'estrang'd' from both reason and Phaon which implies a sense of otherness as she is transformed into a spurned obsessive lover. Read across the sequence, the imperative mood maps Sappho's ambivalent relationship to agency. Early imperatives are outward-facing and demanding: she calls upon the muses imploring, 'Come, tuneful maids' (IV.10) to soothe her emotional turmoil. Here she uses authoritative syntax, and yet Sappho enlists others to mediate her desire, and her agency is realised through appeal rather than independent action. Later imperatives turn inward, moderating Sappho's own affective responses. She commands herself, 'fond sigh be hush'd congeal O! slighted tear.'(XXXVIII). The term *'congeal'* conveys not merely cessation but a kind of internalised discipline, suggesting that the poet's emotional life is subject to rigorous self-governance. The sigh and the tear are not evoked to elicit sympathy or to display

[207] Jerome McGann, 'Mary Robinson and the Myth of Sappho', in *The Poetics of Sensibility*, p.103.

feeling; they are addressed as phenomena to be controlled, as if sensibility itself could become excessive or ethically misdirected. This concern with regulating sensibility anticipates Robinson's broader meditation on the limits of perception as she shifts from controlling immediate emotional responses to grappling with the challenges of understanding the world itself. Later in the sonnet she writes that:

> Dim is the golden page of wisdom's lore;
> All nature fades before my sick'ning sight:
> For what bright scene can Fancy's eye explore,
> 'Midst dreary labyrinths of mental night?' (VII, 11-14)

As we have seen previously in 'Sight' the importance of healthy vision is vital to her idea of normal human experience. Here Robinson takes this idea further. The 'golden' page references reason and Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge, but it also indicates how reason fails to provide clarity amidst emotional chaos. Sappho's 'sick'ning sight' is a physical embodiment of her suffering; Robinson invokes classical imagery such as 'dreary labyrinths of mental night' to further emphasise her entrapment and disorientation, relating Sappho's psychological state with an image of intellectual paralysis and incapacitation. Robinson's use of this imagery reflects the collapse of rationality under the weight of feeling, marking a turning point where agency is no longer a function of reason but of the body's emotional state. In these lines, Robinson explores the fragility of intellectual agency in the face of overwhelming emotion to show that reason, while invoked, cannot alleviate the deep suffering Sappho experiences. Returning to McGann again who suggests that 'Robinson's Sappho is not by any means arguing for an ordinary balance of head and heart, or reason and feeling,' it becomes clear that Robinson is not offering a resolution so much as presenting the limits of both faculties.[208] Reason cannot temper love; sensibility cannot provide a way

[208] *Ibid*., p.103.

to resolve the emotions that arise in heartbreak. Robinson captures the volatility of Sappho's state, allowing moments of lucidity and despair to coexist.

Throughout the poem vision is important both for its capacity to see the truth with clarity, and also its corruption which evokes suffering and a lack of agency. Robinson describes Sappho in the thralls of love pondering, 'WHY, when I gaze on Phaon's beauteous eyes, | Why does each thought in wild disorder stray?' (IV, 1-2) It is ironic because the reader is observing Sappho watching Phaon, specifically looking at his eyes, his organs of sight. Destabilised by the visual encounter, the gaze does not provide clarity, but chaos. Vision becomes a mode of surrender, where the act of looking initiates emotional turmoil. The act of writing itself, however, functions as a counter-gaze, possibly even a way of re-seeing the self through poetic expression. Robinson stages an epistemology rooted not in clarity, but in the aesthetics of intense feeling. Though this visual onslaught causes her thoughts to scatter in 'wild disorder', the tension between physical and emotional suffering is palpable. Robinson intensifies this with repeated questioning: 'Why does each fainting faculty decay, | And my chill'd breast in throbbing tumults rise?' (IV, 3-4). This emotional and sensory disintegration becomes physical, until finally Sappho declares 'My down-cast looks, my faultering lips betray, | That stung by hopeless passion, – Sappho dies!' (IV 6-7). To look is to relinquish power; to look away becomes, paradoxically, a reclaiming of it. In this way, Robinson stages a moment of resistance within emotional decline. The poet develops this idea further as she shows that eyes do not merely register or reflect emotion, they are agents of suffering and have the capacity to cause harm. Robinson writes:

> DANG'ROUS to hear is that melodious tongue,
> And fatal to the sense those murd'rous eyes,
> Where in a sapphire sheath, Love's arrow lies,

Himself conceal'd the crystal haunts (X,1-4)

Though there are echoes of the Della Cruscan style, such as her description of 'Love's arrow', they are increasingly harnessed to explore the moral implications of seeing and witnessing, rather than being used simply for poetic ornamentation. In this passage, Phaon's eyes are framed as both violent and enigmatic as vision here is not illuminating but destructive. The 'murd'rous eyes' not only belong to Phaon, they become an embodiment of the broader instability of subjective perception in a sentimental tradition where feeling is both authentic and performative. Robinson returns to this notion time and time again in the poem, repeatedly staging perception as a fraught act. Sappho mourns:

> O! Eyes! Whose beamy radiance stole away
> As stars fade trembling from the burning sky!
> Why art thou chang'd? dear source of all my woes (XVIII, 7-9)

Here she presents Phaon's eyes as celestial, but the pain itself is intimately human. Once a source of warmth and love, their capacity for emotion has now vanished which articulates both loss and the possibility of agency. Sappho addresses the eyes, accuses them, and therefore anchors her suffering in the act of seeing. If sensibility is a mode of heightened emotional awareness, then Robinson's emphasis on the eye stages that awareness in all its volatility: to see is to feel too much. Therefore, Sappho's gaze is not passive; it is acute, unyielding, and destructive in its clarity. In contrast to the unnamed protagonist in 'Sight', her pain arises not from blindness but from perception. In this way, Robinson frames vision as both a source of vulnerability and a tool for agency.

Bodies of water

For Robinson, the relationship between the physical body and landscape is vital to her conception of suffering in her poetry. Bodies of water emerge throughout Robinson's writing as spaces of transition, exposure, and ultimately suffering, but they also offer a space to exhibit agency in the face of overwhelming force. The ocean in particular has an important personal resonance: her father abandoned the family to pursue a career whaling in Newfoundland, which was a loss inextricably bound to the sea. In later life, Robinson crossed the Channel multiple times in search of relief from her debilitating rheumatism, seeking the healing waters of continental spas: journeys she recounts in numerous poems such as 'Lines Written Between Dover and Calais' (1792) and 'Lines written on the Sea-Coast' (1791) which lend her poetic landscapes, a personal resonance.[209] Though in *Sappho and Phaon*, the ocean comes to symbolise something much more than just Robinson's oscillation transient between physical affliction and poetic production or even between cultural marginality and authorial fame.

Given the poem charts Sappho's maritime journey, it is striking that islands are never simply scenic backdrops, rather they are laden with symbolism which Robinson uses to convey isolation. Eighteenth-century readers would have been used to the rich and varied significance of the island setting; notable examples include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and the moral explorations in French texts such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788). Robinson draws on this tradition but reorients it from a feminine perspective. The opening sonnets describe Lesbos as mythical space, 'Where sportive Fawns, and dimpled Loves invite' (III,3) and 'the birds breathe bliss!' (III,9). Within the island with

[209] For example in Lines Written Between Dover and Calais she declares, 'Welcome GALLIA'S hostile shore;| Now, the breezes waft me over;| Now we part – TO MEET NO MORE!' (66-8).

its ‘pellucid fountains’ (III,11), Robinson presents it as hospitable and life sustaining. Yet after lamenting the choice of her ‘faithless’ Phaon to abandon her (XIX,9), Robinson places some distance in between Sappho and the idyllic island setting, she bids ‘FAREWELL, ye coral caves, ye pearly sands.’ This helps to position the island as exotic to the average contemporary British reader; coral and pearls would have been something that only rich people would have encountered while travelling and brought back as souvenirs.[210] The foreign nature of the island is emphasised by the use of the second person pronoun ‘ye’ which further emphasises Sappho’s newfound otherness. Sappho does not actually depart from Lesbos for another ten sonnets. This allows Robinson to show the transformation of Sappho’s emotional state as suffering begins to clarify into resolve. Following the volta, the poem lingers on the liminal moment between decision and oblivion. Robinson writes:

> The vessel rocks beside the pebbly shore,
> The foamy curls its gaudy trappings lave;
> Oh! Bark propitious! bear me gently o’er
> Breathe softly, ye winds; rise slow, O! swelling wave!
> Lesbos; these eyes shall meet thy sands no more:
> I fly, to seek my Lover—or my Grave! (XXX, 8-14)

The first two lines of the sestet lean into the rhythm of the iambic pentameter helping to create a sense of the movement of the boat on the waves. The island becomes the catalyst where emotional pain is converted into action. Robinson’s Sappho is not the victim of circumstance, nor the passive subject of romantic despair; she is a woman scorned, and she acts with intention. From this perspective, the sea crossing is a rite of transformation, not destruction, which is emphasised by the hopeful ‘Bark propitious’

[210] As a result of the popularisation of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, corals and pearls were popular ‘foreign’ trinkets brought back by visitors to Europe. For more information see Olivier Raveux, ‘Mediterranean Red Coral: A European Merchandise of the First Globalization’, *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe* [online], ISSN 2677-6588, published 22 June 2020 https://ehne.fr/en/node/12239 [accessed 12 April 2025].

and Sappho's entreaty 'Breathe softly, ye winds; rise slow, O! Swelling wave!' Towards the end of the stanza, the genuine potential for suffering is revealed; Sappho voices her suffering in its most distilled form, but the syntax of the final line is assertive as she makes her choice, which is further emphasised by her use of the caesura in between 'lover' and 'grave' to reflect the mortal danger she is placing herself in. Robinson reiterates Sappho's resolve later, declaring:

> YES, I will go, where circling whirlwinds rise,
> Where threat'ning clouds in sable grandeur lour;
> Where the blast yells, the liquid columns pour,
> And madd'ning billows combat with the skies (XLI, 1-4)

In this moment, Robinson connects personal determination with sublime natural imagery, rendering Sappho's agency not as rational or measured but as defiant, even ecstatic, in the face of death. The repetition of 'where' amplifies the harshness of the landscape, while the violence of 'blast' and 'billows' creates a kind of auditory turbulence that mirrors Sappho's emotional volatility. The clouds with their 'sable grandeur' invoke Burkean sublimity, possibly indicating that Sappho's chosen path is not simply self-destructive, rather conceiving it as a dignified and even majestic confrontation with death. Sappho's declaration, in its elevated diction and controlled metrical force, is powerful even as she surrenders to her inevitable fate. It is in this tension, between yielding to emotion and asserting voice, that Robinson locates a feminine mode of tragic agency, one that transforms the act of departure into an act of defiance.

Robinson uses freshwater sources, often portrayed as calm, pure and life-sustaining, as counterpoints to Sappho's oceanic journey which is fundamentally associated with chaos, danger, and death. She describes Lesbos as a place where, 'Small

tinkling rills bid rival flow'rets bloom!' (III,12) which is in direct opposition to the 'green wave' (XL,13) of the wild ocean that Sappho must cross. That said, when she leaves Lesbos, she presents a different image of it altogether, bidding:

> Farewell, ye limpid rivers! Oh farewell!
> No more shall Sappho to your grots repair;
> No more your white waves to her bosom swell,
> Or your dank weeds, entwine her floating hair (XXIX, 9-12)

Immersion in the water foreshadows the spectacle of her drowning at the end of the poem. Abandoning rivers in exchange for the ocean marks not just a physical and topological departure, but also a moment of profound emotional transition for Sappho. The repeated anaphora 'no more' emphasises not only finality of her decision, but also what she is giving up in making her journey to the cliff, positioning Sappho as both a subject of suffering and a figure constrained by external forces. Rather than simply accepting her fate, Sappho's reflection on her loss of this Edenic paradise becomes a site of self-awareness, possibly even referencing the biblical, or Milton's, Fall. Another interpretation is that, here Robinson evokes the death of Ophelia who loses her sanity when abandoned by her lover, 'When down her weedy trophies and herself | Fell in the weeping brook.'[211] It is possible that in alluding to *Hamlet*, Robinson deepens the resonance of drowning as both a literal and metaphorical act, perhaps even suggesting Sappho's innocence, or hinting towards her psychological torment. Robinson's 'dank weeds' suggest a similar suffocating embrace, mirroring Sappho's emotional entrapment and foreshadowing her later suicide.

This is not the only instance where Robinson plays on the symbolic contrast between fresh and salt water. She describes Sappho reclining 'on the low margin of a

[211] William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet', in *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016) p.1730.

murm'ring stream' (XL, 1), which is a pastoral image of stillness and reflection. There is a sense of calm vitality here which Robinson juxtaposes with the vast, brutal emptiness of the sea. In the same sonnet, Robinson writes 'O'er the Leucadian deep, a dazzling beam | Shed the bland light of empyrean day' (XL, 5-6) recalling Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

> Now had the Almighty Father from above,
> From the pure Empyrean where he sits
> High Thron'd above all bent down his eye,
> His own works and their works at once to view:
> About him all the Sanctities of Heaven
> Stood thick as Stars, and from his sight receiv'd
> Beatitude past utterance (III,56-62)

An allusion to this text is unsurprising, particularly as in the introduction, Robinson refers to it as a 'grand epic.'[212] By framing Sappho's dream-vision in Miltonic diction, she invokes the authority of his writing even as she redirects its theological and philosophical grandeur towards an exploration of human feeling and feminine agency. It is possible to interpret this further, as Anna-Julia Zwierlein notes, 'The life-sustaining power of inland waters […] is in Milton continuously opposed by the open sea with its apparently limitless expanse and threatening bottom which symbolize chaos and dangerous conflict'.[213] For instance, Milton writes:

> Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice
> Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest
> The rising world of waters dark and deep,
> Won from the void and formless infinite (*PL,* III, 11-13)

Here, the open sea, representing chaos and limitless expanse, is juxtaposed with Milton's description of the 'clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill' (III.27-28) just a

[212] *Sappho and Phaon,* p.144.
[213] Anne-Julia Zwierlein, 'Satan's Ocean Voyage and Eighteenth-Century Seafaring Trade', in *Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture*, ed. by Bernhard Klein (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), (p. 50).

few lines later, evoking both suffering and mortal danger. Like Milton's waters, Robinson's seas symbolise not only chaos, but also the possibility of transformation. For Sappho, it becomes both the site of despair and the means through which she asserts agency, where immersion in the tumultuous water becomes a deliberate act, and a rejection of her previous life among the calm inland waters.

Depicting bodies of water in a literal sense is not the only way in which Robinson portrays suffering; she also relates it through metaphors of the body. Throughout her poetry, Robinson finds innumerable ways to relate the body to the landscape. Through the voice of Sappho, Robinson connects love and heartbreak directly to the structure of the human body pondering:

> WHY, through each aching vein, with lazy pace
> Thus steals the languid fountain of my heart,
> While, from its source, each wild convulsive start
> Tears the scorch'd roses from my burning face? (VIII, 1–4)

Here, Robinson turns the circulatory system into a metaphor for emotional trauma. Sappho's heart, 'the languid fountain', in contrast earlier to the 'pellucid fountain' is not a strong, life-giving force, but as weakened and ineffectual, reflecting the agency that love has taken from her. The metaphor is anatomical and precise: the pain of unrequited love literally slows her blood, draining her vitality while 'aching' continuously. The contrast between the 'lazy pace' of blood flow in the first line, and the active 'wild convulsive start' from the heart's source captures the unpredictable, destabilising effects of intense emotion, and could be seen as a warning against it. Love for Sappho is not gentle, rather it is violent and erratic. This is further emphasised through the description of her cheeks as 'scorch'd roses' suggests the physical symptoms of emotional anguish, such as a burning flush, corrupt Sappho rather than acting as a symbol of affection.

Passion has overwhelmed her body which damages rather than sustains her which parallels the idea that saltwater is fundamentally corrosive, whereas freshwater is essential to life. Robinson does not just compare the body to a landscape rather she treats it as one. Veins become rivers, the heart a corrupted spring, and the face a singed landscape. Here, metaphor is not simply decorative, but diagnostic. The body becomes a site where emotional damage is measured in physical terms, and she draws attention to its fallibility. In doing so, Robinson makes love as much a physiological crisis as a psychological one. Later in the poem, Sappho once again laments that:

> Though dark my bosom's tint, through ev'ry vein
> A ruby tide of purest lust're flows,
> Warm'd by thy love, or chill'd by thy disdain:
> And yet no bliss this sensate Being knows;
> Ah! why is rapture so allied to pain? (XVIII,10-14)

Robinson uses temperature to figure not only the excess of feeling but also its capacity to subvert agency, positioning Sappho in a state of perpetual reaction—both burning and frozen, always emotionally overwhelmed. Sappho is swept up in these emotional currents, her agency eroded by the very force that animates her. In this way, Robinson emphasises that Sappho is suspended between ecstasy and anguish, unable to anchor herself in either.

The violence enacted upon the body is also mirrored by Robinson's descriptions of the stormy ocean. Robinson writes, 'Wild is the foaming sea! The surges roar! And nimbly dart the livid lightnings round!' (XXII, 1-2) which evokes a conventional Romantic diction of the Sublime, but also relies on heightened auditory and visual language to externalise Sappho's emotional tumult, rendering the natural world not merely a backdrop but an active participant in her psychological suffering. This notion is exacerbated by the following lines where she describes that:

On the rent rock the angry waves rebound;
Ah me! The less'ning bark is seen no more!
Along the margin of the trembling shore. (XXII, 3-5)

The direction of the waves becomes important here, as well as their marginality and aggression. The alliterative first line reflects a sense of relentless energy as the waves perpetually crash against the rocks, which is only emphasised by the complex Petrarchan versification creating a sense of unyielding movement through the iambic pentameter couplets. The boat can no longer be seen from the 'trembling shore' which further demonstrates Sappho's bravery and agency in her departure. But it might also suggest that the boat is the plaything of the elements. This tableau culminates towards the middle of Sonnet XXII as Sappho, declares that:

Loud as the blast my frantic cries shall sound,
My storm-drench'd limbs the flinty fragments wound,
And o'er my bleeding breast the billows pour! (XXII,6-8)

Robinson depicts sea as both a setting in a literal sense, and also as a symbol of Sappho's emotional extremity. The injury that the ocean enacts upon the body is emphasised later in the sonnet as Robinson writes, 'For howling winds, and foaming seas, in vain | Assail the breast, when passion rages there (XXII, 13-14). The imagery serves to externalise the tempestuous nature of Sappho's feelings, but Robinson suggests that even nature's most violent forces are powerless against all-consuming passion, which in a way reflects Sappho's strength of feeling, positive or negative.

Witnessing Sappho's Suicide

One of the main reasons that the myth of Sappho has remained in the minds of artists and writers for centuries is her suicide. The trajectory of Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* is framed by this tragic inevitability, with the poem's narrative arc ultimately leading to

the spectacle of her drowning. Philosophical ideas about suicide had been widely circulating during the period, for example, in his essay, 'Of Suicide' David Hume argues that:

> though death alone can put a full period to his misery, [man] dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence from a vain fear lest he offend his Maker by using the power with which that beneficent being has endowed him.[214]

In 1796, Mary Wollstonecraft published *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden Norway and Denmark.* These were written in a particularly trying period in the author's life, shortly following a suicide attempt, and she details her perception of the act as 'one of the calmest acts of reason.'[215] Though Robinson's later works such as *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799) engage more explicitly with Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Indeed, Robinson would have been aware of her arguments about suicide as Robinson corresponded with Godwin and moved in the same radical and literary circles in London during this period. Sappho's suicide is written not through the language of feminine madness, but in a manner similar to the way in which Wollstonecraft describes it, which further complicates discourses surrounding sensibility and feminine agency.

Throughout the sonnet series, the act of witnessing is crucial to our understanding of Robinson's portrayal of suicide. When Sappho prefigures her death, the boundary between Phaon and the reader becomes difficult to distinguish as she poses the following questions:

> OH! can'st thou bear to see this faded frame,

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[214] David Hume, 'Of Suicide' in *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul: By the Late David Hume, Esq. With Remarks by the Editor. To Which Are Added, Two Letters on Suicide, from Rousseau's Eloisa, ed. by James Decker* (Basel: printed for the editor of the Collection of English Classics, 1799), p. 2.

[215] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. by I. Horrocks (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2013), p. 64.

Deform'd and mangled by the rocky deep?
Wilt thou remember, and forbear to weep,
My fatal fondness, and my peerless frame? (XLII, 1-4)

When she refers to 'thou', it is not clear whether she is asking the reader, or indeed Phaon himself if they can endure witnessing the destruction of her physical body. The violence and physicality of these lines is palpable as Sappho confronts the reader with her impending demise. Here, Robinson's position is multi-faceted as she suggests that the physical body is fallible, but perspective is once again important. Sappho's 'faded frame' is now a shadow of its former self and stands in direct opposition to the rugged and menacing rocks that lie beneath the surface of the water. Furthermore, in the first couplet, Robinson distances Sappho from the scene as she avoids the use of the personal pronoun, choosing to refer to her body as 'this', which depersonalises the act of suicide. It also suggests a physical gesture as Sappho appears to be looking at herself, observing her own body from a removed perspective; this moment of confrontation emphasises her fractured subjectivity. The poet further highlights the importance of vision and perspective as Sappho's dead body is described as a 'peerless frame'. This idea is repeated throughout the series until the penultimate sonnet where Sappho looks down from the cliff she is about to leap from, describing the scene:

WHILE from the dizzy precipice I gaze,
The world receding from my pensive eyes,
High o'er my head the tyrant eagle flies,
Cloth'd in the sinking sun's transcendent blaze! (XLIII, 1-4)

Linguistically 'dizzy precipice' once again registers the relationship between the sick body and the landscape, while also leaning into the idea of lovesickness. Vision and perspective here are vital, as Sappho looks up, then down, then up again. The vast open sky and the eagle in flight are traditional emblems of freedom that stand in direct opposition to her precarious position on the cliff's brink and the rocky ocean below.

They also reframe the scene as heavenward oriented rather than down into the waves as we might expect. Here Robinson externalises Sappho's inner desolation – the world recoils as she peers downward, emphasising the isolating effects of despair. Yet in giving voice to Sappho's visual enactment of suffering Robinson grants her a measure of control. The act of looking becomes a critical site in which Sappho both confronts and claims her anguish, transforming passive endurance into an assertion of poetic agency.

Robinson inherits the Wertherian model of the lover who is ultimately destroyed by their passion; Sappho's fatal leap from the Leucadian cliffs is not simply an act of sensibility but a deliberate assertion of autonomy in the face of Phaon's betrayal.[216] Sandra Gilbert suggests that 'women poets have often imagined death as multiply and richly seductive', though for Robinson, this is not necessarily the case.[217] Without Phaon's love, Sappho declares that she will become, 'Midst the waste a solitary urn, | A blighted laurel and a mouldering tomb'. (XXV, 13-14). This evokes the image of ossification on dry land rather than the body dissolving into the water, and suggests a final, fixed state of decay rather than a fluid, natural return to the elements. The 'blighted laurel' much like the 'bloody laurel' given to Marie Antoinette in the *Monody*, is especially significant: traditionally a symbol of fame and poetic prowess, here it appears irreparably damaged, indicating not only the loss of vitality but also the permanent destruction of Sappho's poetic renown; not only will Sappho die alone, but her poetic legacy will die too. Robinson was clearly preoccupied with this idea as she

[216] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) published *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther) in 1774. This epistolary novel traces the emotional decline of its protagonist, Werther, whose despair over unrequited love for Charlotte culminates in his suicide. The text quickly became a cultural phenomenon, giving rise to so-called Werther-Fieber, a wave of sentimental imitation and was associated with the Sturm und Drang movement.
[217] Sandra M. Gilbert, 'The Supple Suitor: Death, Women, Feminism, and (Assisted or Unassisted) Suicide', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 24.2 (2005), 247–55 (p. 247).

memorialised both the fictional character, Werther, from Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, and the poet Thomas Chatterton, both of whom committed suicide; 'To the Memory of Werter' was published in World on 15 July 1789 and just a few years later she included 'Monody to the Memory of Chatterton' in *Poems* (1791). Charlotte Smith also writes about Werther's suffering and critics such as Dolan argue that:

> [Smith] re-appropriates from Goethe the discourse of loss and longing, [and] Smith modifies the German poet's version of melancholia, offering her readers not only a portrait of sensibility, but also a glimpse of the balancing rationality that might have saved Werther.[218]

Like Smith, and so many writers of her time, Robinson was captivated by Werther's plight, though she does not suggest that reason alone could have saved Sappho. Just like Goethe's protagonist, naturally Sappho cannot narrate her own death, so the final sonnet switches perspective as the narrator's voice pierces through the narrative in order to declare:

> HERE droops the muse! While from her glowing mind,
> Celestial Sympathy, with humid eye,
> Bids the light Sylph capricious Fancy fly (XLIV, 1-3)

Sappho, for Robinson, is both a poet and a muse as she embodies both the experience of suffering and the capacity to inspire imaginative expression. Furthermore, 'Droops' is a curious word choice here; in his dictionary Samuel Johnson defines it either as: 'to languish with sorrow' or 'to faint; to grow weak; to be dispirited.'[219] One cannot help but wonder if it is a play on the word 'drop' as she leaps from the cliff. Furthermore, sympathy and its eighteenth-century connotations of 'fellow feeling' are invoked here

[218] Elizabeth A. Dolan, 'Melancholia and the Poetics of Visibility: Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*', in *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the Romantic Era* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 21–47 (p. 21).
[219] 'droop, v.n.', *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson (1755), https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/droop_vn [accessed 10 April 2025].

not to magnify Sappho's pain but to confer upon her a moral dignity in death, as she is exalted to 'Sky-born VIRTUE!' (XLIV, 4). In particular, the etymology of sympathy itself is important, here; particularly as Robinson treats it as a personified abstraction who sheds a tear at Sappho's suicide. Here the poet seems to imply a form of co-suffering, which elevates both Sappho and the reader as Robinson implies a heavenwards ascent, and her 'capricious fancy' flies, which would seem at odds with her cliff jumping episode. Nonetheless, Robinson implies that the reader should feel sympathy for Sappho and this is reflected by the sentimental tear from the 'humid eye'. Tobin Siebers argues that:

> readers of Romantic texts always have a better chance of living a Romantic life than any Romantic hero because they possess the model of the entire life: readers have the opportunity to stage their own suffering in ways that will allow them to experience the distinction that Romantic heroes win only after death. The model of the Romantic hero's reception remains Goethe's success at Werther's expense, for Werther's death makes Goethe's esthetic life possible. Goethe could not have created Werther if Goethe had been a Werther.[220]

Just as Werther gains posthumous power over Goethe, Sappho's voice in Robinson's hands transcends her narrative death, offering the reader an aesthetic and affective experience of agency. The reader, like the poet, holds the vantage point of the whole sequence and thus enjoys a perspective unavailable to Sappho herself in the moment of crisis.

In some ways, Sappho's journey to the cliff represents more of a negotiation between reason and emotion in the face of profound personal suffering. Robinson's treatment of this duality becomes clear as she weaves together the intensity of emotional turmoil with a desire for rational clarity:

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[220] Tobin Siebers, 'The Werther Effect: The Esthetics of Suicide', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 26.1 (Winter 1993), 15–34 (p. 20).

> So shall this glowing, palpitating soul,
> Welcome returning Reason's placid beam,
> While o'er my breast the waves Lethean roll,
> To calm rebellious Fancy's fev'rish dream; (XLIII, 9-12)

By invoking 'Reason's placid beam,' Robinson juxtaposes this intensity with the ideal of reason: a calm, illuminating force that promises peace but remains distant from the chaotic reality of Sappho's experience. The 'Lethean roll,' referencing the river of forgetfulness from Greek mythology deepens this yearning for release, suggesting that Sappho seeks not only clarity but also an escape from the overwhelming emotional state in which she finds herself. This image of tranquillity is in direct opposition to her earlier description just two sonnets earlier where we are presented with an image where 'The wild waves gasp impatient to devour, | And on the rock the waken'd Vulture cries!' (XLI, 7-8). Where Sappho previously found herself in the grip of intense emotional turmoil, now, in contrast, she seeks peace, evoking a desire for relief. This shift emphasises the idea that the rational act of suicide appears to provide a kind of detachment from the emotional extremes she experienced earlier. In this light, the calmness she seems to embrace in her final moments is not merely a release from suffering, but it could also be a reflection of reason's dominance over the passions, as Sappho exerts control over her fate, for example Singer argues that:

> While oblivion has up until this point operated as a figure for mental blankness, in *Sappho and Phaon,* the evacuation of sensation that frees the mind must be followed by a suicide that kills the body. Sappho's epistemological cliff-diving becomes a sign of her liberty, her refusal to continue to be made an idiot by empiricism's demands upon women and women writers to remain creatures of sensation. Robinson flags her philosophical, empiricist vantage at the end.[221]

Though this is true to an extent, I would suggest that Robinson, rather than abandoning emotion entirely, constructs Sappho's final act as not merely a rejection of emotional excess, but as a conscious exercise of agency, in which reason and passion both play a

[221] Singer, p.668.

part in her self-determined fate. The fact that the soul is still 'glowing' and 'palpitating' suggests that she has not abandoned her sensibility. Therefore, Robinson's representation of Sappho is less about privileging reason over feeling or vice versa, but more about illustrating the complex relationship between emotional suffering and agency.

Conclusion

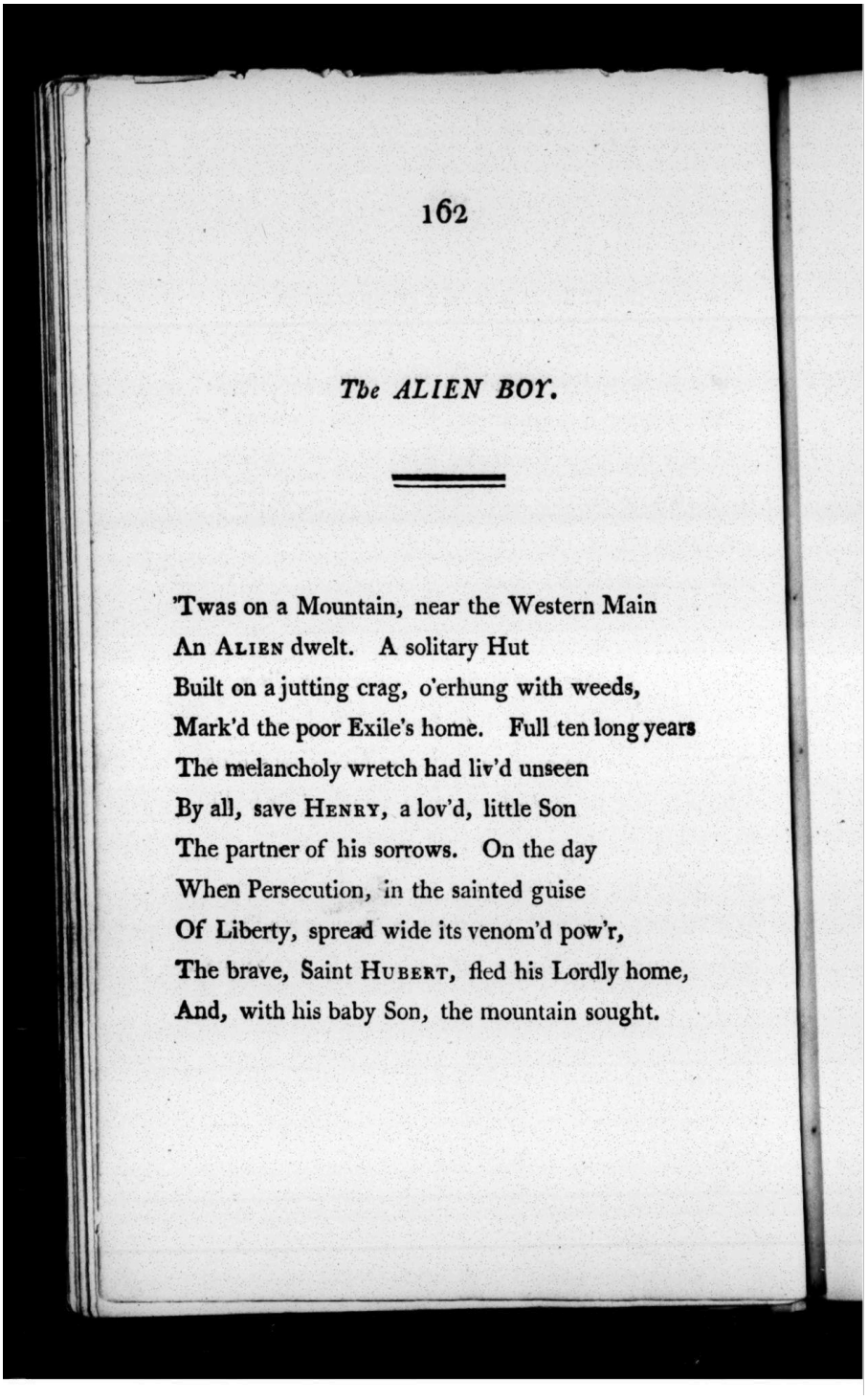
Martha Rainbolt argues that 'Sappho is not a blank page for these poets of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. They use her in multiple ways: they use her texts, her reputations, her social circle, her mythic status, her name.'[222] This is certainly true in Robinson's case. In reclaiming Sappho's voice from Ovid and Pope, Robinson does more than transcribe her legendary despair; she reconstructs a figure whose suffering is both intensely personal and culturally resonant. In reimagining Sappho's suicide, Robinson engages with contemporary debates about the relationship between reason and feeling in moments of extreme emotion, portraying a heroine who negotiates the constraints and expectations placed upon women, while asserting her own autonomy.

As Ashley J. Cross notes, Robinson's 1799 essay *A Letter to the Women of England* 'defends women's reputations as intellectuals and provides an answer to the self-erasure women face in the conflict between love and philosophy: a shared women's intellectual history.'[223] In *Sappho and Phaon*, Robinson stages these same concerns poetically, demonstrating that emotional impulse and rational deliberation co-constitute agency. Sappho's passion propels her forward, yet her decisions remain guided by

[222] Martha Rainbolt, 'Their Ancient Claim: Sappho and Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Women's Poetry', *The Seventeenth Century*, 12.1 (1997), 111–34 (p. 128).
[223] Ashley Cross, 'He—She Philosophers and Other Literary Bugbears: Mary Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England*', Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period, 9.1 (2002), 53–68 (p. 54).

reflection, showing that feminine action can be both deeply felt and consciously deliberate. Her journey to the Leucadian cliff is not a passive surrender but a deliberate assertion of self-determination within the social and cultural pressures she faces. In this way, Robinson presents Sappho's suffering as morally significant, insisting that her pain, her defiance, and her choices are recognised. Reason and feeling coexist in deliberate tension, producing a form of gendered agency that is at once tragic and assertive. Robinson affirms that women's actions, even when constrained by emotion or circumstance, possess moral weight, insisting that voice and agency cannot be ignored. By choosing the historical figure of Sappho, whose voice survives only in poetic fragments, Robinson highlights the precarious agency and afterlife of female authors more generally, illustrating how women negotiate emotional expression even within traditions that threaten their erasure.

Part III: Writing Alterity



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The ALIEN BOY.

'Twas on a Mountain, near the Western Main
An ALIEN dwelt. A solitary Hut
Built on a jutting crag, o'erhung with weeds,
Mark'd the poor Exile's home. Full ten long years
The melancholy wretch had liv'd unseen
By all, save HENRY, a lov'd, little Son
The partner of his sorrows. On the day
When Persecution, in the sainted guise
Of Liberty, spread wide its venom'd pow'r,
The brave, Saint HUBERT, fled his Lordly home,
And, with his baby Son, the mountain sought.

Figure 5: First page of 'The Alien Boy', in *Lyrical Tales* (London: printed for Longman and Rees by Biggs & Cottle, Bristol, 1800). Image from https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_lyrical-tales-by-mrs-m_robinson-mary_1800.

Chapter four: Observing tragedy in ‘The Alien Boy’

Robinson’s blank verse poem ‘The Alien Boy’ (1800) occupies a pivotal position within this examination of suffering. In particular, the work demonstrates the poet’s increasing interest in the literary expression of alterity in the face of profound tragedy. First published as the twentieth poem in her collection *Lyrical Tales*, the one-hundred-and-forty-line poem is organised into ten verse paragraphs.[224] The work recounts the fate of a father, Hubert, and his baby son, Henry; the pair flee the French Revolution, and they attempt to start a new life on ‘a Mountain, near the Western Main’ (1–2). They are stripped of nation, home and any former societal protections; consequently, Robinson offers what appears to be one of the clearest and most straightforward representations of suffering in her corpus. Hubert attempts to rescue a shipwrecked mariner, but is swallowed by a huge wave and drowns; Henry loses his sanity after he witnesses the tragedy. After this event, the boy is so traumatised that he becomes mute and lives on the isolated cliffside for the remainder of his days.

Robinson’s choice of title reflects the increasing sense of alterity that permeates the poem, not least through her characterisation of the ‘alien boy’, Henry, himself. As Samuel Johnson defines it, alien means both ‘foreign, or not of the same family or land’ and ‘estranged from; not allied to; adverse to’ – a duality the poem exploits at every turn.[225] The boy is simultaneously a displaced subject of political upheaval and a figure of profound estrangement, separated from his former family and the comfort that they provided him. By naming him ‘alien’ rather than orphan or émigré, Robinson, as in the

[224] *Lyrical Tales* contains twenty-two poems of varying forms and lengths ranging from tragic tales of loss such as ‘All Alone’ and ‘The Widow’s Tale’ to satirical works such as ‘Mistress Gurton’s Cat’ and ‘Deborah’s Parrot’.
[225] ‘alien, adj.’ *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson, (1755), accessed [23.01.2026] https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/alien_adj.

other poems studied in this thesis, refuses any consolation; the term insists on the boy's otherness while simultaneously demanding recognition for the suffering that he has experienced. That said, this poem differs from previous works in that Robinson is not preoccupied with evoking sympathy for Henry and there can be no accusations that this work has any hallmarks of her earlier Della Cruscianism; rather she simply narrates his tragic circumstances. This chapter therefore asks: how and why does Robinson present the act of observing suffering itself as a moral problem? What is the reader to do having witnessed it?

'The Alien Boy' is a sustained meditation on dispossession and the moral problem of witnessing suffering. Robinson depicts a child who is irredeemably severed from society — an extreme form of isolation and suffering for which there is, crucially, like the other works studied in this thesis, no hope of consolation. I begin by situating the poem in relation to *Lyrical Ballads*, arguing that while Robinson is clearly in dialogue with Wordsworth and Coleridge, her poem resists simply imitating them. The second section considers the French Revolution as a vital influence upon the poem, tracing how the residues of Hubert's aristocratic past shape Henry's suffering. I then turn to Robinson's representation of the ocean as a dangerous and ever-present other, attending to the poem's cliffside geography. The fourth section offers a close reading of Henry's isolation and eventual muteness. The chapter concludes by asking whether 'The Alien Boy' offers any form of moral recompense or consolation whatsoever, and argues that Robinson instead insists upon witnessing as an unresolved, ethically demanding act.

Becoming *Lyrical Tales*

It would be impossible to begin analysis of a poem from Robinson's volume without first acknowledging the influence of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)[226] but I concur with Stuart Curran who argues that we do not need to 'once more rehearse' the dynamic between Coleridge and Wordsworth.[218] Though *Lyrical Tales* was not published until 20th November 1798, from late August the same newspapers advertised that 'Lyrical Ballads; vol. 2 by W. Wordsworth – Also a new version of vol. 1 [and] Lyrical Tales; by Mrs Robinson' were 'soon to be published'.[227] There was clearly a degree of excitement regarding the publication of both volumes. It would be hard to argue, particularly as Robinson marketed the volume to them as consisting of tales 'serious and gay on a variety of subjects in the manner of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*', that this was not a deliberate pairing on the part of her publisher Longman.[228] As Byrne notes, Robinson even 'requested that the book should be printed in the same typeface as *Lyrical Ballads*'.[229] Whilst Robinson was doing everything she could to suggest it, this association was much to the dismay of the Wordsworths; in a letter to Mrs John Marshall, Dorothy writes that:

> [William] intends to give [his second edition] the name of 'Poems by W. Wordsworth' as 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 published by the same press and Longman is the publisher of both works.[230]

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[226] It is possible that Robinson read the 1800 version of Lyrical Ballads but we do not know for certain and it is entirely plausible she was too sick to read it. For the purpose of certainty, I will refer to the 1798 version.
[227] 'Advertisements and Notices', *Morning Post*, Wednesday, 27 August 1800.
[228] 'Letter of 17 June 1800', from the Garrick Club Library.
[229] Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 359.
[230] 'Letter 140', *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, rev. by Chester Shaver, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 297.

It is likely that she did not approve of Robinson's reputation, though as Ashley Cross rightly points out, the poet was likely the more fashionable and influential author at that time, as Wordsworth and Coleridge were only beginning their poetry careers.[231] Longman had already published some of Robinson's novels and it may have been thanks to some of her success that the house became fashionable, and possibly even why Wordsworth and Coleridge wanted to publish with them. Robinson's more established reputation is further substantiated by the fact that 1250 copies of *Lyrical Tales* were printed in contrast with the five hundred that were printed for the first *Lyrical Ballads*.[232] It is undeniable that she had a strong admiration for Wordsworth and Coleridge's volume, and it is noteworthy that she reprinted the 'Mad Mother', drawn from it in *The Morning Post,* prefacing the poem with the statement:

> We have been so much captivated with the following beautiful piece, which appears in a small volume LYRICAL BALLADS, that we are tempted to transgress the rule that we have laid down for ourselves [of not reprinting previously published poems]. Indeed the whole collection with the exception of the first piece ['Rime of the Ancient Mariner'] which appears manifestly to be written by a different hand, is a tribute to genuine nature.[233]

Her decision, even at the cost of breaking an editorial principle, indicates a strong and deliberate endorsement of the volume. What emerges is not unqualified enthusiasm but a thoughtful critical alignment, one that situates Robinson as a discerning contemporary critic rather than a mere admirer. In this chapter, I foreground the connection between *Lyrical Ballads* and *Lyrical Tales* in order to emphasise Robinson's acute awareness of emerging literary movements and tastes, despite the mixed reception initially accorded to Wordsworth and Coleridge's volume. Despite their many similarities there are no poems in Robinson's work that have exact counterparts in Wordsworth's collection. As

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[231] Ashley J. Cross, 'From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*: Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40.4 (2001), 571–605 (p.597).
[232] *Ibid*. p 583.
[233] 'The Mad Mother', in *Morning Post* April 2 1800.

Brewer notes *Lyrical Tales* is, therefore, a wide-ranging 'revisionary response' to its literary precursor that seeks to create a poetic dialogue, with Wordsworth and Coleridge while simultaneously asserting Robinson's poetic originality.'[234]

In terms of title alone, the sixteenth poem in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' offers the most immediate comparison to 'The Alien Boy' though in this poem, Betty Foy and her disabled son Johnny, are reunited providing the closure that Robinson withholds from her poem. Perhaps the most similar poem in the collection is 'The Female Vagrant' which recounts a life shaped by displacement and suffering. The narrative describes a woman who, after the loss of her family's land and the devastation of war abroad, returns to Britain alone, reduced to wandering the countryside in poverty. By the end of the poem, the speaker reveals that:

> Three years a wanderer, often have I view'd,
> In tears, the sun towards that country tend
> Where my poor heart lost all its fortitude (262-4)

Like in 'The Alien Boy' the female vagrant is bound to a past catastrophe that continually reasserts itself in the present. Though in this case, Wordsworth emphasises the woman's tears, whereas Robinson centres upon her protagonist's disturbed mental state. Coleridge's 'The Foster Mother's Tale,' the second poem in the volume, is also similar in both tone and language. The narrative fragment tells the tale of a foundling boy who 'read, and read, and read, | 'Till his brain turned'(54-5) and he was imprisoned for being a heretic.[235] The boy eventually escaped and:

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[234] William D. Brewer, 'Introduction', in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by Brewer, William D., D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009) Part I, Vol.1, p.xxvi.
[235] William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, 'The Foster Mother's Tale' in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.25-7.

> In spite of his dissuasion, seized a boat,
> And all alone, set sail by silent moonlight
> Up a great river, great as any sea,
> And ne'er was heard of more: but 'tis supposed,
> He lived and died among the savage men. (77-81)

Coleridge's poem tells the tale of a boy who ultimately chooses to live in the wild whereas Robinson's work does the reverse. The 'alien boy' does not desire his cliffside isolation whereas Coleridge's boy dreams of a life 'among the savage men'. In this way, Robinson's poem portrays the plight of the boy, whereas Coleridge emphasises the suffering of the witnesses and those left behind. Both poems operate at different distances between speaker and protagonist, with Robinson choosing to take an observational detached tone rather than the conversational style we find in the fragment.[236] Nonetheless, there are stylistic similarities as Cross notes:

> 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,' [...] Images and ideas are refigured: the wedding guest of 'The Ancient Mariner' returns as the forlorn, lovelorn deserter in 'Edmund's Wedding'; a Mariner figure appears in 'The Haunted Beach'; the boy of the 'Foster Mother's Tale' is recalled by 'The Alien Boy'; [...] More generally, Robinson's poems shift focus slightly by placing more emphasis on the trauma and isolation that young people and women experience.[237]

Robinson's emphasis upon suffering throughout the volume, particularly among women and children, is undeniable. This chapter extends that claim by arguing that 'The Alien Boy' relies upon this emphasis in order to produce a poem which, like the others examined in this thesis, withholds the consolations typically afforded by sympathy in the late eighteenth century. By the end of the poem, Robinson stages an intimate, almost precocious engagement with anguish, framing madness not as aberration but as an

[236] For further discussion regarding the role of the natural world within Coleridge's work see Gregory Leadbetter, 'Savage, Holy, Enchanted: Coleridge in Concert with the Wild', in *Wild Romanticism*, ed. by Cassandra Falke and Markus Poetzsch, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 59–73.
[237] Ashley J. Cross, 'From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*: Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40.4 (2001), 571–605 (pp. 594-5).

inevitable response to the intrusion of both historical violence and personal catastrophe–an experience before which, once again, the reader is compelled to bear witness rather than seek moral resolution.

There are no surviving contemporary reviews specifically of 'The Alien Boy', though the *Lyrical Tales* volume itself received high praise and was eagerly anticipated. One of the primary considerations among critics was Robinson's capacity to evoke sympathy for a menagerie of pathetic characters. The *Monthly Review* notes that:

> Of the twenty-two tales which compose this volume, those intitled *All Alone – The Lascar – The Widow's Home – The Shepherd's Dog – The Fugitive – The Hermit of Mont Blanc – The Hermit of Mont Blanc – The Negro Girl – The Deserted Cottage – Poor Marguerite – Edmond's Wedding – The Alien Boy* – and *Golfre*, – are calculated to touch the soul with pity, and to fill the eye with tears.[238]

Sympathy usually accompanies suffering to some extent in Robinson's poetry. What is striking here is not simply the inclusion of 'The Alien Boy' among these 'pathetic' narratives, but also the critical assumption that suffering ought to culminate in visible emotional response. In this period sympathy is treated as both inevitable and desirable, a reflexive accompaniment to scenes of distress. Robinson's poem, however, complicates this notion by providing the reader with a description of suffering enacted upon a child. It is for this reason that the chapter contends that 'The Alien Boy' serves as an initial foray into the themes Robinson later develops in 'The Savage of Aveyron' such as the relationship between suffering and voice. I do not deny that the poem elicits some degree of sympathy for the boy, his situation is undeniably tragic, but the moral response Robinson demands of the reader differs from the conventional, consolatory reaction.

[238] *Monthly Review*, 36 (September 1801), pp. 26–30.

Echoes of the French Revolution

Though 'The Alien Boy' is less overtly political than her Marie Antoinette texts or even *Ainsi va le Monde*, contemporary readers would have recognised the allusions to revolutionary upheaval and the moral ambiguities of power. Robinson describes the circumstances that lead Hubert and Henry to escape their previous life, writing:

> On the day
> When Persecution, in the Sainted guise
> Of Liberty, spread wide its venom'd pow'r
> The brave, Saint HUBERT, fled his Lordly home (7-10)

The language that Robinson uses to justify their retreat from civilisation allows her to depict revolutionary violence without providing a sustained and complex discussion of the nuances of its politics that might be more suited to an alternate literary form. She relies upon personified abstractions in order to expose structures of suffering which allow her to depict pain that is personal, but also broadly political. Like in the *Monody*, 'Liberty' and 'Persecution' operate as both moral constructs and active agents of distress, and they both influence the experience of Hubert, and by implication Henry, as well as the ways in which human anguish is at once entangled with and mediated by social and ideological forces and not simply immediate and physical events. Robinson further complicates this moment through her canonisation of 'Saint HUBERT.' Ordinarily this might imply courage, sanctity, and moral authority, evokes the legendary Christian saint and patron of hunters, though Robinson's narrative bears little direct relation to this hagiography, though perhaps it foreshadows his later death. Yet Hubert's flight from the Revolution does not suggest triumph or even martyrdom, rather human vulnerability. In this moment, Robinson could have chosen to evoke sympathy for their plight, yet what we get is a political stance shrouded in ambiguity and metaphor.

Consequently, the poem positions the act of observing their flight as a moral problem: the observer cannot rely on conventional religious authority to resolve the suffering depicted. The poet sharpens this tension through her description of 'the Sainted guise | of Liberty' and the enjambment reflects the subversion fracture visually on the page. Liberty appears not as an emancipatory force but as a sanctified abstraction under which violence is exercised. The corrupted ideals, as Robinson had come to believe, mobilised in the name of revolution are rendered conceptually elevated yet ethically compromised. Furthermore her choice to describe Liberty as 'sainted', emphasises this idea further; the poet implies that the Revolution is based upon (dis)guise and hints at her epistemological scepticism as the true meaning of the words are perverted.

Scholars have noted how traditional family structures shaped political ideas during the French Revolution.[239] It is perhaps unsurprising that Robinson's portrayal of familial relationships, specifically between Hubert and Henry, are vital to her portrayal of suffering as it was composed in the aftermath of this particularly tumultuous period. We have seen that in the *Monody*, Robinson emphasises Marie Antoinette's status as both a woman and a mother in order to vindicate her, and also to highlight the tragedy of her death. In her other works influenced by the French Revolution, including her

[239] See for example Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.4-5, who argues:

> In the absence of any clear model for the private sentiments that might make a new order lovable, the revolutionaries fumbled their way through a thicket of interrelated problems. If absolutism had rested on the model of patriarchal authority, then would the destruction of absolutism depend on the destruction of patriarchy, what the French called "la puissance paternelle"? How far should the moderation of paternal authority go? Would the restriction of paternal authority make everyone in the political family equal, brother with brother, brother with sister, and children with parents? In other words, what kind of family romance would replace the one dominated by the patriarchal father? If paternalism was to be replaced by a model of fraternity, what were the implications of that new model? How, for instance, was the idea of the political exclusion of women to be maintained in the absence of the old justifications of "natural" family order? Would the model of the family be thrown out altogether in favor of a model based on isolated, independent, self-possessing, contracting individuals? 'The attack on absolutism brought in its turbulent wake a necessary reevaluation of the shape of the individual self.

novels such as *Walsingham* (1797), *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796) and *The Natural Daughter* (1799), she also structures the narrative around familial ideals, examining both traditional and non-traditional gender roles.[240] Specifically, in 'The Alien Boy', the absence of a wife for the widower, Hubert, and, more importantly of a maternal figure for Henry intensifies the sense of vulnerability and precariousness reflected throughout the poem. Henry never experiences this stabilising, nurturing presence; he has no formative memories of his own mother and her absence becomes a noticeable presence. Robinson notes that Henry would:

> Oft ask, who bore him: and with curious skill
> Enquire why he, and only one beside
> Peopled the desart mountain? (33-35).

Robinson's punctuation here, specifically the colon and the fracturing of the question across the lineation breaks up the flow of the syntax, producing a movement that mirrors boy's fragmented sense of self. Henry attempts to piece together a personal history that has been ripped apart by exile and loss. Though the boy was just a baby when he first arrived upon the cliffside and his mother was killed during the Revolution, here Robinson emphasises his emerging consciousness. This serves to exacerbate the tragedy of his later insanity and mutism as the child is denied his past and is therefore condemned to perpetual alienation. Robinson builds upon this uncertainty in the following lines:

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[240] In *Walsingham*, Robinson stages a sustained interrogation of gender performance and social expectation through the figure of Sidney, a heroine who is presented as male for much of the narrative, thereby unsettling normative assumptions about femininity and the socialisation of virtue. In *Hubert de Sevrac*, the daughter Sabina and her mother articulate forms of female independence and resilience that counter the patriarchal codes of the ancien régime even as the family is thrown into upheaval by revolutionary dislocation. *The Natural Daughter* stages its own complex family narrative against the backdrop of the Terror, using the figure of Martha Morley, an illegitimate child's adoptive mother and aspiring professional writer, to unsettle the gendered boundaries of domestic economy and self-determination.

Still his Sire
Was slow of answer, and, in words obscure,
Varied the conversation (35–37)

Here the father's evasive replies and the 'obscure' language echo Henry's earlier broken question, reinforcing the idea that knowledge, and possibly even truth itself is distorted. These lines both embody and build upon Henry's uncertain sense of identity: each pause, each half-finished clause, portrays the psychological rupture that stems from his grief. In this way, Robinson consolidates the condition of the 'Alien Boy' as a figure of alterity; his vulnerability to suffering is not only physical or social, but linguistic and affective, staged within domestic routines that offer neither maternal mediation nor comfort from his father.

It is notable that the poet does not try to evoke a response from the reader through hyperbolic language, rather she simply describes the interaction between Hubert and Henry. Robinson emphasises the pair's dependence on one another, they are not just father and son, but equals in sorrow, showing how isolation concentrates suffering and makes witnessing the primary medium through which emotion and connection are enacted. The boy's presence is both a comfort and a reflection of his father's grief: their bond frames the limited social and emotional world they inhabit. Early in the poem, Robinson makes this explicit:

The melancholy wretch had liv'd unseen
By all save HENRY, a lov'd little Son,
The partner of his sorrows. (5–7)

Robinson's use of enjambment here, momentarily sustains Hubert's condition of invisibility before emphasising that Henry is the sole witness to his grief. Suffering is thus defined not only by loss but by the absence of recognition. By naming the child as 'The partner of his sorrows', Robinson assigns Henry a responsibility that exceeds

companionship, and the language that Robinson uses here possibly even binds him to grief itself. Here, the poet does not resolve the moral implications of this relationship. Instead, it allows the pressure of internalised and deeply personalised suffering to accumulate, noting the pain caused when it is sustained without an external witness.

Robinson's portrayal of Hubert transforms masculine bravery into an ethical problem, showing that courage alone cannot be an effective substitute for care or moral responsibility. Hubert's descent down the steep cliff exemplifies this. He 'hurried, boldly venturous, | Catching the slimy weeds, from point to point' and moved 'unappall'd by peril', until, at the foot of the rude rock, the shipwrecked mariner 'Seiz'd on his outstretch'd arm; impatient, wild, | With transport exquisite' (12-18). While Hubert's courage is initially celebrated, Robinson dwells upon the ethical limits of masculine heroism: action alone cannot substitute for care, and witnessing peril does not guarantee responsibility. As the poet observes in *A Letter to the Women of England*, few men 'nobly unite the softest passion of the soul, with the enthusiasm of valour'[241]; indeed in 'The Alien Boy', the father's focus on courage and support for a stranger undermines his role as a protector for his nearest and dearest. That said, Hubert's immediate attempt to rescue the drowning sailor appears, at first, to resolve the problem of passive spectatorship that haunts Robinson's earlier representations of suffering. Yet this movement from observation to action does not eliminate the distance between observer and sufferer. Rather, it suggests that ethical response operates in advance of, and perhaps independently from, full comprehension. Robinson does not critique the impulse to alleviate suffering, but instead situates it within a framework in which the suffering of others remains only partially accessible. Henry on the other hand is heroic;

[241] Mary Robinson, 'A Letter to the Women of England', in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by Brewer, William D., D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), p.114.

he survives peril through resourcefulness, and profoundly vulnerable, deprived of the care traditionally associated with maternal or paternal figures. The fact that he is referred to as a 'boy' maintains him as a childish figure throughout the narrative. He is not an adult, but he is denied the protection that any child should receive. By positioning the reader as witness to both his courage and exposure to danger, Robinson transforms masculine bravery into an ethical as well as aesthetic problem, compelling reflection on the responsibilities of heroism, the limits of initiative, and the moral stakes of observation.

Hubert's nostalgia for his former life as an aristocrat, as articulated in his journal, functions as an act of re-witnessing suffering. Despite their newfound wild state, outside the confines of civilisation, Robinson notes that 'A daily journal would Saint HUBERT make' (39) which reflects the tension between his position as an exile and his former life of extravagance. Robinson treats writing not as a mere instrument of civilisation, though it carries a trace of nostalgia for his former aristocratic life, but as a means of registering and, to an extent, prolonging suffering as he is forced to repeatedly engage with his past trauma. Hubert writes:

> Of his long banishment: and sometimes speak
> Of Friends forsaken, Kindred, massacred:–
> Proud mansions, rich domains, and joyous scenes
> For ever faded, – lost! (40–43)

The iterative accumulation in the poet's description of 'Friends forsaken, Kindred, massacred' enacts a rhythm of irretrievable loss. The dash and exclamation in 'For ever faded, – lost!' disrupt the line's flow, creating a break that mirrors the finality and shock of their dispossession. In this way, Robinson incorporates a sense of alterity into the structure of the lines themselves; repetition, pause, and abrupt closure make the pain

tangible, yet uncontainable within language. By the end of the poem, Henry's eventual muteness and Hubert's death ensure that his story can never be transmitted, leaving the reader as the sole witness to this unassimilable suffering. Robinson's poem itself fulfils a parallel function to the journal: just as Hubert inscribes and records pain, the poem stages its own mediation through language, demonstrating how the act of writing may report experience without offering resolution. The imaginative labour of the poet here both preserves and exposes suffering. Hubert's journal, Henry's silence, and the reader's sustained attention together constitute an ethics of witnessing that resists transmission and narrative closure.

Robinson also portrays the inheritance of status through the vertical landscape of the 'mountain'. Living at such a high altitude literally elevates Hubert and Henry's status and implies a link between aristocratic lineage and the dangerous exposure with which both forms of height are associated. Hubert's withdrawal from civilisation 'with his baby Son' (11) emphasises Henry's innocence, though this is immediately complicated by his resolve to conceal 'The secret of his birth, Ah! a birth too high' (12-13). Here, the interjection 'Ah!' breaks up the syntax of the line, registering a moment of anguish in which rank is acknowledged not as a privilege but as a liability. The voice of this interruption remains ambiguous as, at this moment, we do not know who is speaking, and therefore Robinson reflects upon the instability of identity and status themselves. Elevation functions not as refuge but as exposure, rendering aristocratic identity inseparable from the conditions that magnify suffering.

The ever-present ocean

Despite their isolation, Hubert and Henry initially live a modest but ordered domestic life in their cliffside domain, sustained by nature and their own company. Together, they build fires, and weave nets 'to snare the[ir] finny victim[s]' (24) emphasising their capacity to persevere in the face of profound misfortune. Hubert and Henry are both victims, but in order to survive they have to turn into predators, inflicting suffering upon other living creatures. Perhaps this hints toward Robinson's own internal conflicting beliefs regarding the ethics of the Revolution. Alongside this, the poet describes their sense of community and shared existence noting that 'Oft they sang | And talk'd' (24-5) together, which only emphasises the tragedy of Henry's mutism later in the poem. Nonetheless, this innately human experience is loomed over by the ever-present ocean: while the father and son's interactions are happening 'sullenly the waves would sound | Dashing the sandy shore' (24–5). Robinson again uses enjambment here to portray the persistent tension between the characters and the violent, ever-present force of their environment. The formal disruption mirrors the tension between suffering and voice: first comes the sound and then the violence. This is only emphasised by the fact that the reader is made to witness the fragility of ordinary human rituals under conditions of relentless exposure.

As the poem progresses, the ocean shifts from a vital life-giving site underpinned by a sense of foreboding to an overwhelming threat with its volatility reflecting the precarity of both father and son's shelter and their existence. Robinson describes the fact that:

> The boiling foam
> Rose to an altitude so fierce and strong
> That their low hovel totter'd (46–47)

Here, ‘boiling’ introduces a violent infernal register which is in direct opposition to what we might expect; just lines earlier Robinson notes that the action takes place ‘One winter time’ (44) shortly before Christmas. One we can once again infer Milton’s influence here as she transforms the sea into a hellish presence. The combination of heat and motion conveys uncontrollable energy, while the hovel’s precarity highlights the inadequacy of human protection against natural force. Returning again to the notion of height as a metaphor for social status, the poet implies that it is impossible for the fugitives to escape their previous life, and she emphasises the fact that danger, and by extension suffering, can follow them anywhere. Robinson also uses similarly harsh imagery of cliffs in ‘The Haunted Beach’. This poem is also included in *Lyrical Tales* and tells the story of a fisherman who lives on a lonely, desolate shore where shipwrecked mariners and their spectral crewmates appear by moonlight. This work places emphasis upon the physical landscape too in order to exacerbate the sense of isolation. Robinson writes:

> Above, a jutting cliff was seen
> Where Sea Birds hover’d, craving:
> And all around, the crags were bound with weeds’ (10-12)

This poem, though far more gothic in tone, similarly portrays the desolate, rocky landscape in order to dramatise the intersection of violence, guilt and the unforgiving sea. Nature here is not benign but menacing. In ‘The Alien Boy’, Henry’s isolation on his ‘mountain’ mirrors the desolate shore of ‘The Haunted Beach’, and in both poems the sea’s relentless force reflects the protagonists’ existential precarity. Henry, like the fisherman’s ghosts, is left at the mercy of elemental and social forces beyond his

control, highlighting Robinson's broader concern with how individuals are undone by loss and abandonment.

Robinson's preoccupation with cliffs as a transformative and liminal space is not necessarily unique; we might also recall Wordsworth's 'The Mad Mother' where the protagonist tells the child in her arms:

> And do not dread the waves below,
> When o'er the sea-rock's edge we go
> The high crag cannot work me harm
> Nor leaping torrents when they howl ('Mad Mother', 43-46)

Even in this moment of apparent comfort, maternal logic is deeply unstable: her reassurances are entwined with fear and delusion, exposing the child to danger even as she attempts to protect him. Wordsworth carefully crafts this image, layering a sense of peril against the mother's voice to produce a controlled yet anxiety-inducing effect. This is also different to what Robinson does in *Sappho and Phaon* where she hyperbolically implores the witness to imagine her 'faded frame' (XLII, 1) once she has leapt from the cliff. Robinson's ocean, though dangerous, carries a distinctly moral significance. The father and son observe the sea:

> And with fearful eyes
> Mark'd the vex'd deep, as the slow rising moon
> Gleam'd on the world of waters (49–51)

Just as in the other poems discussed in the thesis, Robinson's focus upon her protagonist's eyes is vital to our understanding of the role of suffering within the poem. Where in 'The Mad Mother', Wordsworth portrays a distorted image of maternal care in order to evoke a strong emotional response in his reader, Robinson differs in orientation as the reader cautiously watches the father and son as they observe the ocean. Here, Robinson relies on the imagery of vision as Hubert and Henry's 'fearful eyes' are a

physical embodiment of their suffering, and this foreshadows the alien boy's 'fixed' eye later in the poem. Moreover, Robinson's anthropomorphic description of the 'vex'd deep' frames the ocean itself as restless and hostile, and not simply a passive backdrop.The ocean itself is constructed as an embodiment of alterity but in this moment it begins to reflect the characters' own otherness. In this sense, Robinson's ocean resonates with Steve Mentz's observation that the sea is at once familiar and unfamiliar – a space of contradiction. He considers:

> Is our ocean Alien or part of our essential Core? The interlaced stories of how humans have imagined and interacted with the ocean over time show that both contrasting narratives speak lasting truths. Ocean defines our inhospitable home, but even that oxymoron doesn't quite capture the tension and urgency, dependence and fear, in the human-sea relationship.[242]

Robinson's depiction of the ocean exemplifies this duality, presenting it as simultaneously intimate and threatening, a landscape that has sustained the two exiles but also a site that will cause their demise, both literally in that Hubert dies and also metaphorically as it causes Henry to become insane. This conflicting notion can be seen through her vivid descriptions of the moon shining upon the tumultuous ocean. She writes:

> Now the full Moon, in crimson lustre shone
> Upon the outstretched Ocean. The black clouds
> Flew swiftly on, the wild blast following,
> And, as they flew, dimming the angry main
> With shadows horrible! (57–61)

Here, Mentz's insight into the ocean as both other and essential illuminates Robinson's poetics. The 'crimson lustre' of the moon transforms an image of nocturnal illumination into a sanguine, affectively charged light that suffuses the waves with menace. This turns a once familiar site into a source of abject fear. The relentless kinetic energy of the

[242] Steve Mentz, *Ocean* (New York, NY and London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2020), p.13.

clouds and wind, together with the ‘angry main’ dimmed by ‘shadows horrible’, externalises disorientation and panic, rendering the ocean a site of both existential and emotional exposure. Human presence is reduced to a ‘sombre speck | Upon the wide domain of howling Death!’ (63), emphasising fragility, erasure of agency, and the moral stakes of observation. It is notable that death itself has an audible presence, rendering human observation fraught and powerless, emphasising that witnessing does not confer agency or control over suffering, but Robinson nonetheless insists upon its importance.

Robinson roots the alterity that stems from suffering in the broader landscape itself, not simply the ocean. After the deaths of Hubert and the mariner, the moon ‘no longer quiver’d’ (101) on the sea, its earlier animation replaced by a ‘mist-encircled’ stillness that produces only a ‘blunted light’(103). Illumination is deliberately partial, revealing movement while withholding clarity, creating a visual field in which danger is present without being fully intelligible. The insistence that the light is ‘Enough to shew all things that mov’d around’ emphasises this minimal visibility. Robinson animates the environment through unsettling detail: ‘black weeds’ (104) are swept by the ‘night-blast’(105), and the breakers along the shore emit a low, continuous sound that she describes as ‘like the wisp’ring of a million souls’, collapsing natural sound into collective lament and transforming the sea into an auditory register of suffering. Most striking is Robinson’s evocation of the ‘green-deep mourning’, which fuses colour, depth, and affect, attributing grief not to human observers but to the ocean itself. Jacqueline Labbe argues that:

> even as she laces her poetic narratives with spectres, ghouls, bodies, and suicides, she [Robinson] also inserts directive tags that turn the attention, ultimately defusing the horror that, paradoxically, she seems unhesitatingly to

> pursue. In this, she elides the force of her violent scenes and transforms the potentially terrifying into the merely moral.'[243]

I would suggest that Robinson does not neutralise horror but rather mobilises it to interrogate the ethical assumptions of sensibility. The scene stages suffering that is immediate, sensory, and morally insistent, yet resistant to comprehension or consolation. Violence is rendered atmospherically rather than narratively: the conditions of perception themselves, sight, sound, and the reader's sustained attention, mediate the encounter with anguish. In doing so, Robinson exposes the inadequacy of sentimental response, insisting that witnessing is both unavoidable and ethically fraught, a labour that preserves suffering without offering the familiar rewards of sympathy.

The intrusion of the shipwrecked mariner into Hubert and Henry's cliffside isolation complicates Robinson's concern with witnessing suffering as fundamentally, the pair see a mariner who will imminently be shipwrecked, but fail to save him. Positioned at a height that affords visibility without control, the pair look out to sea as an oncoming storm gathers:

> 'Twas a scene
> Would make a Stoic shudder! For amid
> The wavy mountains, they beheld alone (49–53)

From their precarious vantage point, the pair confront a spectacle that exceeds both emotional restraint and moral certainty. Upon first glance Stoicism here appears as inadequate, its promise of philosophical detachment unravelled in the face of exposed human life. By insisting that even a Stoic would 'shudder', the poet signals that detachment is impossible: the reader, like the characters, is morally compelled to witness the scene. Suffering here cannot be ignored or rationalised; the act of attentive

[243] Jacqueline M. Labbe, 'Deflected Violence and Dream‐Visions in Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*', *European Romantic Review*, 10.1–4 (1999), 163–74 (p.164).

observation itself becomes a moral and ethical responsibility. This appeal is shortly followed by Robinson's conglomeration of the ‘wavy mountains’ which disrupts the stable topography of the cliff, merging the sea into a shifting, ungraspable space that was once a place of sustenance but is now a site of alterity and incomprehensibility. The poet complicates her depiction of observation as it becomes disorienting, placing the witnesses in a position where seeing does not translate into understanding or action. This sensory excess prepares the ground for the appearance of the boat, whose fluctuating visibility stages the fragility of human life:

> A LITTLE BOAT, now scarcely visible;
> And now not seen at all; or, like a buoy,
> Bounding, and buffetting to reach the shore! (54–56)

The movement between ‘now scarcely visible; | And now not seen at all’ reproduces the instability of perception itself, forcing the reader into the same uncertain act of looking that defines Hubert and Henry’s position. The comparison to a buoy introduces a cruel irony: an object engineered to endure and stay rooted on the seabed is invoked to describe a vessel on the brink of annihilation. The present participles ‘Bounding, and buffetting’ depict the sea’s continuous assault; syntax, rhythm and diction together render motion as unceasing threat. Only belatedly is the vessel revealed to contain ‘a HUMAN FORM’ (75). In this moment signs of life emerge only after prolonged exposure to motion, noise, and threat, perhaps implying that suffering is first understood as disturbance rather than an emotion. When the mariner attempts to address his observers, auditory perception proves as unstable as sight:

> He marked the lonely exiles. Now he call’d
> But he was feeble, and his voice was lost
> Amid the din of mingling sounds that rose
> From the wild scene of clamour (81–84)

Robinson layers sound against sound, allowing the mariner's voice to be absorbed into the 'din' and 'clamour' of the scene. His 'feeble' state signals corporeal depletion, as speech, the vehicle of appeal and recognition, becomes indistinguishable from environmental noise. Seeing and hearing suffering are presented as obligations that expose the observers to responsibility without granting them the power to alleviate harm. Suffering must be attended to, yet attention itself is shown to be insufficient, leaving both characters and readers suspended between perception and impotence. The failure of intelligibility mirrors Henry's own progressive inability to communicate, linking vocal absence to the experience of witnessing and solitary suffering. As Hubert attempts to communicate with the mariner, 'A furious billow, rolling on the steep, | Engulf'd them in Oblivion!' (93–94) Sea and sound collide, exposing the characters to physical annihilation while in a way threatening articulation itself, as speech is extinguished by the force that occasions it. The scene that Robinson describes here is exceptionally visual and is reminiscent of Claude-Joseph Vernet's 'marines' or Philippe Jacques de Louthebourg's (1740-1812) wild watery landscapes. Both artists portray scenes which take on terrifying landscapes by portraying shipwrecks at night, often with wild waves. Though Vernet would have been known to Robinson, if only through engravings, Louthebourg is the subject of her poem 'Lines inscribed to P. De Louthebourg esq. R.A. on seeing his views in Switzerland &.c&.c.' (1791) The poem likely refers to his work 'The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen' (1788) which portrays a powerful and sublime image of the cascade. Robinson writes 'Loud torrents roar, and dashing waves rebound: Th'opposing rock, the azure stream divides' (12-13) which resonate both visually and aurally in a similar manner to 'The Alien Boy', though evidently one is fresh and one is salt water. What is particularly important is Robinson's

use of sensory imagery, which engages the reader's hearing and sight simultaneously, reinforcing the intensity of natural phenomena while linking the emotional register of her characters to the violence of the elemental world.

Isolation

Isolation and the role of the reader in observing it, is important to a number of Robinson's poems, not least those found in *Lyrical Tales*. This idea becomes even more relevant when considering Robinson's admiration for Coleridge. As previously noted Robinson's literary relationship with the poet proved exceptionally fruitful and their respective influences can be found in each other's writing.[244] In the 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', the protagonist faces similar isolation. Coleridge writes 'Alone, alone all all alone | Alone on the wide wide sea' (224) which is clearly similar to the wild boy's cry, and indeed similar to the first poem in *Lyrical Tales*, 'All Alone'.[245] But in Coleridge's work, the Mariner has disrupted and intruded upon nature through the murder of the albatross, 'a Christian Soul' (63), whereas Henry has more parallels with the albatross, as he is first taken away from his previous life, then his father drowns. In the closing stanzas of the poem, Robinson presents Henry, who has transformed into the titular 'Alien Boy', as profoundly estranged from society, responding to potential contact with instinctive, almost animalistic retreat. The poet writes:

> And if by chance,
> A Sea-beat wand'rer from the outstretch'd main
> Views the lone Exile, and with gen'rous zeal
> Hastes to the sandy beach, he suddenly
> Darts mid the cavern'd cliffs (131–135)

[244] 'The Savage of Aveyron', according to Judith Pascoe, 'exhibits the metrical influences of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan.'Judith Pascoe, *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 1999) p.332.

[245] In this work the speaker comes across an orphaned child in a churchyard and she declares 'Thou art not left alone, poor boy | The stops to hear thy tale' ('All Alone' 7-8).

Here, the poet emphasises the improbability, rather than the impossibility of social contact which helps to convey a sense of self-imposed exile. Robinson reiterates the traumatic conditions that brought him to the cliffside in the first place, perpetuating his suffering. The way that the boy 'darts' conveys swift, instinctive movement, suggesting an erratic flight reflex. The cliffs serve as both concealment and refuge, reinforcing the boy's self-imposed isolation. Witnessing is thus rendered ambivalent: although the observer perceives him, the boy's own perception of being seen triggers his immediate withdrawal. Robinson frames this response as the embodied consequence of trauma and estrangement; the boy's social alienation is manifested through his flight, rendering him both vulnerable and untouchable, a figure suspended between human recognition and the protective enclosure of the natural world.

Robinson's poetry often emphasises how pain becomes perceptible through the senses; In Henry's case, the experience of loss is portrayed through outward description rather than through the portrayal of inner emotions. By the end of the poem, after experiencing the death of his father, Robinson writes that, 'Young HENRY stood aghast: his Eye wide fix'd' (112). It is notable that the poet hones in on the boy's eyes as we witness his suffering. Robinson extends this physical embodiment of his pain further noting that 'On his cheek | Despair sate terrible! (114-115).' It would seem that Robinson is making a case for physicalising emotions that cannot be expressed through voice. This tension becomes immediately apparent through Henry's attempts to speak.

> He spoke — he groan'd
> But no responsive voice, no kindred tone
> Broke the dread pause: For now the storm had ceas'd
> And the bright Sun-beams glitter'd on the breast
> Of the green placid Ocean. (120-4)

The transformation of the boy's voice is here set in direct opposition to nature. The calm and glittering ocean contrasts with his groan, reflecting the internal rupture of grief. Robinson's description of the noise as it 'broke the dread pause' emphasises the force of human feeling intruding into a space of stillness, while the imagery of sunlight on the placid ocean emphasises the indifference of nature to human suffering. Robinson reinforces the connection between articulation and humanity. The anguished boy's voice asserts a moral and emotional presence that the external world cannot replicate. Elaine Scarry suggests that 'the voice becomes a final source of self-extension, so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, it occupies a space much longer than the body.'[246] In the poem, vocalisation functions precisely in this way: speech projects the boy's interior suffering into a shared space, allowing his pain to register and be recognised. The voice resists the reduction of suffering to bodily affliction alone, momentarily sustaining the self as relational and ethically legible before it is threatened by silence. Scarry goes further to argue that 'only in silence do the edges of the self become coterminous with the edges of the body'[247] which, in relation to Henry's muteness collapses the self, and experiences of suffering, back into corporeality making his inner turmoil visible.

After Hubert's death Robinson traces the consequences of Henry's grief into the domestic sphere, demonstrating how familiar objects, which ordinarily offer stabilising effects, become instruments of alienation once trauma fractures subjectivity. Not unlike the Savage of Aveyron, the subject of the next chapter, the moment at which Henry shifts from an articulate, domesticated boy into the inarticulate, estranged 'alien boy' is

[246] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) p.33.
[247] *Ibid*., p.33.

marked with abrupt narrative precision, emphasising both psychological rupture and the collapse of speech:

> To his Hut
> The lorn Boy hasten'd; there the rushy couch,
> The pillow still indented, met his gaze
> And fix'd his eye in madness. — From that hour
> A maniac wild, the Alien Boy has been; (120–128)

The domestic imagery is central to Robinson's representation of suffering. The 'rushy couch' and the 'pillow still indented' register as material traces of intimacy and prior presence, but rather than stabilising Henry, they confront him with absence. These objects function as silent witnesses, fixing his gaze and precipitating psychological collapse. This is a form of compromised, or one might even describe it as corrupted, domesticity. The 'rushy couch' gestures towards an uneasy overlap between nature and home, a makeshift bed that unsettles any clear boundary between the natural and the domestic, and therefore intensifies the sense of precarity rather than comfort. As Mintz argues:

> Pain can emerge in surprising guises, the subject of a poetic inquiry that articulates pain to refashion it from isolated body parts or the clash of tropes and associations. Such work presents the disturbance of pain in two ways: pain may be the disrupter of coherent experience or identity, but it is also interrogated, its status as a self-evident, inherently negative phenomenon disturbed.[248]

Robinson's scene exemplifies this disturbance. Pain is not localised in the body but illustrated through domestic space, its potency refracted through objects that make loss visible without articulating it directly. Formally, the abrupt dash before 'From that hour' mirrors the violent rupture in Henry's psyche, while the sustained rhythm leading up to it heightens the suddenness of his descent. Madness is not presented as a gradual

[248] Susannah B. Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering Body*, (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.32.

deterioration but as an event which provides an instantaneous reconfiguration of his consciousness. The hut, once a site of shelter and home, becomes an embodiment of his otherness. Furthermore, the poet gives his consciousness physical qualities, describing 'the tablet of his mind, disorder'd chang'd, | Fading, and worn with care' (130-1). Cognition is figured as inarticulate and eroded, collapsing the boundary between interior knowledge and external experience. Voice, previously a marker of Henry's articulate humanity, is now fragmented, its loss rendering interior disorder externally legible. As elsewhere in Robinson's work, including 'Sight', speech, reason, and perception are inseparable from moral and emotional being. Their disruption signifies profound loss, and Robinson's treatment of domestic space, cognition, and voice compels the reader to witness suffering as something encountered and endured, rather than abstractly explained. Curran notes that 'however constant and pressing the pathos in *Lyrical Tales*, the extremity of the depiction make it seem a just response to the tears of real things.'[249] Indeed, in many of the poems in the collection, this is true. but as a work that places particular emphasis upon observation rather than emotion.

Moral?

'The Alien Boy' does not resolve the ethical dilemma of how to respond to suffering, but it insists that the observer at least recognise Henry's capacity for endurance. For Robinson, the boy's survival itself becomes a form of achievement. The poem conveys a message that is less moralistic than reflective, emphasising resilience: Robinson highlights the boy's perseverance despite his vulnerability to both environmental and social violence. He becomes:

[249] Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson, Joel Haefner, and Stuart Curran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 17–35, p.31.

A melancholy proof that Man may bear
All the rude storms of Fate, and still suspire
By the wide world forgotten (137–140)

Her assertion that the poem, and by extension, Henry's story itself, functions as 'melancholy proof', adds an element of disconnection to the poem, akin to the way that one might describe a case study. Robinson's choice of the word 'suspire' exploits its dual meaning, signifying both the simple act of breathing and a melancholic sigh. The boy now leads a tragic, diminished existence, in which the only consolation is the continued rhythm of his own respiration. Robinson acknowledges the boy's vulnerability, though she stops short of the other works in this thesis, such as in 'Sight' where the protagonist will find alleviation from his pain in heaven or the *Monody* where the poet emphasises the fact that Marie Antoinette's memory will live on. In 'The Alien Boy', Henry's melancholy is transferred to the reader as they witness his pain, but her invocation of the 'Rude storms of Fate' reminds us that this suffering is shaped by forces beyond human control, positioning personal anguish within a broader, almost inexorable order. As Daniel Robinson observes, 'Under the influence of Southey and Wordsworth, [during her tenure at the *Morning Post*] Robinson becomes more interested in narrative poetry as a vehicle for a similar humanitarian concern for the poor and disenfranchised – a concern that Robinson had expressed previously in more ostensibly lyric poetry.' [250] While this account is persuasive for several poems in the *Lyrical Tales*, it is less applicable to 'The Alien Boy'. Instead, the poem withholds the affective rewards typically associated with narrative consolation, presenting suffering as

[250] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p.179.

something that cannot be redeemed through social concern or moral recognition, but must instead be endured by the reader.

Conclusion

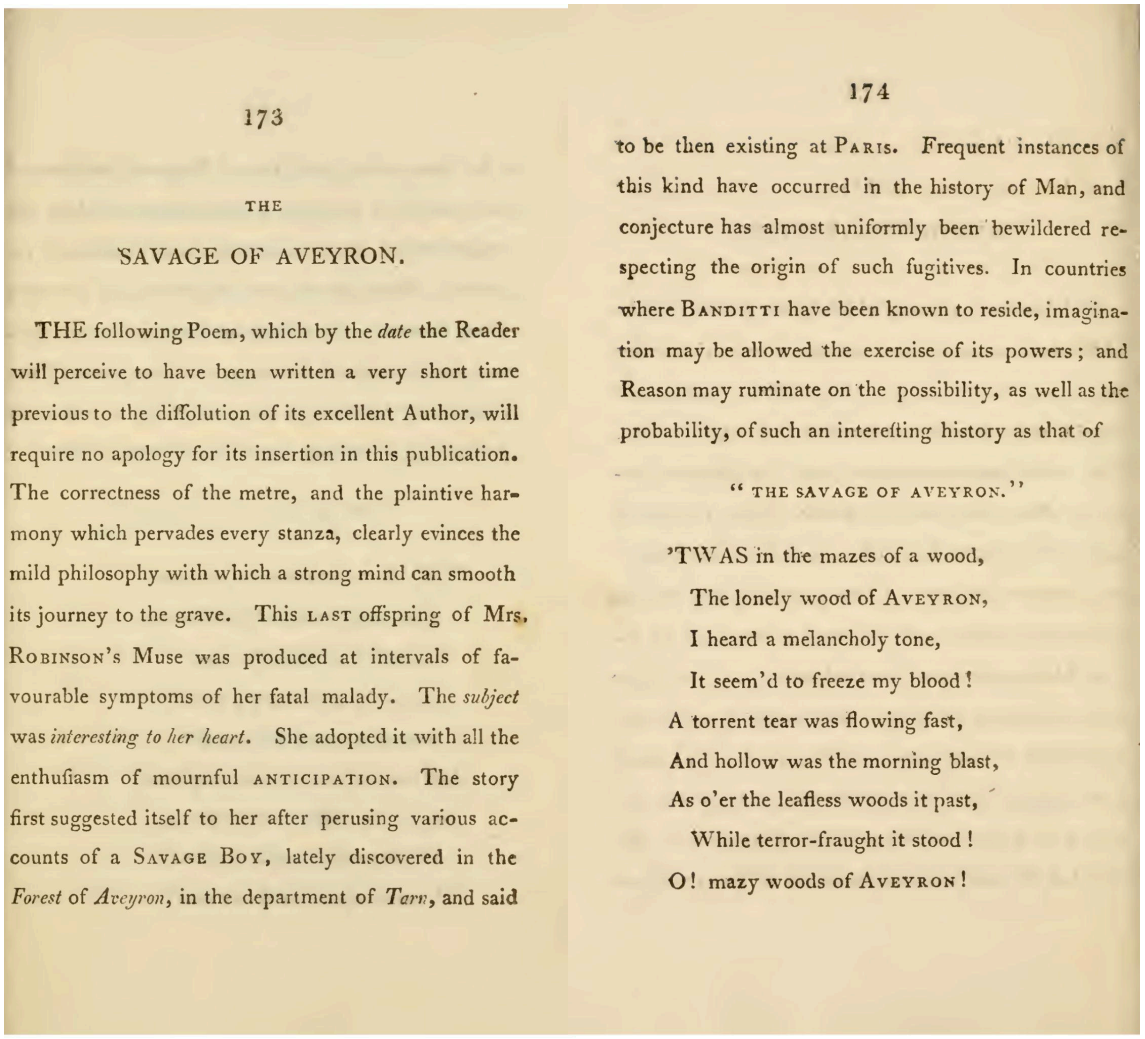
'The Alien Boy' is a poem about the terms of alterity and resilience. It stages the conditions under which suffering is witnessed and represented, rather than exploring the boy's inner feelings or attempting to guide the reader to feel sympathy. The poem presents suffering as both observable and ethically charged, insisting on attention and careful perception as the primary mode of engagement. Henry's experiences of loss and grief are persistently externalised: the poem directs attention towards what is seen, heard, and recorded, rather than towards the emotional responses such scenes might provoke in the reader.

From the outset, Robinson foregrounds the act of observation through the watchful attention of father and son, emphasising their fearful eyes and finally Henry's fixed gaze. She offers no direct access to Henry's inner life, instead leaving the reader to impose their own frames of interpretation. This portrayal resonates with what Wordsworth and Coleridge are doing in some poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. For example, in 'Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman' Wordsworth writes 'It is no tale; but you should think, | Perhaps a tale you'll make it' (79-80). In many ways Robinson encourages the reader to come to their own conclusion by the end of 'The Alien Boy' and does not demand sympathy. She uses this approach to accentuate alterity: the ethical force of the poem emerges from the careful attention paid to the boy as an other figure, rather than from sympathetic engagement. This narrative approach allows suffering to be portrayed in its immediate, external manifestations, enabling the reader to witness its impact without

mediation. In this sense, her use of poetic narrative amplifies both the moral and affective elements of experience, offering a more observationally grounded mode of moral reflection than the emotionally mediated approaches explored in earlier chapters.

Curran remarks that most of the poems within *Lyrical Tales* portray, 'grotesque, even extreme alienation, as the initially marginalized are cut away from whatever moorings are still at their disposal.'[251] This observation is particularly apposite here. The alien boy exists entirely outside familiar social, familial, and narrative structures, rendered profoundly isolated not only by circumstance but by the poem's formal refusal of sympathetic mediation. For that reason, it offers an examination of what poetic witnessing can achieve; rather than offering suffering as an object transparently available to the reader's pity, In doing so, 'The Alien Boy' emerges as a poem concerned less with emotional identification than with the terms of otherness and endurance – a concern that prepares the ground for Robinson's more sustained engagement with the figure of the wild child in 'The Savage of Aveyron', to which the next chapter turns.

[251] Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson, Joel Haefner, and Stuart Curran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 17–35 (p.32-3).



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THE

SAVAGE OF AVEYRON.

THE following Poem, which by the *date* the Reader will perceive to have been written a very short time previous to the diſſolution of its excellent Author, will require no apology for its insertion in this publication. The correctness of the metre, and the plaintive harmony which pervades every stanza, clearly evinces the mild philosophy with which a strong mind can smooth its journey to the grave. This LAST offspring of Mrs. ROBINSON's Muse was produced at intervals of favourable symptoms of her fatal malady. The *subject* was *interesting to her heart*. She adopted it with all the enthuſiasm of mournful ANTICIPATION. The story first suggested itself to her after perusing various accounts of a SAVAGE BOY, lately discovered in the *Forest* of *Aveyron*, in the department of *Tarn*, and said

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to be then existing at PARIS. Frequent instances of this kind have occurred in the history of Man, and conjecture has almost uniformly been bewildered respecting the origin of such fugitives. In countries where BANDITTI have been known to reside, imagination may be allowed the exercise of its powers; and Reason may ruminate on the possibility, as well as the probability, of such an intereſting history as that of

"THE SAVAGE OF AVEYRON."

'TWAS in the mazes of a wood,
The lonely wood of AVEYRON,
I heard a melancholy tone,
It seem'd to freeze my blood!
A torrent tear was flowing fast,
And hollow was the morning blast,
As o'er the leafless woods it past,
While terror-fraught it stood!
O! mazy woods of AVEYRON!

Figure 6: Title page of 'The savage of Aveyron', in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself, with some posthumous pieces in verse*, ed. by Mary Elizabeth Robinson, 4 vols, (London: R. Phillips, 1801), Vol. III. Image from https://archive.org/details/memoirsoflatemrs00robi.

Chapter five: Voicing identity in 'The Savage of Aveyron'

'The Alien Boy' is not the only suffering child that Robinson focused her poetic attention upon at the turn of the century. In 1800, a feral child was captured in rural France. The 'Savage of Aveyron' as he became known, after the 'département' in which he was found, is the subject of one of Robinson's last published poems.[252] One might wonder what led the Englishwoman to write about this specific wild French boy. The third volume of *The Memoirs of the late Mrs Mary Robinson* (1801), in which the text was first published, offers us an initial answer regarding her choice of protagonist. Maria Elizabeth chose to include the work, revealing in the poem's preface that 'the subject was interesting to [Robinson's] heart. She adopted it with all the enthusiasm of mournful anticipation.'[253] Certainly, as previous chapters have shown, desolation and isolation featured prominently in Robinson's poetry. This poem goes further than 'The Alien Boy', focusing on the wild boy's experience of suffering following his bereavement, exploring the fragility of his voice and the limits of his agency. This chapter will therefore consider how Robinson is inspired by the wild boy's depiction within the press, but rejects some parts of it, to construct a complex and multi-dimensional poem expressing ideas about the relationship between suffering and voice.

The 175 line poem was written mere months after *Lyrical Tales* was sent for publication while Robinson's health was severely in decline. Although her own

[252] Published posthumously in the 1801 *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Mary Robinson*, then again in 1806 in a collection of poems entitled *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs Mary Robinson: Including Many Pieces Never before Published* and once more in the collection of poems published by her daughter, *The Wild Wreath*.
[253] *The Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson written by herself with some posthumous pieces in iv volumes*, ed. by Maria Elizabeth Robinson (London: Wilkes and Taylor for R. Philips, 1801).

suffering inevitably informs the poem's tone, its primary purpose lies in articulating the experience and voice of the feral child at its centre. Maria Elizabeth notes that:

> The correctness of the metre, and the plaintive harmony which pervades every stanza, clearly evinces the mild philosophy with which a strong mind can smooth its journey to the grave. This LAST offspring of Mrs ROBINSON'S Muse was produced at intervals of favourable symptoms of her fatal malady'.[254]

While Robinson's condition frames the context of composition, the 'plaintive harmony' serves primarily as a poetic medium through which the child's profound suffering is given voice. At the same time, Maria Elizabeth's emphasis on 'the correctness of the metre' and her mother's 'mild philosophy' draws attention to the extent to which that suffering is formally mediated, even disciplined, by the structures of the verse. The metre does not merely carry affect but orders it, shaping distress into a mode that is both legible and aesthetically coherent. In this sense, the 'plaintive harmony' operates not only as an expressive vehicle but as a regulating principle, one that aligns the representation of suffering with the moral and aesthetic expectations of sensibility. The child's experience is thus articulated through a form that both enables and constrains it, rendering extremity perceptible while tempering its potential resistance to poetic and philosophical containment. As Daniel Robinson notes, the poem 'can be scanned as having an iambic foot matrix with a few substitutions. It is framed by two intricate fifteen-line stanzas with slightly different rhyme schemes. […] with twelve similarly rhymed twelve-line stanzas within'.[255] This formal complexity not only demonstrates Robinson's technical mastery but also functions as a vital framework within which the silenced and traumatised voice of the feral child is rendered audible. Through this

[254] 'The Memoirs of Mary Robinson' in *The Works of Mary Robinson*, ed. by William D. Brewer, D. Robinson, S. M. Setzer, and O. Smith eds., (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), II, p.191.
[255] Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p.211.

disciplined structure, Robinson negotiates the tensions between language and muteness, giving expression to a subject who exists at the limits of taxonomical, social and linguistic integration.

Critical engagement with Robinson's poem has been largely limited to its relationship to the discovery and scientific evaluation of the wild boy of Aveyron. It has been seen as a contextualising work rather than a significant early reaction to the boy's story. The poem has certainly been overlooked and undervalued; for instance, Patrick McDonagh refers to the poem as 'one of the few pieces of wild-boy ephemera to be recovered intact from history's dustbin.'[256] To treat the poem as merely 'ephemera', is to overlook Robinson's meaningful portrayal of the relationship between suffering and voice. When attention has been given to the poem, there have been some attempts to cast Robinson as a feral figure herself. The idea, as Ann Milne seems to suggest, that the poet found 'comfort with a feral identity' throughout her life and that this was conveyed throughout her works, is problematic and constitutes an oversimplification of the poet's long career: Robinson was a liberated woman, not a feral child.[257] Simply identifying the author with her subject as 'notorious', due to their portrayal in the press, and 'thing-like and disabled', as a result of their impairments, is reductive.[258] Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia suggest that , 'because of hers and the wild boy's notoriety, "The Savage of Aveyron" becomes news about news.'[259] To attempt to categorise either the poet, or the wild boy, simply by their disabilities and reputations alone, deprives the reader of subtle insights into their identities, but also in Robinson's

[256] Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 51.
[257] Ann Milne, 'At the Precipice of Community: Feral Openness and the Work of Mary Robinson', *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts*, 2.1 (2012), 1-14 (p.3).
[258] *Ibid*..
[259] *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider, and Catherine E. Ingrassia, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 274.

case, her intellectual interest in the suffering of others. I will, therefore, address the question: why did the stories in the press fire Robinson's imagination to such an extent that she not only wrote a poem about the feral child, but made him her own by developing a complex narrative about the circumstances of his suffering?

This chapter will begin by describing the circumstances of the wild boy's discovery. Then it turns to a consideration of the role of the newspapers in the construction of the feral child's identity to evaluate his public image and perceived identity. I will examine how Robinson both uses and deviates from these reports in order to portray the suffering of the savage boy: he is shown to be neither human, from the perspective of eighteenth-century scientific discourse, nor animal, through the poet's complex portrayal of his consciousness. Then, I will interrogate the effects of Robinson's inclusion of religious motifs upon the multi-dimensional construction of the child's characterisation, and how this relates to his mutism and ascribes a sense of agency to both the poet and her feral subject. This section will also address how Robinson engaged readers to think about him differently from the scientific discourse presented in other contemporary representations.

The discovery of a wild boy

Following an initial sighting in May 1797, the boy had been wandering the woods near La Bassine in the 'département' of Tarn in 1799. Robinson's feral child was believed to have been captured twice by woodsmen and brought to the town of Lacaune, escaping both times. It was only when he arrived on the outskirts of Saint Sernin on 8th January 1800 that the wild boy, presumed to be approximately twelve years old, began his integration into human society. The child was taken in by the government

commissioner, Jacques Jean Constans Saint Estève. Just two days later he was sent to an orphanage at Saint-Affrique where he was entrusted to the care of Pierre-Joseph Bonnaterre (1752-1804), a French Professor of Natural History at the École centrale d'Aveyron who eventually wrote the first, but not the most famous, scientific study of the boy, *Notice historique sur le sauvage de l'Aveyron.*[260]

Shortly after the wild boy of Aveyron's discovery in 1800, he became an important figure within the wider taxonomical debates begun by the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus' (1707–1778) *Systema Naturae* (1735), and his idea of the 'Homo Ferus' was developed further by French scientists such as Bonnaterre, Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) and Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1774-1838).[261] Attempts to understand the feral child's mental and linguistic capabilities were considered a failure by Pinel, who viewed the boy as 'destined for the Bicêtre, the Paris hospital for the insane and imbecilic'. [262] As a result of the feral child's muteness and mental disabilities, he had no name other than the ones given to him by others such as 'the Savage of Aveyron'[263] and then later on 'Victor.'[264] The name Victor was given to the boy by his teacher Itard.[265]

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[260] Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre, *Notice historique sur le sauvage de l'Aveyron, et sur quelques autres individus qu'on a trouvés dans les forêts, à différentes époques. Par P. J. Bonnaterre, professeur d'histoire naturelle à l'École centrale du département de l'Aveyron* (Paris: Panckoucke,1799).

[261] See Patrick McDonagh, 'A "Pupil of innocent Nature!" The wild boy of Aveyron goes to Paris', in *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 50-78.

[262] Patrick McDonagh, 'The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and the Deaf Mute in Early-Nineteenth Century France', *Criticism*, 55 (2013), 655-675, (p. 665).

[263] It is important to note that the term for the boy, 'savage', has derogatory connotations in contemporary usage. I will therefore only use this phrase when discussing it in its relevant context, in quotation marks and to refer to debates current during his lifetime. Furthermore, the term had a double meaning in the eighteenth century with 'savage' sometimes referring to something that was brutal and uncivilised, but also meaning uncorrupted and innocent, such as Rousseau's 'noble savage'. Therefore, Robinson's title is inherently ambiguous.

[264] It is thought that, despite Itard's claims, he actually named him after the protagonist from the melodrama *Victor ou l'enfant de la forêt*, by René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt which was running in Paris at the time and was based on a successful 1797 novel of the same title by François Guillaume Ducray-Duminil.

[265] The most famous book on the wild boy was a case study by the child's eventual guardian Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard. It was published after Robinson's death so it is not relevant to this investigation but nonetheless contains some interesting scientific information. See Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, *De l'éducation d'un homme sauvage, ou Des premiers développemens physiques et moraux du jeune sauvage*

He maintained that it was based upon the sounds that the child made. These titles are at best imprecise, but at worst completely inaccurate: the child was not from Aveyron his name was doubtless not originally Victor and indeed, it is disputed that he was actually a wild boy.[266] This did not stop the plethora of publications, which as Patrick McDonagh points out, either 'explored[ed] or exploit[ed] the boy's semiotic potential: who and what precisely might he be?'[267]

The press

In order to understand the literary trajectory of Robinson's wild boy, it therefore is necessary to turn to the very first newspaper reports written about him as these are the foundation for the way that the boy was perceived within contemporary society. It is likely that Robinson's professional relationship with the *Morning Post* as poetry editor, her sustained interest in current affairs, and her Francophilia contributed to inspiring her poem 'The Savage of Aveyron.' French newspapers soon heard about his arrival and the *Journal des débats, et lois du pouvoirs legislatif, et des actes du gouvernement* published Constans Saint Estève's correspondence with the orphanage two weeks after the boy's emergence from the forest on 25th January 1800. This was the beginning of the media scrutiny the 'savage' received. Curiosity around the position of feral children within society meant that there was a surge in both positive and negative press coverage which appeared in both France and England.

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de l'Aveyron (Paris: Goujon fils, 1801) and, also by Itard, *Rapport fait à son excellence le ministre de l'intérieur sur les nouveaux développemens et l'état actuel du sauvage de l'Aveyron* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1807

[266] See Thierry Gineste, *Victor de l'Aveyron : Dernier enfant sauvage, premier enfant fou* (Paris : Hachette, 1993) and Lucien Malson, *Wolf Children* (London: NLB, 1972).

[267] Patrick McDonagh, 'The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and the Deaf Mute in Early-Nineteenth Century France', *Criticism*, 55 (2013), 655–675, p.665.

Detailed information about the wild boy did not start circulating in the English press until the summer of 1800. Though it is possible that Robinson might have learnt of his discovery from a French periodical, it is likely that the factual details that the poet includes originate from the feral child's depiction in the *Morning Post.* The issue dated 4th August included an in-depth article informing its readership that a 'savage' from had arrived in Paris and had been 'entrusted to the care of the ingenious and amicable Sicard, the master of the deaf and dumb school'. [268] Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard (1742–1822) was a French abbé and pioneering educator of the deaf, who led the Institut National des Jeunes Sourds in Paris. The *Morning Post* article, as well as another from 3rd October later that year, appear to constitute the main basis of Robinson's poem and many significant details figure in these newspaper reports.[269]

One of the most widely read articles expressing contemporary suspicion of the 'savage' of Aveyron appeared in the *Journal de Paris* in August 1800. There was a lively, if fierce, debate after journalist George Feydel wrote several letters questioning the boy's legitimacy as a truly savage child. In response to an article by astronomer Citoyen Lalande (1732–1807), who on 10th August (22 thermidor an VIII), Feydel asserts 'en conséquence de ma lecture [de l'article dans la *Gazette de France* par Lalande], je propose de parier 24 Fr. contre l'auteur de l'article, que le prétendu Sauvage de l'Aveyron n'est qu'un petit comédien qui joue passablement son rôle.'[270] Feydel with the proposed bet that he might be an imposter, and these articles contributed to later sceptical attitudes towards the child.[271]

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[268] 'The Savage of Aveyron', *Morning Post*, 14 August 1800.
[269] *Ibid*.
[270] Gineste, *Victor de l'Aveyron*, p. 147
'Consequently, after reading the article in *La Gazette de France* by Lalande, I propose to wager 24 francs against the author of the piece that the alleged Savage of Aveyron is merely an actor who plays his role rather passably.' My translation.
[271] See Gineste, *Victor de L'Aveyon*, pp. 147-180.

In England, conjecture surrounding the circumstances of his abandonment are reduced to a mere speculation in the *Morning Post*: 'It appears not improbable that this unhappy child was abandoned by his parents on account of some deformity in his organisation, which rendered him a disagreeable object.'[272] Robinson's evocation of his disabilities, on the other hand, creates a much more vivid picture of the child and constructs a narrative that challenges the idea of him being abandoned by his mother: 'She past the night, bewilder'd wild, | She past it with her fearless child'(140-141). The child is 'fearless' thanks to his 'bewilder'd' Mother staying with him, as though her protection, at this stage, is sufficient to reassure him completely. Additionally, as we have seen in the *Monody*, this is not the first time that Robinson has used the image of the mother and child in order to evoke sympathy. Here, Robinson suggests that the feral child was both loved and protected which distinguishes her vision from his portrayal by the newspapers (which seem to blame his alleged abandonment on his disabilities) and renders his suffering visible and relatable, to an extent. In the *Morning Post* on 3rd October 1800, the boy is described in a cold and clinical manner as having a limp: 'the formation of this child is nothing extra-ordinary. It is only remarkable that he constantly draws one leg after him, which makes his walk appear very awkward and disagreeable.'[273] Robinson's physical description of the feral child, or rather its lack of specificity, speaks to the poet's over-arching interest in his mutism, and what it means to voice suffering without a voice. His physical impairment does not appear in Robinson's version though it is likely that she would have been aware of it as the article appeared in the newspaper in which she published her own poetry. Robinson's child has no problem 'Quitting the blasted tree' (79) to show the speaker his rudimentary life within the

[272] 'From a Paris Journal', *Morning Post,* 3 October 1800.
[273] *Ibid*..

forest. The 'savage' does not evoke disgust or monstrosity resulting from his physical disabilities, rather the focus of Robinson's poem is the boy's displacement from society, and her intention is to give voice to his suffering. Much has been said about the anthropological and philosophical issue of the discovery of feral children by scholars such as Julia Douthwaite who argues that:

> The reactions to the discovery of Peter [of Hannover], Marie-Angélique [Memmie Le Blanc], and Victor [The Savage of Aveyron] reveal a shift from early apprehensions about mankind's place on the "great chain of being" and moral concerns about humanity's postlapsarian nature to a later stance of optimism about the powers of science to improve and even cure victims of isolation.[274]

Yet, the narratives surrounding the feral children's discovery become ones of scepticism, speculation and rumour, which is only fuelled by their inability to coherently describe and navigate the public through their own story. We might assume, as so many have done before, that Robinson's wild boy is simply a component within the broader contemporary debates surrounding taxonomy and the nature of humanity; after all, the *Morning Post* outlined the scientific community's hopes for the boy to help 'elucidate the history of the intellectual faculty of man'.[275] Yet, as a mute individual the wild boy's representation raises questions about the ethical and imaginative challenges of depicting those who cannot speak for themselves. On the one hand it is possible to argue that Robinson dehumanises him in order to create a poetically and epistemologically complex protagonist. Though perhaps the most convincing argument is that the tension between objectification and agency emerges from her engagement

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[274] Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) p.57.
Peter of Hannover was a feral child found in 1725 near Hamelin in Germany. The following year at approximately age twelve, he was brought to Kensington Palace by George I. Like Victor, he was mute and physically disabled. Marie Angélique Memmie Le Blanc was discovered in 1731 aged between ten and nineteen years old in Champagne. Unlike the other two children, Le Blanc was eventually taught to speak and she later became a nun.
[275] 'The Savage of Aveyron', *Morning Post*, 3 October 1800.

with the ethical and imaginative challenges of representing a being whose suffering and inarticulacy demand attention, reflection, and a sympathetic response.

The voice of the mute

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that 'disability has experienced a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works. Consequently, disabled people's marginalization has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images.'[276] This is particularly relevant in the case of the wild boy as one of the problems that further complicates attempts to analyse the feral child's identity is that he has no voice both figuratively within his own narrative, and literally, as he is effectively mute. Everything from the wild boy's discovery to his evaluation by the many scientists who were interested in him was chronicled in the press, and this became the only seemingly factual representation in both England and France.

There are discrepancies between the newspaper reports and Robinson's portrayal in terms of the way that they convey the feral child's muteness, which was thought to be psychological and developmental rather than as a result of an injury. The *Morning Post* writes that 'He makes a noise like a scream' but Robinson takes extra care to ensure the reader knows that 'No mortal ear had heard his groan' (56).[277] This description seems to suggest that the wild boy's suffering stems from beyond human understanding. Just as the boy has been removed from civilised society through his life in the forest, and subsequently taken from 'the Lonely wood of Aveyron' (2) by the scientists, the poet indicates that the child's trials and tribulations are displaced from the human realm as nobody can hear his cries. Just as with 'The Alien Boy' the idea that suffering cannot

[276] David T. Mitchell and Sharon, L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disabilities and the dependencies of discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 6.
[277] 'The Savage of Aveyron', *Morning Post*, 14 August 1800.

truly be elucidated by the sufferer provides a comment upon its resistance to representation, particularly as these characters physically cannot speak. Therefore, the way that Robinson constructs the natural and isolated world that the wild boy inhabits builds further upon the abject as it is the only real sense of identity that we as readers can understand. McDonagh asserts that:

> The mute character, as well as the real-life mute individual, is paradoxically eloquent in his or her representational capacity, a trait that grows from the idea of muteness itself, an ambiguous, ambivalent signifier: is the muteness real, or is it assumed? And, if real, why is the mute rendered speechless? How might the mute acquire a voice? And what, then might the voice reveal?[278]

From this perspective, McDonagh insists that muteness functions as a productive ambiguity rather than a straightforward lack of speech. By holding open the question of what muteness is, how it comes about, and what it might conceal, the passage frames silence as a space in which meaning gathers and from which further inquiry naturally proceeds. Robinson's use of implicit references to a world beyond gives the boy a form of voice through the words of her speaker, but it is possible to argue that this voice is a way of saying that even things unsaid can be perceived by an all-seeing poet, and if this is the case, then Robinson also gives herself a sense of power. The boy embodies the complex debates surrounding the nature of humanity and this idea is emphasised through the progression and allocation of meaning and emotion to the single word that the wild boy can actually say: 'alone'. When we are first introduced to the sound it is 'melancholy' (3) then 'sometimes the tone was loud and sad | And sometimes dulcet, faint and slow' (16-17), then 'suddenly a cheerful tone | proclaimed a spirit glad' (22-23). It therefore seems appropriate to say that Robinson is highlighting to the reader

[278] Patrick McDonagh, 'The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and the Deaf Mute in Early-Nineteenth Century France', *Criticism*, 55 (2013), 655–675 (p. 657).

that despite the assertion that 'And then to mutter he began | But, O! he could not speak!' (40-43), the feral child is able to communicate his emotions in a human-like way and yet simultaneously lacks the capability to formulate language. Robinson assigns agency to the wild boy in the 'representational capacity' that McDonagh implies. Unlike the newspaper reports, Robinson shows that the boy is emotionally intuitive and affected by the tragic circumstances surrounding his mother's death and his subsequent abandonment in the forest. The poet transforms the boy's linguistic muteness into a poignant reminder of his isolation both from civilisation and now his family which is made manifest through his 'tone of frantic woe' (18). Possibly Robinson is suggesting that the boy is closer to human than animal through her expression of the complex emotions surrounding the story about the boy's mother. The poet is deliberately ambiguous as to reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of the feral child's identity, as reflected through the capacity of communication without language.

Unlike in 'The Alien Boy' where the narrator remains at a distance from the events of the poem, the interjection of the speaker's voice throughout 'The Savage of Aveyron' offer a dramatic contrast to the wordless cries of the feral child. For the majority of the poem, the focus is upon the speaker's emotions through the first-person narrative and therefore, it is possible to suggest that Robinson's feral child is the object, rather than the subject of the poem. In the first stanza, the poet's emphasis is not upon the wild child's 'melancholy tone' but rather the 'terror-fraught' speaker who reveals that 'it seem'd to freeze my blood' (4). Robinson creates a threatening atmosphere which demands that the reader becomes emotionally invested in the characters. The poet crafts the speaker's identity in relation to the wild boy, though it is difficult to say whether she wants us to believe that the author herself is the narrator. Her desire to be

like the wild boy as ‘a traveller alone’ is not as simple as it initially seems. The voice’s desire for a solitary life like the feral child’s transforms from a ‘thought’, to a ‘sigh’, and even to a ‘wish.’ The relationship between the narrator and the child is vital to our understanding of suffering within the context of the poem; the boy himself is unable to bear witness and articulate his experiences and therefore Robinson relies upon these carefully interspersed interjections in order to relay his trauma.

The tension between Robinson’s portrayal of the feral child’s ‘savage’ uncivilised lack of language and his idealised natural innocence demonstrates the poet’s complex depiction of the boy’s mutism. Robinson attempts to show a degree of sophistication in the way that the feral child attempts to inform the speaker of the tragic circumstances surrounding his isolation. He is uncorrupted by society and is not tied to language as his sole means of communication. The poet writes that ‘I saw him point to heav’n and sigh’ (44) as the boy hints at the death of his mother. This line also seems to suggest that the child, though without language, has some awareness of transcendence or a higher power, which implies that he is not so divorced from mankind as we might initially infer. Furthermore, Robinson places considerable emphasis upon the boy’s body language and it becomes evident that she views his muteness in a much more multi-dimensional way, and in a manner that is far ahead of contemporary thinking. The poet takes this idea further and illuminates the boy’s ability to communicate not only through body language, which reflects the feral child’s sensibility, but also by means of a form of written code that demonstrates his multifaceted consciousness:

> And now upon the blasted tree
> He car’vd three notches, broad and long,
> And all the while he sang a song—
> Of nature’s melody!
> And though of words he nothing knew

> And though his dulcet tones were few
> Across the yielding bark he drew
> Deep sighing, notches three (64-71)

Here, Robinson combines the boy's attempts at written communication with his state of natural innocence, as he is untainted by civilisation. The phrase 'he car'vd three notches, broad and long' stresses the physicality and permanence of his markings, with 'broad and long' amplifying their deliberate, almost monumental presence in contrast to the boy's sparse verbal expression. This idea is further emphasised by Robinson's use of the ballad form, which propels the narrative through repetition and rhythmic momentum. The boy's inability to defend himself or narrate his own story inevitably made him the subject of gossip in the newspapers, which perhaps explains how Robinson's use of the form intensifies the reader's sense of his helplessness. The ballad, rooted in the oral tradition, sits in deliberate tension with the boy's rudimentary form of written communication, as he cannot articulate his experience in conventional language. Instead, he 'sings' wordlessly, attempting to convey the tragic circumstances surrounding his mother's death. The resulting combination of oral and performative modes underscores both his precarity and the broader social neglect of vulnerable figures, and as Alan Richardson suggests:

> In the fictionalized Aveyron of Robinson's ballad, the child has managed to retain a compelling, affecting humanity throughout his years of solitude in the wild, remembering and lamenting his mother, recording and communicating her death in a self-taught iconic language.[279]

It is true that the feral child exhibits human qualities, but Robinson seems to imply that the articulation of meaning is more complex than simply using spoken language. The boy retains his natural innocence without the acquisition of language, possibly reflecting

[279] Alan Richardson, 'Embodied universalism, Romantic discourse and the anthropological imagination' in *British Romanticism and the Science of the mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 151-180 (p.160).

that he has a version of primitive humanity, which is unexpected, and yet in some ways more pure than other more recognisable forms. Indeed, the fact that he can sing reflects this too. The boy is able to communicate the number of attackers who murdered his mother through his carvings outside the confines of spoken language. The poet also demonstrates the sensibility and deeply understanding nature of the speaker, as she can interpret the boy's tragic version of events. This suggests that sensibility functions as an alternative mode of communication, allowing the speaker to access meaning beyond language. The boy's silence therefore becomes expressive rather than deficient, with his song and carvings preserving emotional truth. At the same time, the speaker's role as interpreter highlights how such 'primitive' expression still depends on mediation to be understood.

The newspapers indicate a much simpler picture of the feral child's linguistic abilities. The *Morning Post* claimed that 'the boy is said never to have uttered yet an articulate sound, not even to have articulated his most urgent wants.'[280] If, as many speculated, the wild boy was unteachable and would be permanently unable to speak, Robinson rebels against this notion by crafting a character with a clear communicative agenda which evokes his suffering while granting him a modicum of agency. The feral child's mother passes on the only piece of vocabulary that he understands:

> From her the wild boy learn'd 'alone',
> She tried to say *my babe will die!*
> But angels caught her parting sigh,
> The BABE her *dying tone.* (160-163)

The contrast between the feral child's mother's 'sigh' and his adoption of her 'dying tone' once more reinforces the absence of language. For Robinson, this sound becomes

[280] 'The Savage of Aveyron', *Morning Post*, 14 August 1800.

more important than the shriek of an animal. It represents and evokes the emotions of the boy but also the speaker's own sentiments of melancholy and forlornness as reflected by the end of the poem. It also suggests something transcendent in the message 'alone' as the sound resonates even after the boy's mother's death as a legacy of their suffering. At the same time, the poet hints at a strange connection between angels and the feral child and it is possible to go as far as to state that the poet's depiction of the boy has tropes of angelism: the idea that man is innocent and untarnished by original sin. Furthermore, the angels hear the mother's cry and protect the child which further emphasises his purity. Richardson suggests that:

> According to Enlightenment discourse, idiots and those characteristically grouped with them – the deaf and blind wild children, 'savages' – lack the very 'idea' of death. […] Robinson's 'Savage of Aveyron' […] centres on [its] subject's awareness of a mother's death, providing at once a sentimental crisis and a quietly polemical assertion of a common human nature independent of language'[281]

From this perspective, by removing the feral child from the constraints of language, Robinson is demonstrating his innocence but also his relationship with knowledge. The poet therefore rejects the 'Enlightenment discourse' and shows that without language, it is still possible to attain a fully formed consciousness and experience suffering and other emotional states. Robinson demands that the reader feels sympathy for the boy's experience and concludes the poem with a moralistic statement. The poet writes:

> And could a wretch more wretched be,
> More wild, or fancy-fraught than he,
> Whose melancholy tale would pierce an heart of stone. (172-4)

She presents the emotional response of the reader as bound up with the experience of the feral child following the death of his mother. For Robinson, the subsequent destruction of his natural state through his discovery and introduction into society also

[281] Richardson, 'Embodied universalism, Romantic discourse and the anthropological imagination', p.172.

represents a tragic loss of innocence. This reflection simultaneously normalises and idealises the feral child. Robinson mediates the image of the boy, who could be perceived as frightening, through this tragic and evocative statement. The poet's depiction of the forlorn and woeful life of the wild boy has parallels with the 'fancy pictures' of peasants painted by one of her portrait artists Thomas Gainsborough.[282] For example, his 1785 painting 'The Cottage Girl' depicts a forlorn yet idealised child, dressed in rags holding a pitcher and a puppy with a rural backdrop. [283] Similarly, in 'The Savage of Aveyron' Robinson presents the reader with a harrowing but strangely beautiful image of the feral child, whose 'sallow lip was dy'd' (101) by the wild berries he fed upon in order to survive. This image adds another layer of communicative agency to the boy's portrayal outside the confines of language as the reader is able to vividly imagine the feral child's grief which is a demonstrably human emotion. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine E. Ingrassia argue that, in general, eighteenth-century British women's poetry is 'filled with dramatic episodes and scenes and with gripping visual images […] [including] the nearly speechless wild boy mourning his mother's murder in Mary Robinson's "The Savage of Aveyron"'[284] This is certainly true, though I would extend this claim and suggest that, in representing the boy's grief visually rather than verbally, Robinson emphasises that suffering and emotion cannot always be fully captured through words, yet they demand recognition. The scene foregrounds the ethical and aesthetic responsibility of the observer, inviting the reader to witness the boy's

[282] See Hugh Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: The Portraits, Fancy Pictures and Copies after Old Masters* (New Haven: by Yale University Press, 2019).
[283] Gainsborough depicts children with careful attention to their behaviour and surroundings, without attaching moral commentary, in contrast to many of his contemporaries. His choice of subject was shaped by the vogue for the picturesque, the influence of Wordsworth, and compositional motifs borrowed from Murillo, whose works were then at St James's Palace near his Pall Mall studio. The landscapes evoke an Arcadian atmosphere through loosely rendered greens and purples that harmonise with the figures.
[284] *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, eds. Paula R.Backscheider and Catherine E. Ingrassia, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

humanity and to engage with his pain, even in the absence of articulate speech. In doing so, Robinson extends the scope of agency beyond conventional language, showing that the expression and acknowledgment of suffering are not limited to speech but can be communicated through embodied presence, affective display, and visual representation.

Religion

Robinson further explores the idealised portrayal of the boy through the use of biblical parallels. The wild boy's repeated cries of 'alone' can also be said to recall John the Baptist's words: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the LORD, as the prophet Isaiah said.'[285] Here, Robinson adds yet another layer of meaning to the feral child's characterisation as a potential voice of innocence and truth. He embodies the possibility for deeper understanding of the differences between man and animal through an exploration of his capacity to speak. Robinson engages with Cartesian ideas concerning the *cogito*, yet her attention is primarily on the boy's significance beyond the bounds of language. For her contemporary readership, the 'savage' suggests a site of scientific curiosity or potential discovery, yet Robinson imbues her feral child with an innate innocence, presenting him as uncorrupted by civilisation. In doing so, she foregrounds the boy's capacity for agency, showing that his gestures, expressions, and affective responses convey meaning and demand recognition even in the absence of speech. The poem thus extends the notion of communicative power beyond language, inviting the reader to witness and ethically engage with suffering and human feeling in forms that are both embodied and morally legible. Robinson's version of the feral child, however, has a sense of the inherent innocence of nature that has yet to be corrupted by civilisation. Interest in the wild boy can be linked

[285] John 1.23.

back to the Rousseauvian idea of the noble savage and the purity of the état de nature.[286] The interruption of the feral child's solitary existence by the speaker can also be viewed as a manifestation of upheaval within the poem. The presence of the observer within the child's private world emphasises the tension between freedom and constraint, while also prompting reflection on the ethical responsibilities of those who witness or interpret another's suffering. Here Robinson is commenting upon the injustices and suffering experienced by the real 'Savage of Aveyron' and his forced integration into civilisation following his capture. At the time, it was certainly dangerous to publicly and overtly express progressive or radical thought. So, it makes sense that Robinson conceals and layers these hidden political commentaries beneath the otherness of the wild boy, who himself lacks agency.

The poet romanticises the physical description of the boy as she layers her construction of the 'savage' with religious allusions which serve both to give the boy a sense of power and to indicate his cultural importance. She describes the feral child in these lines: 'Chequer'd with scars his breast was seen, | Wounds streaming fresh with anguish keen' (104-106). Reading this image at its most literal, the boy has become injured from his harsh life in the forest as he is now exposed to the elements. It is notable that Robinson combines both physical and emotional suffering, here. She juxtaposes the old wounds, the scars, with a streaming new injury which perhaps reflects the violence of his representation after his discovery. It could also be seen as a reflection of the wounds caused by the flagellation scene in the Bible where Christ was flogged before the crucifixion.[287] Indeed, the name that was given to him, Victor, also has religious connotations in that it literally means conqueror and goes some way to

[286] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, ou de l'éducation*, 4 vols. (La Haye: Jean Néaulme,1762).
[287] See John 19.1.

justifying his suffering as morally good. Just as Christ suffered, so too does the wild boy. The poet goes on to write that 'About his form a garb he wore | Ragged it was, and marked with gore' (115-16). Here Robinson is taking a detail from the newspapers and elaborating upon it. In an article published in the *Morning Post*, on 4th August 1800, it is noted that 'he [the 'Savage' of Aveyron] is about twelve years of age; he wears a large girdle, and is without shoes and stockings.'[288] Robinson's poem lacks the intricate factual details about the boy's appearance that appear in the press, but she does refer to the ragged 'garb' that the boy wore to indicate his humanity. This image supports the idea that the wild boy is presented as a Christ-like figure through his physical description. Robinson is alluding to the potential for the feral child to illuminate our taxonomical understanding of the relationship between man and animal, or on the other hand, she could be suggesting that emancipation from society and freedom in the woods is something to be aspired to. From this perspective, not only is the boy human, but he is being aligned with the ultimate model for humanity. By implicitly connecting him with Christ, Robinson evokes the notion of redemptive suffering, where witnessing his trials becomes an ethical act for the observer, and his endurance of hardship reflects both innocence and moral superiority. Robinson's presentation of the feral child can, therefore, be seen as a major challenge to the scientific discourse which portrayed the 'savage' as a mere animal, as she demonstrates his irrefutable human qualities. This is emphasised as there is something wonderful and almost paradoxically desirable about the wild boy's fate, just as Christ's crucifixion has been perceived as the salvation for the sins of humanity. Robinson is once again elevating the boy's sacred characteristics; she simultaneously sentimentalises his natural wild state whilst also emphasising his

[288] 'The Savage of Aveyron', *Morning Post*, 14 August 1800.

human qualities by portraying him as a Christ-like figure, therefore implying that his suffering cannot be reduced to a singular entity.

Robinson also uses the feral child's description in order to play upon contemporary anxieties surrounding the nature of man and his relationship to religion. The 'savage' occupied a liminal position between human and animal which would have been unsettling for a contemporary readership. As Keith Thomas notes, 'it was no accident that the symbol of Anti-Christ was the beast, or that the Devil was portrayed as a mixture of man and animal.'[289] But Robinson humanises the boy. In describing the feral child's dwelling place, Robinson writes, 'Upon the earth I saw him spread | Of wither'd leaves a narrow bed.' (92-93) The poet purposely draws the reader away from the image of an animal's lair, though she does still retain a hint of the boy's animalistic qualities through the contradictory image of a human bed formed from the natural resources of the forest. Nonetheless, Robinson does not definitively give the reader an answer as to whether the feral child is human or animal. By emphasising this ambiguity, she encourages the reader to confront his liminal status .[290] Robinson's description of the 'the mazes of a wood | The lonely wood of Aveyron' (1-2) also reflects this duality. The notion of a man-made maze is significant, as its multiple entrances and exits mirror the complexity and ambiguity of the feral child's own position between nature and civilisation. This sense of uncertainty is reinforced by the repetition throughout the poem, which continually returns the reader to the dense, twisting forest and underlines the challenges of interpreting the boy's identity. This idea is reinforced by the repetition throughout the poem of 'alleys rude' (26), which adds an additional level of complexity

[289] Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*, (London: Penguin, 1984) p.36.
[290] See Lucien Malson, *Wolf Children* (London: NLB, 1972).

to Robinson's construction of a liminal maze setting. These 'alleys' refer to the woodland paths and serve to demonstrate the unconfined nature of the feral child's identity which in turn gives him a form of agency. Robinson creates a sense of unease through the initial ambiguity surrounding the boy, perhaps reflecting upon anxieties about his identity. By combining the maze, a man-made construction, with the feral child's natural solitude, she creates another element of ambiguity surrounding his character.

The French Revolution

Underneath the wild landscape of the forest and the taxonomical debates about the true nature of the wild boy, 'The Savage of Aveyron' expresses anti-revolutionary sentiments which are revealed through subtle clues to the social status of the child's mother. As noted in the *Monody* chapter, in Robinson's *Memoirs* some 'ruffian-looking men' manage to enter the poet's bedroom to taunt her during the peak of her illness.[291] In 'The Savage of Aveyron', Robinson once again dwells upon the image of the boy's mother who is murdered by 'ruffians three' (145). The poet describes the woman's death in an evocative and tragic way: 'Three barb'rous ruffians shed her blood, and mock'd with cruel taunts, her dying groan' (134-5). As mentioned earlier, Robinson also describes the boy's voice as a 'groan.' The poet therefore traces a direct line between maternal violence and the child's later condition. The groan becomes almost hereditary in affective terms: the mother's final expression of pain is echoed in the boy's inarticulate voice, as though trauma is transmitted not through language, but through sound. Robinson's presentation of the wild boy on the surface seems to be a story about freedom with the voice of the speaker envying the feral child's supposed untamed

[291] Robinson, *Memoirs*, p.145.

natural state. Yet like Marie Antoinette, and indeed his own mother, the boy also falls victim to the pain caused by the violent ruffians, both within his life in the forest, and through his real-life role in scientific studies about the nature of man. In the preface, Maria Elizabeth foreshadows this connection:

> In countries where BANDITTI have been known to reside, imagination may be allowed to exercise its powers; and Reason may ruminate on the possibility, as well as the probability of such an interesting history as that of 'THE SAVAGE OF AVEYRON[292]

Here, Maria Elizabeth frames a careful tension between imagination and reason. The 'banditti' invite the reader to engage imaginatively with danger and the unknown, yet reason must measure the plausibility of such events, weighing 'possibility' against 'probability'. The violence of the banditti echoes the ruffians who oppress Marie Antoinette, establishing a thematic link between the boy's ordeal in the forest and human cruelty more broadly. In both cases, suffering is mediated by observation, whether imaginative or scientific, signalling that understanding human nature requires negotiating the untamed, affective power of imagination alongside the disciplined evaluation of reason.

As McDonagh notes, 'the calming of revolutionary violence also made it possible for people to pay attention to something so extraneous to daily demands as the presence of a wild boy.'[293] This speaks to the popularity of the feral child within the newspapers and literature of the period, and indeed the way that Robinson constructs characters who

[292] *Ibid*., p.174.
[293] McDonagh, 'The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and the Deaf Mute in Early-Nineteenth Century France' (p. 665).

lay in the wake of the revolutionary violence.[294] The 'garb' that was worn by the savage, is revealed to 'once ha[ve] been a lady's vest | white as the mountain snow' (124-125) highlighting the boy and his mother's aristocratic status before they were forced to flee to the forest. The detail could also suggest that the mother surrendered her clothes to protect the child, which reflects Robinson's recurrent idea that motherhood can constitute a kind of moral vindication through self-sacrifice, as seen in her Marie Antoinette texts. The intricate and opulent quality of the dress is reflected, as Robinson notes 'And yet where 'twas folded o'er | Full many a spangle shone!' (117-118) The item piece that clothes the feral child which is a dramatic subversion of its former use. One of the underlying messages the poem carries is the condemnation of the Revolution's excessive brutality as Robinson reveals its tragic consequences for the wild boy: 'For Him no bright Hope had shone' (57). As Curran argues:

> The common theme of Robinson's pathetic poetry is a sudden and total displacement of the stabilities on which existences depend. The revolutionary and counterrevolutionary warfare of Europe stands behind fully seven of these poems – in its domestic shatterings ('Edmund's Wedding', 'The Deserted Cottage', 'The Widow's Home') in its inescapability ('The Hermit of Mont-Blanc'), in the flotsam of displaced people it leaves in its wake ('The Fugitive', 'Poor Marguerite', 'The Alien Boy'). This is a sad world, one that witnesses constant abuses of power, where armies do no one any good, where class conflict is systematic and cannot be wished away by liberal compromise and where not perspectivism but insanity and stark alienations seem the logical end of interiorizing social conditions.[295]

It is no stretch to argue that 'The Savage of Aveyron' is based upon similar displacement and the abrupt contrast between the jewels that 'gleam'd amid thy [the boy's] solitude' (181) and the feral child's wounds reflect this idea. The possibility that

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[294] In *Hubert de Sevrac*, for instance, Robinson explores the emotional and material difficulties of émigré life in greater detail, portraying an aristocratic family compelled into exile by the French Revolution and charting their gradual reconceptualisation of identity as they negotiate loss and the collapse of ancien régime assumptions.

[295] Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context', in *Revisioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p.31.

the wild boy and his mother fled from the revolutionary violence could represent a significant destabilisation of their lives. After the boy and his mother fled to the forest, her murder represents another rupture to the child's stability and once again reflects the gratuitous and merciless violence of the revolutionary 'ruffians'. Robinson's describes the moment that 'Ruffian hands had taught to flow | The Fountain of her Breast' (126-127) registering the physical and emotional brutality enacted upon the child's mother . Once again, the poet is reflecting upon the dangers and corrupting power of man, and the feral child's position outside of civilisation acts as a mechanism for his own protection. From this perspective, the suffering of the wild boy and his mother lies precisely in the fact that his story is being voiced, and his natural isolation has been intruded upon. Though, the voicing by the sympathetic speaker could also be viewed as a correction to the distressing infiltration of the boy's environment by other, more nefarious characters.

Another way in which Robinson constructs the multi-faceted identity of the feral child is through the depiction of his madness in order to evoke sympathy and to an extent, humanise him. After the murder of the wild boy's mother Robinson writes, 'yet dark and sunken was his eye | Like a lone maniac's wild and shy' (32-33). The couplet not only gives a vivid picture of his character and mental state but also signals a recurring pattern in Robinson's poetry: the term 'maniac' frequently appears alongside figures who are isolated, desolate, or suffering, not least in her poem 'The Maniac' (1793), which begins by immediately confronting the taxonomical issue of the identity of an insane character. Robinson writes 'Ah, what art thou, whose eye-balls roll | like Heralds of the wand'ring soul.'(1-2) In this way, Robinson situates the feral child within a wider typology of marginalised characters. The repetition of such terms across

her work suggests that 'maniac' is not simply descriptive, but a key conceptual tool through which Robinson explores the boundaries between the human and other, as well as the extremes of feeling that define her presentation of suffering. Vision and perception, too, are undeniably important for Robinson's portrayal of marginalised characters. For instance in 'Sight', we see that Robinson uses blindness as a symbol of dehumanisation and in 'The Alien Boy', his eyes are 'fixed in madness.' Curran notes that:

> Indeed, for all its surface poetic articulateness, the poem is paradoxically in the position of its ostensible subject, who cannot speak, except for one word, "alone". That is to say, it represents within its elaborate tonal range a psychological state wholly unsusceptible to analysis […] Nothing appears quite real in this poem, which is suffused with atmosphere rather than actualities […] This is a world that is patently absurd – but then, so is schizophrenia. And like madness, the poem, even as it throws off all restraint, represents itself as sane.[296]

From this perspective, Robinson presents the savage child's mental disturbance not solely as pathology, but as a lens through which to explore the multiplicity of human experience. This differs from her earlier presentation of the 'alien boy' whose sole experience of suffering stems from isolation from society, which she presents as a singular experience. In 'The Savage of Aveyron' Robinson enacts the tensions between articulation and inarticulacy, reason and irrationality, suggesting that the very inaccessibility of the mind is a site of both vulnerability and agency. By rendering madness in this way, Robinson emphasises its ethical and aesthetic significance, demonstrating that states of suffering and mental disturbance demand recognition even when they elude conventional understanding. The protagonist's limited capacity for speech, underscores the challenges of witnessing and representing interior experience, highlighting the moral and imaginative work required of the observer.

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[296] Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson and the New Lyric', *Women's writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian period*, 9.1 (2002), 9–22 (p.20).

Conclusion

If 'The Alien Boy' invites the reader to witness the plight of a suffering child at the limits of society, 'The Savage of Aveyron' demands that it be voiced, despite its seeming unintelligibility. The poem's purpose is to render Victor's suffering intelligible through his characterisation, showing how lives that cannot be fully expressed in conventional terms can be apprehended, interpreted, and understood within a narrative framework. It is undeniable that Victor's plight specifically captivated the imaginations of many during the eighteenth century. For example Maria Edgeworth, Robinson's contemporary wrote in a letter to Sophy Ruxton in August 1802 that:

> I have been much interested by [Isabelle de Charriere's] *Letters from Lausanne*; I think them in some parts highly pathetic and eloquent, but as to the moral tendency of the book I cannot find it out, turn it which way I will. The Savage of Aveyron is a thousand times more interesting to me than Caliste [one of Charrière's characters[297]

Though some critics, such as Isabelle Bour, have suggested that Edgeworth is referring to accounts of the boy's discovery, it is possible that she is speaking of Robinson's poem. Either way, Edgeworth's remark attests to contemporary fascination with the wild boy's narrative, demonstrating the fact that Robinson had her finger on the pulse of contemporary tastes. Even long after Victor's discovery, questions regarding his fate persisted, as demonstrated by a notice sent in anonymously by H.M in *Notes and Queries* in 1889:

> Can any reader refer me to information as to what eventually became of the wild boy found in the woods of Aveyron towards the latter end of last century, whose education was taken in hand by Prof. Bonnaterre, and later by the Deaf and Dumb Institution of Paris?[298]

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[297] 'Letter to Sophy Ruxton', August 1802, quoted in Isabelle Bour, 'What Maria learned: Maria Edgeworth and continental fiction', *Women's writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian period*, 18.1 (2011), 34–49.

[298] H. M., Savage of Aveyron, *Notes and Queries*, Volume VII, Issue 172, 13 April 1889, p.287, https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/s7-VII.172.287d.

Victor, as he became known, came to signify broader anxieties about the boundaries of language, the limits of human development, and the precarious line between nature and civilisation. These concerns were renewed in the twentieth century through François Truffaut's 1970 film *L'Enfant sauvage*, which further mythologised the feral child as a site of both Enlightenment knowledge and Romantic affect, emphasising his cognitive potential alongside his profound vulnerability. Yet beneath this fascination lies a more intimate narrative: Victor's presumed inarticulacy represents a life endured and lived on terms that resist conventional comprehension.

Robinson's poem stages the challenge of rendering such lives legible, insisting that readers engage with suffering that cannot be easily expressed or categorised. In doing so, she shifts the focus from observation, sympathy, or agency explored in earlier chapters, to the poetic work of articulation itself, showing that representation is an act of moral and imaginative labour. The wild boy's experience is thus made intelligible not through mediation or emotional projection, but through the careful translation of unspoken experience into narrative and character. In this sense, 'The Savage of Aveyron' represents the culmination of Robinson's engagement with human vulnerability: it demonstrates that even a mute child can be given a form of voice, and that the act of rendering suffering comprehensible is both a literary and a moral achievement.

Conclusion

> Near a month confined to my bed, and every day expecting to prove that "there is another, and a better world" – I have scarcely strength to thank you for your kind enquiries. My illness has indeed been so perilous, that I believe little hopes were entertained of my recovery. When my daughter received your letter I was in a state too terrible to describe! – one blister on my shoulders, another on my head, – which with perpetual bleedings, with the lancet as well as with leeches, have so reduced me that I am a mere spectre – My disease lay cheifly [sic] on my head, – an intermitting fever on the brain, – attended with other symptoms of the most alarming nature…
>
> I write against the orders of my Physician. – But I could not resist my desire to thank you. I am still so feeble, that the smallest fatigue overwhelmed me.[299]
>
> *Mary Robinson to Jane Porter*, 15th October 1800.

In her final recorded letter, two months before her death on 26th December 1800, Robinson describes the severity of her condition to the author Jane Porter. It is undeniable that she experienced profound bodily and mental suffering which was worsened by her initial illness at the age of twenty-four. Though this thesis has avoided dwelling excessively on the author's experiences, it is impossible to ignore that her pain helped to shape her conception of suffering. The letter offers insight into her rationalisation of pain: the idea that there is 'another, and a better world' is perhaps her only consolation and the only small redemption from worldly suffering.

As Maria Elizabeth notes, '[Robinson's] funeral was attended by two literary friends, greatly valued by the deceased, whose friendship and benevolence had cheered her while living and followed her to the grave.'[300] Peter Pindar and William Godwin

[299] 'Mary Robinson to Miss Porter, autograph letter signed', 15th October 1800, MISC 2293, Jane Porter papers, Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library.
[300] *Memoirs*. p.290.

were the only two who attended Robinson's funeral besides her daughter. The newspapers, on the other hand, paint a picture of her creative genius and the adoration of her numerous friends. In the *Morning Post* her obituary proclaims:

> at eight o' clock, at her cottage on Englefield Green. She [Mary Robinson] had been for several months in a declining state of health which worldly troubles greatly aggravated. In her last moments, however, she was consoled by the tender attentions of her daughter and of many friends, who deeply lament that a woman of so much genius, of such an elegant taste, of so rich an imagination in poetry should be cut off at a period when the mental faculties are in their prime. As the authoress of several popular novels and poetical pieces, many of them under the signature of LAURA MARIA, she was well known to the public, who would have been still further indebted to her pen, if she had been blessed with life and health.[301]
>
> *The Morning Post,* 29th December 1800.

The *Morning Post* presents Robinson's final months as a story of decline, domestic consolation, emphasising the care of her daughter and friends. This sentimental account contrasts sharply with the rigor of her own engagement with suffering, which refuses easy solace and insists on the necessity of witnessing pain rather than domesticating it. Far from retreating into the private sphere after her early scandal, Robinson amplified her moral imagination, producing work that interrogates the relationship between individual pain and broader historical, social, and political conditions. In refusing to domesticate or sentimentalise suffering, during the 1790s she emerges as a morally and philosophically engaged poet.

We have seen the complex and multi-faceted nature of Robinson's exploration of suffering across the decade. 'Sight' begins with the question of vision and blindness, making explicit many of the concerns that shape the thesis as a whole, namely what it means to see suffering. Its unusual directness in depicting bodily vulnerability and the fragility of sight establishes the foundations for the later poems, where the capacity to

[301] *Morning Post,* 29th December 1800.

see, register, and interpret experience becomes progressively more complex. In this work, the only positive outcome is that the blind figure will be able to see again in heaven, but for Robinson, this does not provide sufficient earthly consolation for his sensory deprivation. *Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* develops a distinct strand, in which suffering is situated within both individual and public contexts. Here, Robinson turns to the spectacle of historical anguish, examining how pain is represented, circulated, and responded to, while evoking sympathy for Marie Antoinette as both a woman and a Queen. The *Monody* reveals Robinson's attentiveness to the ways in which suffering is shaped not only by the body, but by history, power, and collective memory. In *Sappho and Phaon*, this concern is reconfigured through the figure of the female poet, where suffering becomes bound up with questions of agency, expression, and intellectual authority. The poem explores the tension between reason and emotion within the discourse of sensibility, showing how feeling and reflection operate not in opposition but in uneasy conjunction. Sappho's experience is at once intensely personal and culturally mediated, shaped by literary inheritance, gendered expectation, and the constraints placed upon female agency. The problem is no longer simply how suffering is perceived, but how it is articulated, and by whom.

The later poems turn more fully to the question of articulation itself. 'The Alien Boy' presents a tale of a traumatic experience that cannot be narrated by its victim, highlighting the absence of voice and the limits this imposes upon understanding. The boy's condition resists interpretation, leaving only external signs that must be registered without recourse to interior explanation. 'The Savage of Aveyron' extends this problem, introducing a further level of mediation in which the act of observation is itself observed through writing. Here, Robinson confronts the difficulty of representing figures of

alterity that exist at the edge of language, where experience exceeds the structures available to contain it. Voice, perception, and narration are no longer stable, but provisional and contingent, shaped by the limits of human comprehension.

Across these works, Robinson returns persistently to the question of how suffering affects individuals and how it may be rendered meaningful without being reduced or resolved. Bodily pain, emotional distress, political violence, and social marginalisation are presented not as discrete categories but as interrelated conditions that shape one another. At the same time, the poems expose the inadequacy of established modes of consolation. Sensibility, empiricism, theodicy, reason, and imagination are each tested and found to be insufficient as they are shown to be unable to account fully for the realities they seek to explain. Robinson does not replace these systems with a new form of resolution; instead, she reveals their limitations, leaving suffering as something that must be confronted without the assurance of coherence or closure. In this refusal of resolution lies the distinctive force of her later poetry. Suffering remains irreducible, yet it is not entirely inaccessible.

Attention to suffering also provides a particularly fruitful way of reading Robinson's work, bringing into view the formal, intellectual, and moral structures in her work that are often approached through biography, sentiment, or scandal. Read in this way, Robinson's poetry not only reshapes our understanding of her own career, but also indicates the value of returning to other neglected women writers of the period, whose works remain resistant to easy categorisation, whose experiments with voice, mediation, and moral reflection continue to reward reading that is historically and philosophically informed. If this thesis demonstrates anything beyond Robinson herself,

it is that women's writing of the 1790s contains modes of thought, feeling, and representation whose complexity has yet to be fully explored, and should not be overlooked.

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