The Teller of Tell-Tale Tales: Mary Robinson's Relationship with Tales as seen in *Lyrical Tales*

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Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* is a collection of poetry which has received little attention when compared to many of her contemporaries, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and even Charlotte Smith. This is surprising, as she was a much more prominent figure than many of those contemporaries whom we have now canonised; due to her very public affair with the Prince of Wales—and the scandal that ensued when he refused to pay her the £20,000 promised to her on his coming of age—Robinson was regularly featured in the gossip and fashion columns of major London newspapers. However, arguably the main reason she has been relatively ignored by academic circles in contrast to these poets is for the very reason that she is too often compared to them. Just one example of this attitude can be seen in Duncan Wu's influential *Romanticism: An Anthology* where he writes that 'the Gothicism [of *Lyrical Tales*] is, perhaps, a little crude next to *Christabel* or *The Ancient Mariner*, but it works.'[1] It is, in many ways, understandable that Robinson is so often compared to Coleridge and Wordsworth. After all, Robinson was very much inspired by the works of both men, even fashioning the title of her 1800 collection after their 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. However, a much more fruitful analysis of Robinson's poetry can be gained when looking at *Lyrical Tales* in the context of Robinson's position as a female celebrity whose only form of income was through her writing: a very different context to that of Coleridge and Wordsworth. If we take this context into account while looking at the collection as a whole, including its paratext (i.e anything outside of the 'text in its naked state... like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations'[2]), we begin to see how Robinson cunningly employs tales to both utilise the dominant preconceptions of her as a deviant figure, whilst also deviantly undercutting this dominant illusion.

For women in the 18th century, writing was, as Dale Spender notes, not an easy occupation: 'Many women wrote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in psychological circumstances that would not now be considered conducive to writing; many women wrote without "a room of their own" or "500 pounds a year," the very basics advocated by Virginia Woolf.'[3] Instead, female writers were treated with very little respect and a great deal of suspicion, as Spender claims: 'It was an offence for

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[1]Duncan Wu, 'Mary Robinson (née Darby) (1758–1800),' in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 252.

[2]Gérard Genette, 'Introduction to the Paratext,' *New Literary History* 22:2 (1991), 261.

[3]Dale Spender, 'A Vindication of the Writing Woman', in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, ed. Dale Spender (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 28.

women to be confident, visible.'[4] However, whilst the pay was poor, writing was often all that many women could do in desperate financial situations other than turning to prostitution. It was under these circumstances that the crippled and desperate Mary Robinson was forced into the 'unflagging literary activity' from which *Lyrical Tales* was produced.[5] However, despite all of the disadvantages that Mary Robinson suffered—partial paralysis, a daughter to raise and a spell in debtors' prison—she had one advantage: fame. Her public affair with the Prince of Wales had led to a wave of gossip and talk that destroyed her reputation and prevented her from ever finding more work as an actress, a career which was already considered by many to be only a stone's throw away from prostitution.

It is clear from contemporary newspaper clippings that the notoriety from this encounter hounded her right up to her death. This is illustrated from the fact that she is mentioned in a column called 'The Fashionable World' in the *Morning Post* on 18 November 1800, which claims: 'Mrs Robinson's health is still precarious; she is at her daughter's cottage ornée on the borders of Windsor Forest: Her volume of *Lyrical Tales* will be forthcoming in a few days.'[6] It is especially significant that this mention of Robinson comes directly after a far larger story of a party held by the Queen in which one of the main guests was the Prince of Wales. After all, there was nothing of much interest to report on the condition of Mary Robinson; it was clearly just placed in the column strategically to keep the gossip alive. However, it is apparent that Robinson and her publishers were aware of this publicity and that they knew how to use it to their advantage.

The first hint that Robinson and her publishers were using her fame is in looking at the construction of the opening page for the original 1800 edition (Figure 1), which contained only three pieces of information: the title, the publisher and the author. This is relatively rare for books of this period. Many would contain such extras as a quotation from another text, a note explaining a little more about the book or even simply a subtitle.[7] What is most interesting though is the focal point of the page: Mary Robinson's name. Not only is it in the centre of the page, with plenty of white space surrounding it, but it is also almost the same size font as the book's title. The publishers knew that it was Mary Robinson's name that would sell the book.

The paratext also gives other hints that certain aspects of *Lyrical Tales* were designed to use Robinson's fame to its full extent by combining it with her sexuality, as Jacqueline Labbe notes: Robinson's poetry 'exploit[s]...the idea that women need men's protection for survival, and they do this by inserting their bodies into their poetry so that their readers... see not just poems, but the poets, not just authors, but women in distress.'[8] The desire to make a reader feel a certain sense of dominance over the poet is made explicit in the opening portrait of Robinson which, with her facing away from the viewer and down, adds a definite sense of pensiveness or sorrow as well as one of isolation. Evidence for the picture's desire to rouse chivalric feelings

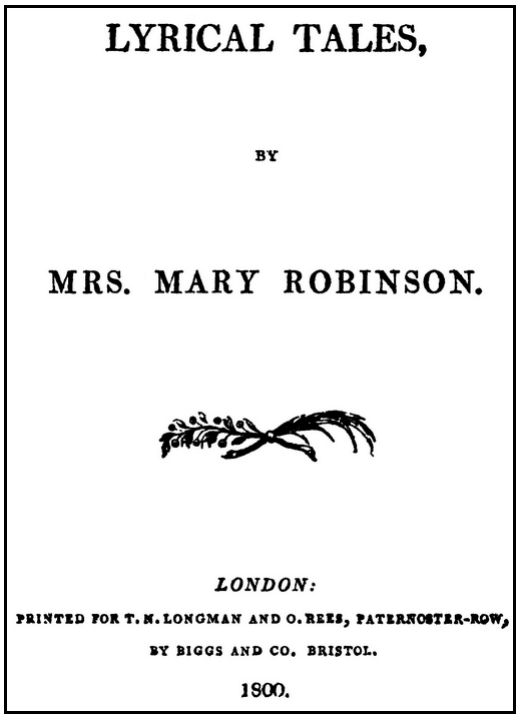
[4]Spender, 'A Vindication of the Writing Woman,' 28.

[5]Roger Lonsdale, 'Mary Robinson (née Darby) (1758–1800),' in *Eighteenth Century Women Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 470.

[6]'The Fashionable World,' *Morning Post and Gazeteer* (London, 14 November 1800).

[7]See: Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60–93.

[8]Jacqueline M. Labbe, 'Selling One's Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry,' *Wordsworth Circle* 25 (1995), 68.


LYRICAL TALES,

BY

MRS. MARY ROBINSON.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR T. N. LONGMAN AND O. REES, PATERNOSTER-ROW,

BY BIGGS AND CO. BRISTOL.

1800.

Figure 1: Title page of Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* (London: T. N. Longman & O. Rees Cover, 1800).

in the male readership are further fuelled by her hair, choker and relatively low cut and fine dress which show her as attractive and sensual: Not only in need of rescuing, but worth it too. This sentiment of the lonely, abandoned beauty is carried on into the structure of the collection when the first poem encountered upon looking down the list of contents is simply entitled 'All Alone.'

Labbe is well aware of the potentially belittling nature of these observations and quickly adds that such a method does not diminish the author's autonomy but that, 'to be bold enough to manipulate the belief that sexual behaviour and self-display ruin women for-ever means that she too refuses to be silenced by convention.'[9] However, Labbe somewhat undersells Mary Robinson's cunning in the writing and marketing of *Lyrical Tales.* Instead, from a closer analysis of the poems themselves we see that Robinson is at once using her fame and reputation to sell and build up a browser's expectation of the poetry before subtly undercutting them.

This is first seen in the opening poem of the collection, 'All Alone', neatly undercutting the sentiment of the damsel in distress hinted at in the paratext revealing its title to be a hook cleverly used to reel in the reader. Instead of a lonely damsel we are presented with a far stranger tale about a traveller who talks to a boy whose mother has died and feels he cannot abandon her grave:

> I cannot the green hill ascend,
> I cannot place the upland mead;
> I cannot in the vale attend,
> To hear the merry-sounding reed:
> For all is still beneath yon stone,
> Where my poor mother's left alone! (*LT*, 4)[10]

[9]Labbe, 'Selling One's Sorrows,' 68.

[10]All references to *Lyrical Tales* [hereafter *LT*] refer to the following edition: Mary Robinson, *Lyrical Tales* (Bristol: T. N. Longman & O. Rees, 1800)

It would seem that, as Labbe suggested, Robinson—whose own mother died only seven years before, described by Judith Pasco as, 'a loss she felt intensely'—has put herself into this poem in a very unexpected disguise: that of the young boy.[11] It was not unusual for Robinson to disguise herself within her poetry, as Paula Backscheider writes: 'Mary Robinson created a panoply of pseudonyms, including Laura Maria, Tabitha Bramble, Sappho, Lesbia and Portia.... These voices gave her freedom that her notorious life as the Prince of Wales's "Perdita" restricted.'[12] However, this similarity is not the only, or major similarity between Robinson and the boy, instead this double is made clearer through the relationship between the boy and the speaker.

The speaker is a relatively ambiguous figure who claims to have often seen the little boy 'upon the lovely mother's knee' (*LT*, 3) making the reader believe that there is some kind of closeness between the speaker and the boy. However, this perceived closeness is sabotaged by the impersonal nature of the conversation between the two. The boy, in recounting his tales, seems not to recognise the speaker and tells him his tale as though he were a complete stranger. However, in spite of this, the speaker keeps telling the boy that 'thou art not left alone, poor boy,... I know thee well!' (*LT*, 1–2) Despite this claim, the speaker's evidence for knowing the boy well is hardly satisfactory for a close relationship as they are merely physical descriptions of the boy:

> I know thee well! Thy yellow hair
> In silky waves I oft have seen;
> Thy dimpled face, so fresh and fair,
> thy roguish smile, thy playful mien
> Were all to me, poor orphan known. (*LT*, 2)

These descriptions of the boy, combined with the fact that he 'stops to hear thy tale' (*LT*, 1) are enough, in the speaker's mind, to make the claim that the boy is not alone. Yet the boy clearly feels very differently about this, claiming, "'No friend shall weep my destiny, / for friends are scarce, and *tears* are few'(*LT*, 9). The boy's agitation builds with the speaker's insistence that he is not alone until the final four lines of the poem, where he wails:

> I have no kindred left, to mourn
> When I am hid in yonder grave!
> *Not one*! To dress with flow'rs the stone;—
> *Then—surely*, I AM LEFT ALONE!" (*LT*, 9)

The relationship between these two mirrors the relationship between the reader and Mary Robinson perfectly. After inviting the male reader in with thoughts of familiarity, and even chivalry, Robinson quickly, and yet subtly, reveals that this perceived relationship is actually no relationship at all. It is instead one that is perceived by the reader but not felt by the writer. It is from this platform that Robinson sets up much of the rest of the collection to criticise those who feel they know her through the tales spread about her, and more importantly, those who spread them.

[11] Judith Pasco, ed., *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Broadview, 2000), 43.

[12] Paula R. Backscheider, *Eighteenth Century Women Poets and their Poetry* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 20.

One of Robinson's poems that is most explicit in the criticism of spreading gossip is 'Deborah's Parrot, a Village Tale.' The poem's central character is Debby, a woman who 'was doom'd a Spinster pure to be' (*LT*, 97) and who teaches her parrot gossip and slander about other women so that it may be spread throughout her village. Throughout the poem Debby is painted as jealous of other women's youth and looks:

> Why did she watch with so much care
> The roving youth, the wandering fair?
> The tattler, Fame, has said that she,
> A spinster's life had long detested. (*LT*, 98)

Robinson's representation of the envious woman as spreading gossip because of her jealousy of the sexuality of younger, more attractive women could be read as a direct attack on those who actively gossiped and spread rumours about her. In the same year as *Lyrical Tales* was published, Robinson claimed, 'If I did not enter into the true spirit of Friendship for my own sex, it is because I have almost universally found that sex unkind and hostile towards *me*...I have found those women the most fastidiously severe, whose own lives have been marked with private follies and assumed propriety.'[13] The criticism of such women comes to a head at the end of the poem when, years after its beginning, Debby eventually manages to marry a man prone to jealousy and who is driven to a rage when his false suspicions that his wife is having an affair with the Parson are seemingly confirmed when her old parrot, whom she taught years ago to say '*Who with the Parson toy'd? O fie!*' (*LT*, 104) randomly begins to cry it again. Thus the last, explicitly didactic stanza ends:

> Thus, Slander turns against its maker;
> And if this little story reaches
> A Spinster, who the Parrot teaches,
> Let her a better task pursue,
> And here, the certain vengeance view
> Which surely will, in Time, O'ertake Her! (*LT*, 106)

This is a far more evolved usage of the tale from that in her poem, 'All Alone.' This time she is outwardly criticising those who spread tales. However, it is also a poem that begins to become uncomfortable with tales in any form, even its own. After all, the poem begins by revealing itself to be that which it criticises, an unreliable tale, or gossip:

> Twas in a little western town
> An ancient Maiden dwelt:
> Her name was Miss, Or Mistress, Brown,
> Or Deborah, or Debby (*LT*, 97)

The teller of this tale seems to trip over the facts of the tale, relatively uncertain of the name of its central character, in desperation to move onto the interesting part of the story by rushing straight into the next line 'She / was doom'd a spinster pure

[13]Mary Robinson to Jane Porter, 27 August 1800. Cited in *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. Judith Pasco (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2000), 41.

to be' (*LT*, 97). Therefore the poem almost seems to be doing exactly what it is preaching against: spreading tales with an uncertain foundation. However, Robinson seems aware of this conflict, and discusses it further in another of her more didactic poems, 'The Granny Grey, A Love Tale.'

This poem concerns Dame Dawson, whose beautiful grand-daughter Annetta is in love with William, 'as brave a youth / As ever claim'd the meed of truth.' (*LT*, 173). In this tale, two others are said to be told: the first is Granny Gray's, the moral of which was:

> Keep the wicked Men away,
> For should their wily arts prevail
> You'll surely rue the day! (*LT*, 173)

The second tale is told by William, who, when he discovers that Granny Gray has cunningly gone to their night-time meeting pretending to be Annetta, runs to the village and tells the villagers that he has seen:

> A fierce, ill-omen'd, crabbed Bird—
> [. . .]
> With claws of fire, and eye-balls green. (*LT*, 175)

The poem ends with the villagers running to the tree where they find Granny Gray and believe her to be a witch, at which point she confirms her 'tale of shame' (*LT*, 178) resulting in the mockery of her by the villagers until she repents and gives her consent for William to take Annetta. The poem's concluding stanza, containing the moral of the tale, highlights what is particularly interesting about this poem:

> And should this Tale, fall in the way
> Of lovers cross'd, or Grannies grey,—
> Let them confess, 'tis made to prove—
> The wisest heads,—too weak for Love! (*LT*, 178)

It is surprising, considering the poem's penultimate position in a collection which spends much of its time criticising the spreading of tall tales, that he who tells the most lavish tale is rewarded. However, in this poem Robinson is subtly justifying her use of tales to preach against their misuse. There seem to be three justifications that Robinson puts forward for William's tale to be acceptable. The first is the most obvious: that his tale was merely in response to Dame Dawson's tale and the trickery that she told it for. The second is that it is for a noble cause: love. However, the third, and most interesting justification, is that William managed to tell a better story to more people, and because of this he was successful in gaining the support of the villagers and embarrassing Granny Gray to a point in which she consents to William and Annette's partnership. It would seem then that this poem is almost a statement of the tale-teller's power and a warning to those who might try to tell their own tales.

In paying particular attention to the context and paratext of the collection as a whole, it can be seen that Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* was carefully crafted with dominant and deviant narratives in order to profit from her fame and reputation as much as

possible. Not only this, but it is clear that she also tried to criticise the gossip that came with and perpetuated such notoriety. However, in considering this elements of the collection, further glimmers of complexity arise in Robinson's poetry; whilst she has been hounded by tales about herself, she is also fed by those that she writes and publishes. Her relationship to tales, of which this essay has only brought out one aspect, has produced a far more fascinating and complicated set of poetry in *Lyrical Tales* than is often acknowledged. Hopefully, in beginning to recognise these issues and narratives within Robinson's poetry further research can continue to resuscitate and reveal the many intricacies of Mary Robinson's relationship with tales and storytelling throughout her staggering career.

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Poems

All poems cited are from: Mary Robinson, *Lyrical Tales* (Bristol: T. N. Longman & O. Rees, 1800).

'All Alone,' 1–9.
'Deborah's Parrot, a Village Tale,' 97–106.
'The Granny Gray, a Love Tale,' 171–178.