

Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson!

There is not a woman in England so much talked of and so little known as Mrs. Robinson.

Morning Herald, 23 April, 1784



In the first instalment of her revealing new series, author Amanda Elyot introduces us to the turbulent world of Mary Robinson.

Square, expecting Hester to look after herself and provide for their children. But when she opened a school, her estranged husband was scandalised. How dare she bring shame upon his name by working? Darby demanded that she close the academy as soon as possible. This incident gave Mary her first taste of the era's double standards of conduct, a theme she would frequently revisit in her writing.

During the Georgian era many fortunes rose and fell and families were compelled to retrench, Jane Austen's among them. Yet before Jane, another novelist — Mary Robinson — managed to perpetually transcend the numerous reversals that befell her, turning adversity into triumph.

Mary was born in Bristol (most likely in 1757) to Hester Darby and her husband Nicholas, an affluent merchant. Unfortunately, Mary's entrepreneurial father would prove to be the first in a string of feckless and fickle men to disappoint her. When Mary was nine years old, Darby abandoned Hester and their three children. After returning from a failed venture in the North American fur trade two years later, he took up residence with his mistress in London's posh Grosvenor



Mrs Mary Robinson ('Perdita') by George Romney painted in 1780 – 1781 ©The Wallace Collection

Hannah More (1745-1833) by Frances Reynolds. Reproduced by kind permission of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

Mary was one of the rare girls to have some formal schooling. During the Darby family's happier days, she attended the academy run by the More sisters in Bristol, and Hannah More, in her pre-evangelical years, was one of Mary's tutors. Mary displayed an early aptitude for acting and eventually garnered an audition for David Garrick, the manager of Drury Lane and the greatest actor of the age.

But Mary's theatrical debut was postponed by two events: a bout of smallpox and her mother's insistence that she marry well instead of pinning her hopes on a stage career.

Tom Robinson was a lawyer's clerk who had misrepresented himself to Hester Darby as the nephew of a wealthy Welsh landowner. He and Hester conspired to convince Mary that even if she recovered from the pox, her beauty might be marred forever, and in any event, the stage was no place for a respectable young woman of the gentry who had perfectly good marriage prospects before her.

So Mary and Tom were married in London on 12 April, 1773 at the church of St-Martin-in-the-Fields. Mary was all of fifteen years old.

And Tom turned out not to be "as advertised". He was in fact the illegitimate son of the Welshman he called his "uncle". He was also several months from completing his clerkship, a gambler and an adulterer who seemed allergic to any form of employment. On the 3rd of May, 1775, Mr. Robinson was remanded to the Fleet prison. Mary and their infant daughter Maria Elizabeth joined him there, but even in debtors' prison, Tom Robinson proved a disappointment. He carried on affairs behind Mary's back and refused to accept work as a copyist, which would have eventually garnered him enough to discharge his debts.

So Mary accepted the copyist's job, while she also toiled long hours as a charwoman at the Fleet and looked after little Maria. Somehow she found the time to devote to writing poetry, a pursuit she had enjoyed since childhood. Her younger brother George, having heard that the Duchess of Devonshire, was fond of literature, managed to deliver to Her Grace a little volume of Mary's poetry. The duchess was enchanted and requested an interview with the author, which led to a friendship between the two teenage beauties. Georgiana became Mary's first patroness, and in



David Garrick. © NPG London

the summer of 1776 *Poems by Mrs. Robinson*, a 134-page octavo volume was published. Mary earned enough money from book sales to help secure Tom Robinson's release from the Fleet.

But when Tom reverted to his wastrel ways, Mary reconsidered her first love — a stage career. She returned to David Garrick's tutelage, and in time became the toast of Drury Lane, excelling in contemporary comedies and dramas, and in the classics of Shakespeare and Dryden. Offstage, Mary was a glamorous superstar renowned for her fashion sense, and a trendsetter who scandalized society when she visited the London pleasure gardens wearing breeches.

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire by Sir Joshua Reynolds. © The Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement. From *Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire* by Amanda Foreman





Vauxhall Gardens c. 1784 by Thomas Rowlandson © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

Mary with the Prince of Wales and her very short husband Thomas Robinson

On 3 December, 1779, Mary appeared at Drury Lane in a royal command performance of *The Winter's Tale*, ("altered by Garrick from Shakespeare") in the central role of Perdita, the shepherd girl who falls in love with a handsome prince and does not learn until the denouement that she herself is really a princess.

When the seventeen-year-old Prince of Wales fixed his attention on her, the twenty-two-year-old married actress was so disconcerted that she raced through her lines with the speed of a runaway horse. The heir apparent's attention was the talk of the company.

The following day, the Prince's confidant, Viscount Malden, paid Mary a call. He was bearing a gushing letter addressed to "Perdita" from an admirer calling himself "Florizel". Mary remained sceptical about the identity of her epistolary swain until Malden visited the following day with another letter in which His Highness assured her that he would give her a demonstrable sign of his attraction that evening at the oratorio, a religious concert where the young Prince and his family were to be in attendance.

Through Malden, who now became the couple's official courier, Mary reminded the Prince that she was a married woman, and that if she were to attend the concert, it would be in the company of her husband. By that time, Mary and Mr. Robinson had unofficially parted ways, divorce being a near impossibility for the English middle class. Mr. Robinson was an unemployed, hard-drinking, hard-

gambling womaniser who kept two mistresses, and Mary was well rid of him. But for an actress, a profession notorious for its lack of respectability, being married, however unhappily, lent a woman a measure of propriety.

At the oratorio, the Prince engaged in an elaborate pantomime, where he seductively touched his glass to his lips, and pretended to write something on the edge of the royal box. Soon, the daily papers were

buzzing with titbits of gossip about the pair; and from salons to coffeehouses, the buzz centred on the prince's fancy. "Florizel" wrote to his "Perdita" almost daily. But Mary understood that her giddy epistolary romance might as well have been written in the sand they used to set the ink.

George continually pressed her for a private meeting, but Mary was not yet willing to surrender her charms. For one thing, the Prince — though he seemed to have no qualms about taking a married woman as his mistress — emphatically believed that the theatre was a disgraced profession. If Mary were to become his lover, she would have to relinquish her stage career, an uncomfortable trade-off. Not only was she a bona fide star who loved her job, but Mary was one of the few women of her day who had managed to secure an independent living, supporting herself, her wayward spouse, and their young daughter solely on the income she made as an actress. And it was quite an impressive income, even if Mary did have a penchant for spending every penny of it on clothes and new carriages.

But George was unwilling to be forestalled. He sent her his portrait in miniature, ringed with diamonds. Still, Mary "recommended him to be patient till he should become his own master; to wait until he knew more of my mind and manners before he engaged in a public attachment to me and, above all, to do nothing that might incur the displeasure of the royal family."

As further proof of his devotion, the Prince



Mrs 'Perdita' Robinson by Richard Cosway c.1785 Watercolour on ivory in a heart-shaped ruby and enamel pendant From an exhibition held in 1999 *The World of the Portrait Miniature* at the Holburne Museum of Art, Bath



George, Prince of Wales miniature by Richard Cosway (1742–1821) Watercolour on ivory From an exhibition held in 1999 *The World of the Portrait Miniature* at the Holburne Museum of Art, Bath

Within weeks, Mary gave her notice to the manager of Drury Lane, the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Mary's beloved Garrick had died on 20 January, 1779).

The canny Sheridan capitalised on Mary's increased notoriety, adding more appearances in order to pack the house as frequently as possible until her emotional farewell performance on 31 May, 1780.

That night, although she left the theatre with tears in her eyes, Mary Robinson's heart was filled with anticipation, fully prepared to embrace a new love. 🌸

All For Love by Amanda Elyot. Amanda (aka Lesley Carroll)'s new book about Mrs Robinson is reviewed on page 49.

sent Mary a promissory note or bond for £20,000 (today over £2 million), payable upon his coming of age, although His Highness would not turn twenty-one until 12 August, 1783. Were she now to cast off her lucrative career to become a royal mistress, her financial sacrifice would not be overlooked.

Finally, Mary consented to a nocturnal meeting with the Prince, brokered by Lord Malden, which did much to sway Mary's inclinations from esteem to ardour. During just a few minutes together she became utterly smitten. "How my soul would have idolised such a husband," she wrote in her memoirs.

In Part 2, Mrs. Robinson becomes a royal mistress. Deliriously happy, she's quite the "high flyer" as such fast living was called. But many believed she was soaring too close to the sun.

Leslie Carroll is a professional actress and multi-published novelist, who writes historical fiction under the pen name Amanda Elyot. Her previous novels *By a Lady* and *Too Great a Lady* have been featured in JARW.

