

# Here's to you, Mrs Robinson!

*I have ever been disposed to speak my sentiments too freely. What I dislike, I condemn; what I love, I idolise. . . I write what my heart prompts. Perhaps imprudently; certainly unartificially.*

~Mary Robinson

*Letter to William Godwin, 1800*



In Part one of this series, the phoenix-like Mary Robinson went from Bristol to London — from being a pupil of Hannah More to being a protégée of David

Garrick. She was married at fifteen, in a debtors' prison two years later, and a published poetess; and the toast of the London stage — when she caught the eye of the young Prince of Wales who was eager to make her his first mistress. Amanda Elyot reports.

After months of keeping him at arms' length, Mary finally surrendered her body to the teenage Prince of Wales at the unprepossessing Three Swans Inn, Thames-side near Brentford. The lovers would have more assignations at a small brick house not far from Kew.

Already a celebrity as an actress, once she became a royal mistress Mary's allure multiplied. She gaddered around town in a coach that bore the emblem of her initials entwined with those of

the Prince of Wales, surrounded by a border that tapered at its apex into something resembling a coronet. She took a side box at the theatre, a location customarily the purview of the titled and otherwise well-heeled. Although Mary had once been queen of that very stage, her detractors thought that she should have been relegated to the upper balcony, where the troling prostitutes plied their trade.



Mrs Robinson by Sir Joshua Reynolds 1784  
© The Wallace Collection, London

Mrs Mary Robinson ('Perdita') painted 1781 by Thomas Gainsborough  
© The Wallace Collection, London

The caricaturists, ever vicious, ridiculed Mary and her royal lover. It was then, for the role in which she had first caught George's eye, that Mary Robinson earned the sobriquet that would follow her for the rest of her life, no matter what her profession or who she was sleeping with. Everyone now called her "the Perdita"— *the lost girl*.

And then, one day in mid-December 1780, when Mary believed herself to be at the zenith of her popularity and the prince's affection, she received a brief message from him: "We must meet no more," it read. Mary was shocked and devastated.

Days later she begged George to take her back, and they had a passionate reconciliation at Lord Malden's town house; but her relief was short-lived. The following day, Mary's carriage passed the Prince's in Hyde Park and he ignored her totally, refusing eye contact and rattling right by her coach as if he never knew her.

Mary was well and truly lost now, and quickly became society's latest laughingstock. Her friends cautioned her against renewing her stage career, for no one wanted to see her triumph. Out of a job and bereft of her protector, Mary made the difficult decision to publish their love letters, aware that the correspondence would become an income-earning best seller.

When King George III got wind of Mary's intentions, he dispatched Colonel George Hotham, the Prince's treasurer, to negotiate a settlement. The talks dragged on for more than half a year. By July 1781 Mary was still reminding the King that she had been compelled to relinquish her profession and her respectability as a married woman because she truly believed that the Prince loved her and would always provide for her, as he had so often promised.

The King's final offer was £5,000 (more than £467,000 and over \$934,000 today) for the letters — all or nothing. But that sum would scarcely cover her debts, and she had no immediate prospects of an independent income. However, she still had the £20,000 bond that the prince had given her. After considerable wrangling over the document's present and future legitimacy, in late August 1781 they settled on a £500 annuity.

As the years wore on Mary and her Prince became cordial acquaintances and often moved in the same social and political circles. Mary and the Whig firebrand Charles James Fox became lovers, and she also enjoyed brief liaisons with Viscount



Malden and — during a head-clearing excursion to France — the Duc de Lauzun.

On January 28, 1782, Mary's life changed once more. In Sir Joshua Reynolds's studio where she was having her portrait painted, she met another sitter, Colonel Banastre Tarleton. He was a war hero known in America as "Bloody" and "Butcher" Tarleton. But to the English, he was "the Green Dragoon" and the "Scourge of the Carolinas", although his ignominious defeat at the Battle of Waxhaws paved the way for the British loss of the American colonies. Full of dash and bravado, he had lost two fingers on the battlefield.

Mary and Tarleton became lovers, remaining so for 15 years. Although Tarleton, too, deserted her several times, Mary was head over heels in love and forgave him his numerous trespasses. She was the ghost-writer for his political speeches when he

*Perdita and Perdita* engraving by T. Colley 1782 Charles Fox riding with Mrs Robinson in one of her famous carriages. © British Museum



stood for election in his native Liverpool, and after he became a member of the House of Commons.

Mary accounted herself among the happiest of mortals until disaster struck on the July 23, 1783. Instead of meeting Mary at the opera that

night, Tarleton secretly fled for the Continent, having promised his parents that he would forsake his tainted mistress if they would help him to discharge his gambling debts.

After the performance Mary discovered her lover's flight. In the dead of night she set out along the Dover road to follow him, but

the coach met with an accident and Mary was taken to a local inn, unable to move her legs. Her fingers remained cramped like claws. There was so much blood on her undergarments that she may also have been pregnant with Tarleton's child, and miscarried. Doctors never conclusively diagnosed the cause of her condition.

Unable ever to return to the stage, Mary embarked on a career as an author. Although she never fully regained the use of her legs, and there were times when her hands remained so cramped that she had to dictate her manuscripts to her young daughter, Mary became a bestselling novelist and poetess, noted for incorporating her own life experiences into her work. Her maiden voyage into novel writing, *Vincenza, or The Dangers of Credulity*, which explored the plight of a royal mistress, was published on February 2, 1792. The entire edition sold out in a single day

In December 1798, Tarleton married a woman half his age — Susan Priscilla Bertie, the illegitimate daughter of an old Army buddy, the Duke of Ancaster.

Mary now lived quite retired at Englefield Cottage in Old Windsor. In 1797 she had befriended the philosopher William Godwin and his

Colonel Banastre Tarleton by Sir Joshua Reynolds 1782 © National Gallery. From *Mrs Robinson and her Portraits*, Wallace Collection Monographs 1.



Painting of Samuel Taylor Coleridge by Thomas Philips between 1818 and 1821. © "Dove Cottage" The Wordsworth Trust.

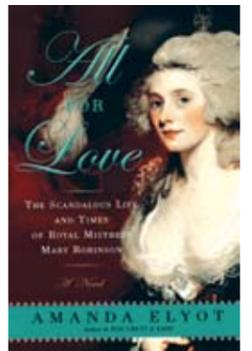
Soon after her death, two people received a lock of the author's auburn hair: Banastre Tarleton and the Prince of Wales. Mary was buried as she had requested, with little fanfare in Old Windsor. Only two mourners walked behind her coffin — William Godwin and the poet Peter Pindar. Her daughter was not present as it was not the fashion of the day for women to attend funerals. Samuel Taylor Coleridge delivered the benediction.

Maria Elizabeth Robinson remained at Englefield and completed her mother's memoirs. She never married, instead residing there for many years with Elizabeth Weale, a female companion she referred to as "my most excellent Bessie". Maria left her entire estate to Miss Weale upon her own demise in 1818.

During the 1790s Mr Robinson dropped out of Mary's life entirely. The remainder of his life is a mystery.

Every time Mary Robinson's fortunes were at their lowest she courageously managed to reinvent herself. In each profession she entered, from actress to courtesan, from an author (poetry, best selling novels, plays, operas, and essays) to a radical feminist writer, she achieved celebrity status.

And yet, so many of her contemporaries remain well known to us today while she has been largely forgotten. Certainly, it's time for Perdita, the lost girl, to be found by a new generation of admirers.



*All For Love* is Amanda Elyot's new book about Mrs Robinson.

lover (later wife) Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary was so impressed with Mrs Wollstonecraft's efforts to promote the rights of women that after the latter's death in 1797, she took up the banner, writing her *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* in 1798. The essay was first published under the pseudonym Anne Francis Randall, because Mary was certain that no one would seriously credit such a treatise if they'd known that it was penned by the notorious Perdita. But a year later, Mrs Robinson owned up to its authorship and the *Letter* was republished under her own name in 1799.

By late December 1800, at the age of 43, Mary Robinson was suffering from dropsy, a swelling of the soft tissues of the body due to the accumulation of excess water. The condition was nearly suffocating her. On Christmas evening, she lapsed into a coma and breathed her last at noon on December 26.



left: William Godwin © NPG London



right: Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie c.1797 © NPG London