

Perdita, The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson by
Paula Byrne

An eighteenth century sex symbol, Mary Robinson was an unusual mix of fashion icon, celebrated actress, published poet, author and “undoubted genius” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge). If not for Paula Byrne’s extensive research she would have continued to be greatly misrepresented, or her existence only acknowledged in a list of royal mistresses.

Mary’s father had abandoned his family to live openly with his mistress. At fourteen Mary Darby became an actress, a protégée of David Garrick. At age fifteen she was persuaded to secretly marry a man whose fortune was not what he had claimed it to be. Living beyond their means landed Thomas Robinson in debtors’ prison, and Mary and their baby joined him in prison. To support the family on his release Mary returned to Drury Lane & acting, becoming one of London’s most celebrated and most beautiful women, and attracting the Prince of Wales (the future King George IV). She kept the prince at a distance until his ardour became fierce enough to offer her an annuity when he came of age. Finally accepting him as a lover she quit her acting career. He was 17, she was 21. Mary was the sole supporter of her mother, daughter and husband (paying his gambling debts and supporting his mistresses).

Mary Robinson led a fascinating, multitalented life. Having met Marie Antoinette in Paris, and greatly admiring her style and person, she brought French fashion into England. Mary was a manipulator and knew how to market herself. She associated romantically with powerful men in politics and literature, made close friends with the Duchess of Devonshire, Mary Wollstonecraft and other literary figures and was regularly written about in the newspapers of the day, some supportive, some critical. Her image was painted by Reynolds, Gainsborough, Romney, Hoppner and less advantageously by the caricaturists, Gillray and Rowlandson.

Irregular payments from the prince and a need to support her family and her expensive lifestyle compelled Mary to churn out books on poetry, novels and plays. Her poetry, a popular style of the times, is covered in detail in the book. More interesting are her novels written in the Gothic genre, with political messages interwoven into particulars of her own unstable life and of people she knew. Some of her favourite themes were the corruption of the aristocracy, the fate of fallen women, the right of women to receive a “masculine education” and women’s right to inheritance.

In the final chapters one’s view of Mary Robinson softens when she decides to “restore her much tarnished reputation and remake herself as a woman of letters and of genius”. Times had changed. Scandal pages no longer were filled with gossip; Mrs. Robinson was no longer a celebrity. At 25 years of age she had been left paralysed from acute rheumatic fever, contracted in the pursuit of her lover who was leaving for the continent to avoid his creditors.

Always fragile after her illness, Mary Robinson died in 1800 at the presumed age of 42.