



MARY ROBINSON

By Rebekah Martin

- 1756/1758? Mary Robinson was *most likely* born November 27th 1758
- Could have been “Polly Derby” born in 1756. She is the 3rd sibling out of 5. She was often referred to as Perdita
- Actress, writer, sex symbol, the subject of gossip. Also famous for being famous.
- Father: Nicholas Darby (1720-1785) who was Irish, a sea captain and a merchant
- Mother: Hester Vanacott (1725-1793) Married in 1749. In 1753, they settled in Bristol where Darby’s mercantile jobs were based
- Parents encouraged her “to sing, to play a lesson on the harpsichord, to recite an elegy, and to make doggerel verses, made the extent of my occupations” (Levy)
- Unclear how her parent’s rocky relationship truly affected her childhood



- Well educated and had private tutors. She was a student at Park Street, which was run by the sisters of Hannah More
- Mary's father lost most of his wealth. In 1768, their possessions were sold, and her parents split up. Mary and her youngest brother George moved to London. She resumed her education
- In 1771, Mary's mother opened a school. Mary taught English. Mary's father felt emasculated, and demanded its closure as little as 8 months later
- "Assistants of every kind were engaged, and I was deemed worthy of an occupation that flattered my self-love, and impressed my mind with a sort of domestic consequence"
- Sent to finishing school at Oxford House in Marylebone
- Began her pursuit in theater and acting
- Took lessons at Drury Lane for her debut as Cordelia. Her acting career did not last long during this part of her life

Education & Acting

Married Life

- 1772 or 1773, Mary met husband: Thomas Robinson (1750-1802)
- Described as a shady, yet attractively “articled” clerk
- *Thomas said he was the nephew of a wealthy Welsh tailor, Thomas Harris, but he was actually his illegitimate son*
- Mary's mother apparently intimidated her into marrying him, probably because of how much money he appeared to have, considering Mary's parents fell into debt
- Like Mary's father, Thomas also fell into debt.
- Mary wanted the marriage to be kept secret. She claims she never loved him. After their honeymoon in 1773, Mary moved in with her mother. Gave birth to first child Maria Elizabeth
- 1775, Thomas was arrested. Mary shared his imprisonment for almost a year, where she supported her family with various work.
- She released her first collection of poems.

- Mary sent poems to the Duchess of Devonshire. The Duchess invited her to the house and became her patron.
- After Thomas's release, they moved in together to Marylebone. Mary suggested that she pursue acting. Thomas did not object.
- Mary Robinson was a big fan of fashion and presented a fashionable lifestyle. Many men claimed to have affairs with her, which she denied.
- She was known for her beautiful voice and played many characters including but not limited to Juliet, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Perdita.
- Caught the attention of the Prince of Wales during her performance as Perdita in *The Winters Tale* in December 1779. It is said that four days later, he confessed his love to her in a letter. They finally met in 1780, and he promised Mary her own place and a large sum of money.
- Mary stopped acting, Lived a life of luxury and indulgence, and later fell into debt.
- Her most cherished desire: to be remembered
- The 18th century Madonna
- Became a lesson to young girls on the dangers of promiscuity.
- Her sex life was both real and imagined, being that she rendezvoused with several powerful men

Attention

Art ctd.

- During her imprisonment, Robinson really started writing as a means to express her experiences. She wrote miscellaneous journalism, novels, plays, and poems for publication later. She was published in *The Morning Post* and *The Oracle*.
- It is said she was attempting to do something more meaningful with her talents
- Her novels are overwhelmingly feminist, like in *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*.
- Her high productivity can be traced to her need to maintain a high standard of living, and her desire to be recognized.

Captivity, a Poem. And Celadon and Lydia, a tale. Dedicated, by permission, to Her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire.

- Written after imprisonment
- Written in Della Cruscan style- a style of sentimental poetry popular in the later 18th century, which she did not continue to use later
- Captivity wanted to shine sympathetic light onto those who were punished by debt
- Described psychological horrors of captivity
- The purpose was to increase pity
- Follows confession and redemption of wrongdoing
- Focuses on the Partner aka women affected by their husbands debts

Captivity, a Poem. ctd

- “How bless'd the Village-maiden's humble lot, To tend her flocks, and cheer the straw-roof'd cot; To greet the stranger at the friendly door, To bless the generous, and relieve the poor;”
- “In Nature's unaffected voice, she sings the tale which only come from Compassion Springs; The Wretches' fate her genial foul inspires, A kindred Pity all her bosom fires”
- “If the Benevolent, the generous few, Captivity, and all its horrors knew, Then would the sighs of grief ne'er heave in vain, Or Misery's unheeded voice complain”
- “Madam, Your Grace's partiality to these imperfect lines has emboldened me to use your kind permission, of dedicating them to you, the friendly patrons of the Unhappy—to paint those virtues, which dignify your Grace's exalted Situation, would appear in me an Idle Presumption; but I cannot publish these verses, and not take the occasion of repeating my thanks to you, for the unmerited Favors your Grace has bestowed upon me.”

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