1 A Gothic Life

When Mary Darby Robinson (Figure 1) died on December 26, 1800 – having been a prolific poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, editor, critic, activist, leading major-theater actress (1776–80), and mistress to the Prince of Wales (1779–80) and other prominent men – she left unfinished an autobiography soon filled out and edited by her daughter Maria, likely aided by the poet Samuel Jackson Pratt (*WMR* 7: xix–xxv). It was published in 1801 as *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson, Written by Herself* (7: 193–294). As several scholars have noted, most of it, even the "Continuation" half, reads like a Gothic novel, "with its plot of the tortured, long-suffering heroine . . . in a world of terrifying torments" (Mellor 250; see also Close 172–175, 180–185). It begins by situating her birth in 1756 (possibly 1757; see *WMR* 1: xvi), not just in the "Minster-house" in Bristol where it happened, but within the towering "gothic structure" that encompasses it (*WMR* 7: 193). Even the house "was built" only "partly of modern architecture," since its "back was supported by the ancient cloisters of St. Augustine's," and that meant that the "gloomy" birth-room had "been a part of the original monastery" while the rest of the house now seems to sprout outward into modernity (193). The adjoining "cloisters" were parts of a "ruin" left by violent past upheavals, including the expulsion of the "monks" after the Reformation and (Robinson believed) a "cannonading" in 1653 (see *WMR* 7: 359–360 n.3). It is precisely because of this contradictory setting, explicitly called "dark, Gothic" and turned into a backdrop by a former stage performer, that the writer's "contemplative mind" is filled "at this moment . . . with melancholy awe" (193). On one level, this opening strives to counter the coverage of Robinson as sexually profligate by claiming that her origins established a mindset of "mournful meditation" as the truest ground of her being (193). Such a claim extends a widespread ideology of the "architectural imagination" that, especially since the 1740s, increasingly came to pervade English aesthetics and saw Gothic structures, remaining or revived, as calling "up in the perceiver" certain "trains of thought" (Townshend 14) that quite often included Robinson's "melancholy awe."

On another level, this opening in the *Memoirs* also recalls the antique settings in the Gothic romances of Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, and others from the late 1770s–90s (see Mellor) and their roots in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the first fiction to call itself "A Gothic Story" in its second edition (1765; Walpole 2003: 63). That is especially so when the *Memoirs* emphasize how Robinson's birth-chamber was "supported" by the "arches" of a once-Catholic monastery, even though that room was part of a "modern" private house (*WMR* 7: 193). This description pulls her birth emphatically in two directions, making it and her look backward and forward like the two faces of the ancient Roman god Janus. In doing so, it repeats what Radcliffe emphasizes about many of

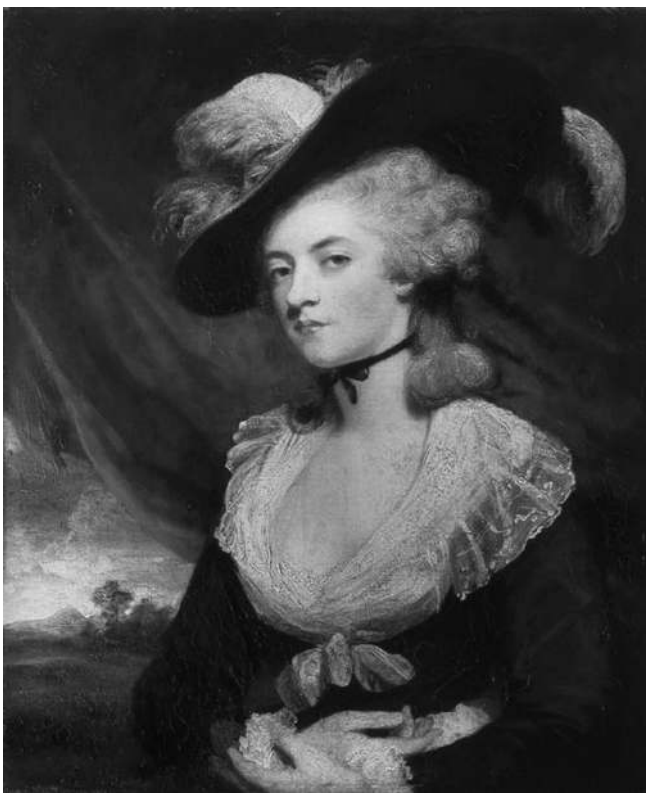

Figure 1 *Portrait of Mrs. Mary Robinson, née Darby* by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1782).

the Gothic settings of her novels. In *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), the "mass of Gothic architecture" that is another "abbey of St. Augustine," this one on the island of Radcliffe's title, rises up "in proud sublimity" out of "the surrounding shades" as if the spectator were looking back toward the past; to the modern "beholder," however, it appears as a hollowed-out, though magnificent, shell – what the Bristol "ruins" are for Robinson – emptied of the "gross indulgences" and the "clouds of prejudice" played out by "the priest, the nobleman, and the sovereign" of "past ages," now rightly dissipated by the forward-looking "sun of science" (Radcliffe 1993: 116), especially for enlightened Protestants of the later 1700s (including Mary Darby, baptized an Anglican in 1758; *WMR* 1: xvi).

By invoking Radcliffe's Gothicized "sublimity," moreover, Robinson's *Memoirs* continue, like her Gothic predecessors, the particular sense of that term in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* on *the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). There vast gloomy scenes and dark ruins, especially in verbal art linking them to bygone eras, arouse in spectators the fear of death, suggested by the

death of the past behind what remains. This is the "terror" that animates the aesthetic response that is Burke's sublime, in which "the mind is . . . entirely filled with its object" and pulled toward the death that the object suggests (Clery and Miles 113). But, especially given the distance of words from their referents, Burke's sublimity can still be "delightful," albeit tinged with some "melancholy" sense of loss, because art, more modern than its death-laden objects, can distance represented entities from any past "destruction" (Clery and Miles 121). All of this is echoed when Robinson writes of being born right at the juncture where ruins from now-absent history appear to sprout modern architecture while leaving a suspect antiquity in view. This very crux is what Walpole uses to define his new mode in his second *Otranto* Preface of 1765. The "Gothic Story" is for him a "blend" of "the two kinds of romance, the ancient and modern," in which the supernatural, chivalric, pastoral, and Catholic "ancient" strain, though still visible and enticing, is distanced as attractive and imaginative but ultimately "unnatural" for 1760s readers; "modern" fiction, by contrast, increasingly urban and mercantile, draws us toward the "rules of probability" accepted in the eighteenth century as part of "common life" rooted in more natural Protestant knowledge based on empirical perception (Walpole 2003: 65; see also Hogle 2019). No wonder Robinson highlights "the horrors of Walpole" right up front in one of her earliest novels (*WMR* 2: 347). Her *Memoirs*, like her Gothic writings in general, do not just echo the Gothic broadly defined. They pointedly extend the Janus-faced foundations of the Walpolean Gothic and its late-eighteenth-century progeny.

It is hardly surprising, then, that these *Memoirs* wax most Gothic and Walpolean when Robinson writes about major transitions and motivators in her life. When, from 1765–7, her father, Nicholas Darby, plunged his family from prosperity into debtor's prison by attempting a "fishery on the coast of Labrador" while continuing lavish spending, it is as if "potent witchery possessed his brain" with "its magic," since he was inclined toward "romantic" fantasies; yet, since he grew up "accustomed to a sea life," he "formed plans for the increase of wealth" based on his experience with seagoing, all the while hiding the "dreadful secret" of a "Mistress" (*WMR* 7: 197–198). Thus torn, like his daughter writing about her father, between "ancient" beliefs and "modern" internal drives, Nicholas resembles Walpole's Manfred, Prince of Otranto, who feels impelled by "his reliance on ancient prophecies" but also the "ambition" growing inside him (Walpole 2003: 149) to force a marriage between himself and Isabella, the betrothed of his now-dead son and the daughter of the Marquis Frederic, a rival claimant for the throne of Otranto (79–81, 120). This deceptive gambit, like Darby's, is flagrantly adulterous (since Manfred is still married) and obscures deep secrets: in *Otranto*'s case the murder of Alfonso, the Castle's founder, by Manfred's grandfather covered up by a "fictitious will," the

exposure of which shows Manfred to be a false heir and uncovers an "authentic writing" revealing the existence of that founder's wife from whom the true heir has descended (164). Such conflicted villainy in Nicholas, so like Manfred's in its basic structure, is further seen by the *Memoirs* as exacerbated by Robinson's mother. She is written to be like Manfred's wife, Hippolita, who pitifully tries to dissuade her husband from extremes that could hurt the family but is ineffectually "obedient" to his "authority" in the end (147). Hester Darby is thus portrayed as "devoted" like Hippolita to the point of "too unlimited indulgence" with both husband and children (*WMR* 7: 197). One consequence is that young Mary and her brothers have been "little served to arm their breast against the perpetual arrows of mortal vicissitude" to come (7:197). This Hippolitan failing turns out to be one principal reason, Robinson now believes, why her mind's "original bent" became, quite early, too interwoven with "the progressive evils of a too acute sensibility" (7: 196).

The Gothic and Sensibility

By moving into this register, too – which Robinson had already done in her poetry (see McGann 94–116) – her *Memoirs* show how the Gothic came to her in the 1790s as already inflected with the philosophy of sensibility, infused somewhat into the characters of *Otranto* but inseparable from the Walpolean Gothic by the time of Radcliffe's romances (1789–97). Descending from the Earl of Shaftesbury's assertion of human altruism against the dominance of self-interest argued by Thomas Hobbes and from John Locke's empiricism, where all knowledge comes through sense-impressions and the feelings they arouse (hence "modern" in Walpole's scheme), this ideology was "generalized from the theories" of "David Hume and Adam Smith" (Poovey 307) and proliferated extensively in poems, plays, and novels well known to Robinson. It especially supported the ideals of the supposedly self-made middle class by associating self-realization with the individual "sensibility's capacity both to move and be moved" and the willingness of people "to face one another, adopt another's points of view," and thereby "modify passion into sentiment" (Chandler xvii). As Mary Poovey has shown, this ideology offered women "undeniable power" and new value during Robinson's lifetime, highlighting their supposedly greater capacity to feel; but it also made women (including women writers) draw back from excess feeling, including unrestrained sexuality, so that they could be seen as preserving the "sentimental values and behavior traditionally associated with paternalistic society" (Poovey 309). Women were thus positioned, like Robinson at birth, in another tug-of-war between the ancient and the modern that made depictions of women and their

sensibilities immediately compatible with Janus-faced Gothic fiction. Hence Isabella in *Otranto*, as she flees from Manfred's predations, is torn between "her heart prompt[ing] her" to "go and prepare Hippolita for [a] cruel destiny" and escaping into the dark "subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the church" (the option she chooses); there, in a scene that set a standard for the Gothic imperiling of women, "every murmur struck her with a new terror" because, while her feelings do reach maximum intensity, she is caught in the dark between two old patriarchal institutions, fearing confinement in both (Walpole 2003: 82). By the height of Radcliffe's writing career, this conflict became intensified by the warning that too much "delicacy of sentiment" could trap women into being "objects of contempt" that reinforce male control, to quote Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; Wollstonecraft 1967: 34). Consequently, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) directly anticipates the "too acute sensibility" of Robinson's *Memoirs* when Emily St. Aubert finds in herself "uncommon delicacy of mind, warm affections, and ready benevolence, but" also, echoing her father's warnings, "a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace" (Radcliffe 1998*b*: 5).

This combination of cultural schemes that both pull in contrary directions – the contest between ancient and modern in the Gothic and the valuing up and valuing down of women's feelings in the aesthetic of sensibility – therefore reappear in how Robinson's *Memoirs* describe the most (in)famous turns in her life following the 1760s. Soon after David Garrick first observes her talent for acting, probably in 1772 (*WMR* 1: xxxv), "he appeared to me as one who possessed more power, both to awe and attract," like an ancient authority-figure, "than any man I ever met" (7: 206). Similarly, as she remembers it, when she played "Perdita" (the "lost one"), which became her best-known role, in a command performance of Garrick's condensation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* on December 3, 1779 (1: xxxv), "my eyes met those of the Prince of Wales" right "as the curtain was falling," and he gave her "a look, that *I never shall forget*" from an elevated box conveying ancient royal power that looked down on paid commercial performers in a modern adaptation (7: 254). Both these scenes as written look back to the "physiognomy" of the monk Schedoni, the title character in Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797): his "eyes were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate . . . into the hearts of men" and especially women, with hints of both "something terrible" in his past and yet an awesome seductiveness that could "triumph" over onlookers with "astonishing facility" (Radcliffe 1998*a*: 34–35). As a result, these life-changing male gazes in the *Memoirs* arouse Robinson's sensibility toward both a "gratifying" flattery that promises "enchanting hours" (*WMR* 7: 204–207) and an awe tinged with fear

that she could be seduced into losing what little self-determination she has. Prone to a "restless peevishness of tone," Garrick commands that Robinson "frequent the theater as much as possible," whether she wants to or not, before she debuts (7: 206), and the Prince requires that, at his first nighttime walks with her, she costume herself in "the male attire" from the "breeches" roles she has often enacted (7: 257). This last hint of performative female freedom mixed with enforced patriarchal orders soon becomes a step that the "Continuation" of the *Memoirs* sees – since Robinson's own manuscript stops after this point – as one of several that ultimately "rendered her but too obnoxious to a thousand errors and perils" (7: 259), very like those that beset Walpole-to-Radcliffe heroines from Isabella on.

Appearance versus "Reality"

These conflicts within the Gothic and sensibility are bound up in the *Memoirs*, moreover, with the equally "obnoxious" distance between appearance and reality. Even the latter for Robinson is rarely grounded in certainty because of conflicting impressions and words – for Ferdinand de Saussure "signifiers," as opposed to their "signifieds" or "referents" – that keep proliferating as print culture expands, shifting across different meanings, and thereby altering perceptions of what their "true" referents are. Of course, the appearance/reality disconnect pervades her relationship with the Prince in the *Memoirs* beyond just her cross-dressing and their reenactments of "Perdita" (now her sobriquet in the press) and "Florizel" (Perdita's lover in *A Winter's Tale*) in their letters carried by intermediaries and the public parodies of their relationship (*WMR* 1: xvii–viii). When, in a 1783 letter included in the "Continuation" (7: 261–267), Robinson recalls her last night on stage before leaving theater for the Prince in May 1780 (1: xxxv), she remembers this final exit as "flying from a happy certainty to pursue the phantom disappointment" (7: 262). The specter of what first promises "visionary happiness" despite her admitted adultery (262) turns Gothically, as she writes, into literal disappointment, the detachment of that envisioned signifier from the referent to which it first seemed appointed, making it only a "phantom." The Prince suddenly dropped her in December 1780 (1: xxxv), and both of them were cast, as she later recounts it, into a terrifying chaos, the pervasive "artillery" of "slander" in "pamphlets . . . paragraphs, and caricatures" (7: 265), all signifiers of other signifiers, just some among the "legion of these phantoms it has been my fate to encounter" (7: 267). That Gothic shift from a singular, exalted object of desire to its explosion into myriad ghost-like falsities on paper ironically echoes, as the *Memoirs* recall it, the author's earlier marriage in 1773 to the solicitor's clerk Thomas Robinson

(1: xxxiii) – whom she never legally divorced – at the behest of her mother to restore the family fortunes. Initially she accepts Hester's image of Thomas as prompting "an impression of gratitude" by "attending" Mary during an illness (7: 209) and claiming to be an "heir" through an uncle to a "handsome fortune" (213). Yet these all dissipate into phantoms when he is revealed to be "the illegitimate son" of that "uncle" (213), a debtor and deceiving adulterer worse than Mary's father (224), and a begrudged hanger-on at that "uncle's" country seat, Tregunter. This mansion, too, first meets the "eye" as the antiquated center of "a romantic space of scenery" (216), yet it turns out to be *faux* Gothic, "not yet finished," and the scene of haughty "insults" toward Mary because she is middle class, even though the "considerable fortune" behind it comes from "trade" and the family cultivates an ignorance so removed from her rich early education (201–202) that she remembers finding "but few sources of amusement for" a cultivated "female mind" (229). The Gothic fronts of both the Prince and Thomas Robinson the "heir," as in romances from Walpole to Radcliffe, are pierced in the *Memoirs* to show themselves undergirded by corruptions, inconsistencies, and fears of "phantoms" that expose one counterfeit identity after another, all disappointments, even in Mary Robinson the actress, wife, and mistress.

The Inescapable Gothic

Ultimately her successful flights from such roles in the 1780s–90s, even her astonishing productivity as a writer over her final decade, do not, as her *Memoirs* recount them, escape the vagaries and fakery of Gothic sensibility. When, after the Prince drops her, she flees from England to France in October 1781 (*WMR* 1: xxxv), she finds herself transported far from the dark slanders of London, lavishly feted as "*la belle Angolise*" (7: 268). She even accepts an invitation from Marie Antoinette and dresses for the occasion in "the fashion of the French Court" (269), yet another counterfeit identity. But, as the *Memoirs*' "Continuation" admits, the Queen particularly notices the "miniature of the Prince of Wales, which Mrs. Robinson wore on her bosom" (269). The distance from England and scandal suddenly collapses, first because Robinson's sensibility obviously still longs for him, but also because this moment recalls the haunting power of portraits in Gothic fictions going back, again, to Walpole's *Otranto*. There Matilda, Manfred's daughter, feels herself attracted to Theodore, apparently a young peasant (Walpole 2003: 76), primarily because he resembles "the picture of the good Alfonso in the gallery" to which she believes "my destiny is linked" (2003: 95). Such a "destiny" is what Robinson keeps having to admit about the Prince in her *Memoirs*, as we see in the 1781 painting of her by Thomas Gainsborough (see Figure 2), where she holds that very miniature, in one of

Figure 2 Thomas Gainsborough, 1781 (oil on canvas), *Mrs. Mary Robinson (Perdita)*, Wallace Collection, London, UK / © Wallace Collection/Bridgeman Images.

several portraits of her (including Figure 1) done at a time when she hovered between celebrated and notorious in the English public eye (Ty 27–28, 38). Later in the *Memoirs*, too, Robinson is Gothically dragged back in other ways. In July 1783, when she starts out for the Continent again, this time in pursuit of lover Banastre Tarlton (*WMR* 1: xxxv–vi), she is figured forth by the "Continuation" as a sentimental and Gothic heroine in a sequence which begins with "her fate assumed darker hue," makes no mention of Tarlton at all, and describes her as "attacked by a malady" from "exposure to the night air" that forces her back to

England and "*progressively deprived her of the use of her limbs"* (7: 270). This is the *Memoirs'* romanticized rendition of Robinson "fall[ing] ill" while traveling, "possibly" from "a miscarriage," into a "fever" that led by 1784 to a "progressive paralysis" that she did indeed "suffer for the remainder of her life" (1: xxxvi).

Even so, this dark descent becomes one of several moments from which she pulls herself up, as from Gothic "melancholy" ashes, to "pour forth . . . poetic effusions" of "genius" and, by the mid-1790s, to become an authority on how "modern poetry [should be] composed," if often from older models (7: 278). For the "Continuation" narrator, in fact, it is the "mournful certainty" of "incurable lameness," somewhat like the "church-yard of Old Windsor" where she asks to be buried (7: 290), that repeatedly gives rise to "the activity of a fertile fancy" (280), recalling her view of such mental expansion as born into her, given her Gothic birthplace. The "Continuation" does acknowledge, as the later Robinson did (*WMR* 1: xix), some regrettable detours motivated by her sentimental inclinations, particularly in 1790. Around that time, as the "Continuation" narrator puts it, she gives in to another counterfeit costume, the "poetical disguise" that is the "extravagance" of the "Della Crusca" school of "Robert Merry," to which Robinson actively contributed poems (*WMR* 7: 279). Still, this brief excrescence (really from 1788–91; 1: xxxvi), as viewed in the *Memoirs*, is left behind by her many publishing triumphs of the later 1790s and her appointment in 1799 to head "the poetical department of a morning paper" (7: 286), *The Morning Post* (1: xxxviii). When the "Continuation" concludes by judging Robinson's life, though, following her daughter's account of her death, the sentimental Gothic keeps enveloping what is written about her. As much as Robinson finally achieved, we are told that her legacy remains haunted by the dark "errors" that often "combined to her destruction" and that her continuous "mental exertions through [her] depressing disease" should "extort admiration," but only as such an "unmitigable severity . . . awaken[s] pity in the hardest heart" (7: 292).

2 The Ungrounded Grounds of the Walpolean Gothic

Even so, when I say that Robinson drives down to, and then draws forth, the very bases of the Walpolean Gothic, I mean that the Gothic in her writing at its best reenacts the most underlying symbolic dynamics of the "Gothic Story" as Walpole first defined them and as they were developed further by his best successors. Just as the *Memoirs*' account of Robinson's birth invokes the "two kinds of romance" in Walpole's second Preface, it also hearkens back to the radical suggestions about the "ancient" kind in his *first* Preface of 1764, nearly always reprinted with the second. In that Preface, where the author claims to be the translator of an Italian text printed in 1529 by an "artful" Catholic trying to counter the Reformation (Walpole 2003: 59), the "preternatural" elements in the story are

castigated as relics from the "darkest ages of christianity" that should not be believed in by enlightened Protestant readers (59–60). Nearly all the elements in *Otranto* that assume a supernatural plane and exclusively Catholic beliefs, then, come to the reader with their ideological foundations "exploded now even from romances," even as such symbols emptied of those grounds arouse, as in Burke, pleasurable nostalgia for modern imaginations (60). Hence the oddities in the influential ghosts of *Otranto*, two of them imitative of the Ghost of the Prince's Father in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (declared as a source in Walpole's second Preface, 66–67). They are all hollowed-out specters compared to Shakespeare's embodied figure, images of other images rather than signifiers of a once-present and solid entity. They are the gigantic ghost of the murdered Alfonso in armored fragments that resembles the statue of him beneath the Otranto "church," also in armor like the *Hamlet* ghost (76); the shade of "the portrait" of Manfred's "grandfather" that "quit[s] its panel" to walk silently across the castle "floor" (81); and the cowled specter that appears to Frederic (156–157) to remind him of an old Hermit who once spoke prophetically to him (133) but that now looks like a skeleton in a *danse macabre* painting of the 1400s. Readers have been told by the first Preface to dismiss the belief-system that credits these apparitions, to see them as hollow memorials of old-style ghosts, and to feel only the sheer "Terror" that the characters do upon beholding them (60). Actual deaths or "ancient" world views that these shades might once have signified have receded so far into the past that such contents are now as absent to our logical understanding as they are felt and dimly desired by our emotions in a Burkean "sublime" reaction. That is precisely how Robinson comes to see the Gothic scene of her birth, with its ruins as towering over her birthplace and as fragmented and divorced from their Catholic base as the ghost of Alfonso is for Walpole's readers. Hence her "melancholy awe," even now, in her *Memoirs*. Such piles arouse a complex emotion combining the loss of that past, only vaguely still desired – hence the melancholy – with the pleasure of that awareness as the worst of those ages recedes in favor of a more modern, Protestant sense of humanity's relationship to signs of a higher divinity – hence the awe.

"Gothic" as Mobile Signifier

Robinson is also a reenactor of other levels among Walpole's peculiar assumptions. For one thing, she accepts, as he does, "Gothic" as a floating signifier. For her as for him, it slides, not just between ancient and modern romance, but between two ideological stances toward its "ancient" connotations that contended with each other in the eighteenth century. One of these, what Dale Townshend terms "dark Gothic," saw the term as meaning "monstrous" and "uncivilized," recalling a medieval antiquity of tyrannical hierarchies, continuous violence, and