

Literary Activism for “Mental Equality” in Mary Robinson’s Proto-Feminist Pamphlet *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination with Anecdotes* (1799)

Wilmarie Rosado Pérez

University of Bologna, Via Francesco Baracca 4, Bologna (BO), 401031, Italia
E-mail: wilmarie.rosadopere2@unibo.it

KEYWORDS Equality. Literary Legacy. Proto-Feminism. Women’s Genealogies

ABSTRACT This paper presents a critical analysis of a text from Mary Darby Robinson’s longest oeuvre, *A Letter to the Women of England* (*A Letter*), published in London, England in 1799. *A Letter* illustrates how an English feminist writer and a follower of Mary Wollstonecraft cleverly managed the paradoxes accompanying the emerging discourses of equality during the revolutionary years, which profoundly influenced the British feminism of that time. Likewise, the paper examines the way Robinson advocated for the recognition of women’s literary legacy in British history, as a strategy to counteract the repercussions of ideologies asserting women’s mental weakness. All these aspects are developed through organic methods of critical thought. This comes from the critique and perspective of a gender researcher intrigued by the way the term ‘equality’ has been used historically, and how women writers’ genealogies have functioned as a form of resistance to social and cultural practices that contributed to women’s subordination.

INTRODUCTION

Objectives

The researcher explores through a historical and literary approach, some of the principal arguments elaborated by Mary Robinson in her proto-feminist tract *A Letter*. Using a close reading method, in which the researcher combined the study of *A Letter* with other critical and theoretical work, the paper attempts to study Robinson’s egalitarian feminist tract. Furthermore, this piece tries to delve into Robinson’s practice of including a catalogue of women writers who employed the pen as a tool for their social emancipation. In overall, by examining Robinson’s literary activism, the researcher seeks to provide a space for critical inquiry and for the development of ideas for contemporary activism on gender equality.

A Letter from a Member of Wollstonecraft’s Legion

Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800) (Robinson) was a famous actress before becoming a well-known English writer during what is known

as the British Romantic era. Her career as an actress at the Drury Lane Theatre began in 1776, at the age of seventeen, when she debuted in the leading role of Juliet in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Later, she played a variety of characters – sometimes even more than one role a night – which contributed to her status as a celebrity and cultural icon of her time. She also attracted the attention of the public, especially of the gossip press, for her relationship with the Prince of Wales (George IV). This relationship started around 1779 after the Prince of Wales attended one of her performances as “Perdita” – a nickname that has followed her into the present day – in Garrick’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (Robinson 2011: 3a). This affair was seen by many as a transgression of the hegemonic social norms of the period, and tainted her reputation in the patriarchal society of England. Instead of notoriety as a famed actress, she became known mostly as the mistress of the prince. Some scholars reject the idea that Robinson was just a victim of a gossip press that depicted her as a sexual figure, and prefer to acknowledge that she made use of these images by exploiting them to boost her celebrity status (Brock 2002: 107-108). Robinson left the stage

and England in 1784, and came back four years later with the intention of starting a literary career that lasted until the end of her life in 1800 (Robinson 2011: 2a).

In her literary years (1784-1800), Robinson produced works in every possible genre, such as novels, plays, political pamphlets and an autobiography. She also contributed extensively, with her poetry, to the *Morning Post* alongside with other famous writers of the period, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Her artistry in composing poetry gained her the epithet of the "English Sappho", and it was the literary form that gave her the most recognition (Robinson 2011: 17a). In the last couple of years of her life, she wrote a novel *The Natural Daughter* (1799), a collection of poems *Lyrical Tales* (1800), her *Memoirs* (1801) which were edited and published posthumously by her daughter, and the feminist pamphlet *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (*A Letter*) (1799).

Robinson's *A Letter* exposed some of the gender debates and proto-feminist activism that took place at the end of the 18th century in Britain. The 1790's saw a number of women writers taking the pen as an act of resistance and engaging in a series of publications around women's social status, and Robinson was one of them. These writers shifted the subject of politically male-oriented arguments concerning universal rights to include women as the main protagonists. According to Anne K. Mellor - an American feminist scholar and romantic critic—these writers' activism took the form of what we today refer to as "liberal feminism" (Mellor 1992: 255). By this, it is meant that they advocated "for the equality and even the potential sameness of men and women". Many of their arguments were also elaborated within the paradigm of the "bourgeois family", demanding equal responsibility in the domestic sphere without advocating for changing its structure. After Wollstonecraft's pioneering text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), some of her most notorious followers writing during the same decade on the subject of the condition of women were Mary Hays with an *Appeal to the men of Great Britain in behalf of women* (1798), Mary Anne Radcliffe with *The Female Advocate* (1799), and Mary Robinson with *A Letter* (McInnes 2012: 479-480).

As the title suggests, Robinson's text takes an epistolary form and is addressed to the "Women of England". Robinson's decision to write *A Letter* had powerful "socio-political implications", particularly if we take into account the revolutionary atmosphere surrounding the period in which her text was published (Rooney 2006: 360). In choosing to write in an epistolary form she followed the models of revolutionary political writings, which was mostly dominated by male writers. Within the conventional gender binary conception of the period, she chooses to occupy a male-dominated space for her feminist literary activism. Additionally, the shape of *A Letter* provided an open and democratic platform from which a plurivocal dialogue could take place. It promoted "the open exchange of ideas, suggesting that Robinson's choice of genre is, in and of itself, indicative of her progressive politics" (Rooney 2006: 360).

Moreover, Robinson's selection of the epistolary genre for her pamphlet, also might be read as a transgressive way of depicting herself as an "epistolary woman", a paradigm that comes from the idea of women's inclination to write emotional love letters (Setzer 2013: 22). Robinson subverts the assumed female version of the epistolary genre and employs it to encourage women to combat the system that subordinates them, and to use the pen as a political instrument for their emancipation. Robinson decision of writing *A Letter* as a woman for a large female audience, while promoting the equality of the sexes, was indeed a destabilizing act, and a transgressive way of making use of the literary genre.

Likewise, starting from the title, Robinson states that her letter is addressed to an audience with a sexual and national distinction, "to the Women of England". In the content of her pamphlet she also refers to "enlightened country-women" and "unenlightened country-women" (*A Letter* 3, 93). She uses the first term, "enlightened country-women", when she shares with her readers the main argument of her text. She wrote,

I shall remind my enlightened country-women that they are not the mere appendages of domestic life, but the partners, the equal associates of man: and, where they excel in intellectual powers, they are no less capable of all that prejudice and custom have united in attributing, exclusively, to the thinking faculties of man. I argue thus, and my assertions are incontrovertible. (A Letter 3, my emphasis).

In this introductory paragraph, she reminds educated (enlightened) women, that they are an equal partner to men in every matter, including intellectual attributes. In contrast at the end of her text, Robinson urged, “O! my **unenlightened** country-women! read, and profit, by the admonition of Reason. Shake off the trifling, glittering shackles, which debase you” (*A Letter* 93, my emphasis). As we can see, Robinson changes her way of approaching women as a group. Instead of exalting their mental attributes and their equal status with all men, Robinson accentuates their condition of illiteracy and exhorts them to use knowledge as an instrument for empowerment and liberation. Although in both quotations Robinson uses different adjectives to refer to the country-women, the relevancy of knowledge for the aspiration of an equal status with men is central to her argument from the beginning until the end of her text.

Proceeding on these lines, even though Robinson’s statements were principally intended for English women, as she states in the title and introduction of her pamphlet, we can find various assertions that go beyond this particular audience. Perhaps, Robinson included a note in which she urges her male readers to change their attitude towards women, “Read this, ye English fathers and husbands, and retract your erroneous opinions, respecting female education” (*A Letter* Note 41). This exhortation connects with the rest of her letter in which she accuses men of contributing to the subordination of women by neglecting them, among other things, the right to access knowledge. In this regard, Robinson expresses, “What first established, and then ratified this oppressive, this inhuman law? The tyranny of man; who saw the necessity of subjugating a being, whose natural gifts were equal, if not superior to his own” (*A Letter* 55).

In her advocacy for women’s equality, Robinson uses the dichotomy of the separate spheres, public and private. Robinson presents the private sphere as a space that constitutes the place where women are mainly imprisoned. Robinson mentions the word “sphere” in the first paragraph of *A Letter* when she exhorts,

“Let WOMAN once assert her proper sphere, unshackled by prejudice, and unsophisticated by vanity; and pride, (the noblest species of pride) will establish her claims to the participation of power, both mentally and corporeally” (*A Letter* 3).

This conception of the separate sphere has been significant for historians on gender in the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Shoemaker 1998: 305). For various scholars, this was the period in which the emergence of the separate spheres took place. Women dominated mainly the private domestic space while men the “public life”. Indeed, the period in which Robinson wrote *A Letter* was marked by the binary idea of separate spheres inhabited by men and women. Women were generally positioned in the private domestic sphere, while men occupied the public sphere in which they could “participate of power” (*A Letter* 3). Nevertheless, after critical work has been produced on this conception of the separate sphere during the Romantic period, various scholars have revisited the public/private dichotomies to expand its definition to incorporate new understandings of the gender dynamics of the time. Perhaps, Anne K. Mellor is of the opinion that during the Romantic Era women had a very active participation in what has been described as the public sphere, “[t]hey openly and frequently published their free and reasoned opinions on an enormous range of topics” (Mellor 2002: 2-3). For Mellor, women’s involvement in the public sphere was not just restricted to the print media but were present in other platforms for social opinions, such as the theatre. Mellor thinks that the separate spheres in England during the Romantic Period were not as divided as have been historically described, and that, indeed, women were able to contribute significantly to the public realm.

In fact, even though Robinson employs in the *A Letter* the dichotomist idea of separate spheres to reinforce her arguments on women’s subordination, she also “connects the emergence of literary female authorship with the suppression of female subjectivity” (Rooney 2006: 362). In other words, although Robinson affirms that women are constantly allocated to the domestic sphere, this confinement has also provoked the emergence of enlightened women who use the pen to exercise their mental strength. Robinson asserts,

The embargo upon words, the enforcement of tacit submission, has been productive of consequences highly honourable to the women of the present age. Since the sex have been condemned for exercising the powers of speech, they have successfully taken up the pen: and

their writings exemplify both energy of mind, and capability of acquiring the most extensive knowledge. (*A Letter* 90-91).

As we can deduce from these lines, Robinson insists on women's literary capabilities as a way of destabilising how society continuously imprisons them within the private sphere and silenced their voices. Moreover, literature is described by Robinson as a powerful means for women to prove society wrong in its practice of excluding them from participation in the public sphere.

In addition, Ashley Cross—an American English Literature scholar—argues that Robinson considered the importance of knowledge, reading, and writing as appropriate instruments to subvert the spheres to which women have been constrained by patriarchy (Cross 2002: 57). Cross asserts that these tools were, according to Robinson, indispensable for women to follow other "intellectual women of the past". In this way, the inclusion of women in history opened the possibility of a future in which women might become citizens of the world.

There are other things to note and discuss about the content of Robinson's text that are essential to this paper. For instance, Robinson's letter is full of ideological and linguistic resonances to Mary Wollstonecraft's views, particularly those developed in her renowned text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1792). However, Robinson refused to execute an uncritical imitation of Wollstonecraftian ideas, as she clearly states on one of her authorial notes text referring to Wollstonecraft,

The writer of this letter, though avowedly of the same school, disdains the drudgery of servile imitation. The same subject may be argued in a variety of ways; and though this letter may not display the philosophical reasoning with which "The Rights of Woman" abounded; it is not less suited to the purpose (*A Letter* A. N 2).

It is possible to see that while Robinson tried to maintain a certain degree of objectivity in *A Letter*, her great respect and admiration for Wollstonecraft is demonstrated noticeably from the very first lines of this text. Another example of this is the fact that Robinson opens *A Letter* mourning a deceased woman "whose death has not been sufficiently lamented, but to whose genius posterity will render justice" (*A Letter* 2). Robinson demonstrates complete respect remembering Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), who died two

years before the publication of *A Letter*. From the beginning, Robinson takes a political position affirming that Wollstonecraft's talents have not been properly acknowledged, not leaving her a place in history. With this remark, Robinson sets the tone for the rest of her tract, in which she recognises Wollstonecraft as prominent intellectual figure. The two knew each other through Wollstonecraft's husband William Godwin (*A Letter* E.N 2).

In this way, *A Letter* could be read as a vindication of Wollstonecraft's political project, but also as an acknowledgement of Robinson's devotion to the author during a period in which her reputation was thoroughly marred. At the time of *A Letter*'s publication (1799), Wollstonecraft was the object of many cruel and violent critiques as a consequence of her husband's publication in 1798 of a biography entitled *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which he disclosed controversial aspects of her personal life. In that period, when even renowned women writers, such as Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), who shared Wollstonecraft's vision, distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft's persona, Robinson displayed without reservation her admiration for the author (Cross 2016: 138-139). Robinson asserts,

I will not expatiate largely on the doctrines of certain philosophical sensualists, who have aided in this destructive oppression, because an illustrious British female, (whose death has not been sufficiently lamented, but to whose genius posterity will render justice) has already written volumes in vindication of "The Rights of Woman" (*A Letter* 1-2).

Robinson also proclaims in *A Letter*, "For it requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence" (*A Letter* AN 2). These particular references to Wollstonecraft are essential to understand how Robinson's response to Wollstonecraft's post-mortem defamation - after Godwin's publication of Wollstonecraft's memoirs—reverberates with another of her primary concerns, the inclusion and permanence of women's contribution to the history of Britain. In a way Robinson considered the attacks against Wollstonecraft, to be also directed against women writers' legacy in general. Robinson extended the vindication of the Wollstonecraft figure and political project to all women writers of England, including herself (Cross 2016: 141).

A relevant fact to note about *A Letter*, is that Robinson wrote this text using a pen name, signing her text as Anne Frances Randall. Literary scholars maintain different hypotheses on Robinson's decision to employ this name. For instance, Robinson argues that her pseudonym holds a function different from that of many other pseudonyms used by the "chameleonic" Mary Robinson. According to this scholar, by using the name of Anne Frances Randall, Robinson wanted to create an "illusion of impartiality" in her practice of recognising great literary women (Robinson 2011: 114b). This might be better understood if we take into account that Robinson included along with *A Letter* a "List of British Female Literary Characters Living in the Eighteenth Century" (*A Letter* 99), which included her own name, Mary Robinson. This list contained "many prominent bluestockings, novelists, and poets, as well as writers who had also written essays on women's issues such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, Mary Hays, and Catherine Macaulay" (*A Letter* EN 99). As previously noted, Robinson added to her the list, "Robinson, Mrs. –Poems, Romances, Novels, a Tragedy, Satires, &c. &c." (*A Letter* 102). In other words, Robinson's strategy of creating an enduring record of great literary women would not have been complete without including her own name and preserving her fame as a writer in the process.

Another hypothesis related to Robinson's use of a pen name is the one asserted by Amy Culley – a scholar in English literature – for whom Robinson employed a pen name to prevent her already damaged reputation from interfering with the aims of her text (Culley 2014: 114). However, this explanation does not necessarily exclude the aforementioned theory by D. Robinson. This is due to the fact that, Culley affirms that Mary Robinson knew perfectly well the value of reputation and how it played against her desire for a female community. Like Wollstonecraft, Robinson herself experienced the rejection of various female cohort writers, such as Charlotte Smith, since her reputation was tainted because of her relationships with important men of the period. Therefore, Robinson attempted to address the issue of women writers' legacy by envisioning a way to connect women. With this objective in mind, Robinson preferred to use the name of Anne Frances Randall "a fictitious woman with

no reputation" instead of her own name (Culley 2014: 114).

A further explanation, which supports the two previous ones, is that the name Anne Frances Randall had a different impact than the other pseudonyms utilised by Robinson before, as it alone took the form of a "real" name. Robinson tried to make her readers believe it was an unknown writer who was advocating for women's rights; whereas the other names Robinson employed for other literary works such as Sappho, Laura Maria and Portia were evident pseudonyms (Hodson 2002: 97). In the same year of the first publication of the text, Robinson reissued *Letter* under a new title *Thoughts on the Condition of Women*, and revealed her identity as the author of this work (Sodeman 2015: 179).

In overall, *A Letter* shows us an example of a feminist practice of resistance carried out by various English writer during the Romantic period. The literary imagination of writers such as Robinson played a significant role in their aim of influencing their readers by pointing out the injustices of a society that treated women as non-citizens. It shows us nowadays how literature was an instrument for feminist politics, and how the idea of woman as an author represented a way of rethinking women's traditional roles. Robinson's literary activism was not without challenges, as we will see in the following section, writing about and promoting women's equality, necessarily brought many paradoxes regarding sexual difference.

A CITIZENSHIP WITH A SEXUAL DISTINCTION

In *A Letter*, Robinson surpasses her individual struggles as a woman writer criticized by society for the way she transgresses conventional social norms of decorum and imagines a future in which women as group might become "citizens of the world" (*A Letter* 91) (Setzer 2003: 9). Robinson fervently disputes,

How comes it, that in this age of reason we do not see statesmen and orators selecting women of superior mental acquirements as their associates? Men allow that women are absolutely necessary to their happiness, and that they "had been brutes" without them (*A Letter* 14).

In Britain, sexual differences were based on ideas belonging to the binary domains of mas-

culine and feminine; this was evident within every aspect of social life at the time. Citizenship was shaped within the confines of physical traits, and moreover by the implications that have historically defined the body in mutually exclusive binary ways. Additionally, women's sexual difference was defined in negative terms, that is, what the female body lacked as opposed to what it was capable of doing. In this regard, arguments against women's citizenship were grounded on the idea that "women were by nature unfit to exercise political rights" (Scott 1992: 103).

To advance her cause for women, in *A Letter* Robinson exposes the irrationality of some of the discourse used to refuse women access to full citizenship rights and to the public sphere. It is important to highlight that Robinson manages to fluctuate between favouring the idea of a universal citizenship that includes women, – a position in which sexual difference disappears – to arguments in which she instead emphasises sexual distinction. In this constant negotiation concerning sexual differences, she sometimes reproduces the ideas she herself intends to eradicate in the first place. In this way, Robinson's text exposes how the discourses used to promote women's equal rights during this period were malleable and full of incongruities, unable to be specifically categorized within a binary identity politics of sameness or difference. As the feminist historian Joan Scott asserts, during the revolutionary years, women need it to work with the paradoxes of rejecting the existence of a sexual difference that excluded them of the public sphere, while embodying their sexual difference to invoke the existence of women as a group who sought legal recognition and equal rights (Scott 1997: x).

Robinson also employs the term "sexual distinction" to describe, ironically, the differences that render women's social subordination possible. According to her text, the woman's condition of subordination is based on the "profane" belief "that an all-wise Creator sends a creature into the world, with a sexual distinction, which shall authorise the very extent of mortal persecution" (*A Letter* 16-17). Moreover, Robinson describes sex as something fluid, instead of something given by God or Nature, and asserts that women might only be happy when they get rid of it. Robinson expresses, "I will boldly assert that there is something peculiarly unjust in condemning woman to suffer every earthly in-

sult, while she is allowed a sex; and only permitting her to be happy, when she is divested of it." (*A Letter* 16) Robinson seems to depict sex as a fluid entity, something flexible and subject to interpretation. This depiction is common throughout her text. She intends to put into question the traditional assumptions assigned to women's sexual distinction stemming from discourse based on nature, religion, tradition, law or social norms.

These discourses, that Robinson counter-attacked in her text, contributed to the exclusion of women from the British social and political imaginary; at the very least women were rejected as participants of the public sphere or, as Robinson states, they were refused an "equal portion of power" (*A Letter* 97). They were of course not alone in their exclusion, as the definition of citizenship was restricted exclusively to men, an identity derived from a racial, gendered, and privileged representation of the body (Scott 1992: 103). As Joan Scott has stated:

For women, the legacy of the French Revolution was contradictory. On the one hand the unit of national sovereignty was declared to be a universal, abstract, rights-bearing individual; on the other hand, this human subject was almost immediately given particularised embodiment as a man (P. 102).

As Jane Hodson – a scholar in language and literature – remarks, the intense debates about the universality of rights were directed to the "rights of men", in which the assumed majority of the participants were precisely men (Hodson 2002: 90). Wollstonecraft's and Robinson's first texts concerning these debates, were assumed to be written by male writers. This complicated Robinson's task of addressing access to universal rights from a woman's perspective. She found herself in a situation in which she needed to appeal to sexual difference in order to attract her audience (the women of England) and to strengthen her claims. While at the same time she aspired to the erasure of the gender difference that prevented women from becoming citizens.

Within the context of discussions on the equality of the sexes, Robinson was forced to deal with the incongruities of supposedly "universal" natural rights that excluded women in practice. Her arguments were consonant to the theoretical idea of the proto-feminism of the period that consisted of a "genderless individual endowed with natural rights", a discourse flexi-

ble enough to include women, and grounded on central Republican postulate (Scott 1992: 102). However, the prevalent interpretation of the doctrine of natural rights was that “citizen” automatically solely implied the male.

Evidently, the adoption of “equality language” for women’s identity politics contributed to a complex conundrum. Women who decided to pursue a path towards equal rights were obliged to recur to their identity as women. They meant to be perceived as a united group in which they could have collective force, while at once elaborating arguments in contrary to the exclusion of any individual with specific physical and sexual traits. This is exactly what Robinson attempts to achieve in *A Letter*. She directs the attention to women as a homogenous and marginalized group, distinct from men, while advocating for the erasure of their differences. For example, many of her assertions are directed to challenge the ideas of woman’s mental and corporal weakness. Robinson asks rhetorically: “In what is woman inferior to man? In some instances, but not always, in corporeal strength: in activity of mind, she is his equal” (*A Letter* 17).

Robinson dedicates a great part of her text to exemplify circumstances in which women demonstrate more fortitude than men both in mental and physical endeavours. On such cases, she discusses women as a unitary and well-defined group, marked by a sexual difference. However, this strategic endeavour to claim a collective identity accompanies her effort to redefine the meaning imposed on women’s sexual difference.

Furthermore, Robinson approaches the subject of physical strength by referring to a woman’s natural right to respond to an offence. She asserts that “woman is denied the first privilege of nature, the power of SELF-DEFENCE” (*A Letter* 79). Robinson explains that the passive character that distinguishes women is the result of the constraints imposed by tradition. She writes,

Let me ask this plain and rational question, – is not woman a human being, gifted with all the feelings that inhabit the bosom of man? Has not woman affections, susceptibility, fortitude, and an acute sense of injuries received? [...] Why may not woman resent and punish? Because the long established laws of custom, have decreed her passive! Because she is by nature organized to feel every wrong more acutely, and yet, by a barbarous policy, denied the power to

assert the first of Nature’s rights, self-preservation (A Letter 8-9).

Here, Robinson alludes to “woman as a human being” with the same sentiments as any man. She goes back to nature and universalism to demonstrate how the oppression to which women are subjected interferes with core elements of their humanity, specifically including “the first of Nature’s rights, for self-preservation” (*A Letter* 9).

Further on her text, Robinson mentions Maria Antoinette and Charlotte Corday as notable examples endowed with women’s physical and mental strength. For Robinson, the two women exhibited “Spartan fortitude when they ascended the scaffold” (*A Letter* 27). She describes the way the French Queen Maria Antoinette endured the wrongs done to her, including an “ignominious death”, with the greatest mental strength that could be learned from and emulated (*A Letter* 25). A French aristocrat and Girondins’ sympathizer, Charlotte Corday, was another female character that Robinson regarded as a woman whose strength should be imitated.

The gender and romanticism scholar Adriana Craciun (2003: 47) in her study of Robinson’s text *A Letter* considers that the violent act executed by Corday when she murdered Marat dramatically disturbed the concept of womanhood during revolutionary times. Benefiting from this transgression of gender rules, Corday’s example also served to meet Robinson’s feminist ends. This illustrates how Robinson was committed to changes in the gender rules of the patriarchal system of the late eighteenth-century. She vindicates Maria Antoinette and Charlotte Corday as exemplary women in a period in which they were depicted as monstrous figures, or as “unsexed” women, the first as consequence of her “perverse sexuality” and the latter for her “unnatural lack of feminine sensibility” (Craciun 2003: 10). Robinson decided purposefully to uphold them as models of women’s courage.

Craciun also calls attention to the fact that Robinson’s discussion on a woman’s natural right to respond is not a common argument touched upon in feminist writings of the period, even if for Robinson it was at the heart of women’s struggle for equality (Craciun 2003: 53-54). According to Craciun “The right to resent and punish” put into question basic ideas on “women’s moral superiority and benevolence”, and one of the main arguments for the permanence

of their subordination, their weakness. Robinson reverses the argument and asserts that instead, women not only possess physical strength but one that is accompanied by mental control and dignity (P. 55).

Another essential aspect that Robinson addresses in *A Letter* is worthy of note, the idea that education could "unsex a woman" (*A Letter* 55). She wrote,

Let these mental despots recollect, that education cannot unsex a woman; that tenderness of soul, and a love of social intercourse, will still be her's; even though she become a rational friend, and an intellectual companion. She will not, by education, be less tenacious of a husband's honour; though she may be rendered more capable of defending her own (*A Letter* 55-56).

Robinson plays with sexual roles that characterized the stereotypical scripts of femininity of the period to strengthen her claims. She knew that the idea that women's femininity will change dramatically as consequence of them acquiring knowledge needed to be challenged. For this purpose, she continues to work from women's sexual difference in a way that she was able to assure to her readers that the emotional characteristics that have distinguished women remain intact even if they have an education.

Robinson knew that denying women access to education serves as an instrument to uphold their subjugation and consequently, their social inequality. If women lacked knowledge, the false idea of their natural mental fragility could be easily maintained. Robinson claimed in contrast that women might even be "superior in natural gifts" to men (*A Letter* 56), attesting that some men were "mental despots", advocating for the termination of the "system of mental subordination" (*A Letter* 56, 69). This aspect of women's access to education is discussed by Scott in the context of the French Revolution: how woman's lack of reason has historically not only been a justification for denying her education or citizenship rights; it has also served to depict logic as an exclusive function of masculinity (Scott 1997: ix).

From the opening of *A Letter*, it is evident that women's mental equality is Robinson's primary claim elaborated from discourses on sexual difference that had particular relevance in the historical context where her text was written. The whole of her text is connected to this desire to

liberate women from their subordinate mental slavery; she stresses that this liberation must begin by allowing women access to an education. She envisions the day that a University of Women could exist, inviting her addressees to exercise reason as a way of ridding themselves of the shackles that constrain them (*A Letter* 92).

REWRITING COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Robinson concludes *A Letter* with a "List of British Female Literary Characters" that in many ways strengthened her arguments on mental equality. For Robinson, the pen constituted a strategic instrument in the pursuit of women's liberation. She believed in the art of writing for women's emancipation, yet more importantly she relied on the collective memory of women writers to transgress the idea of women's mental fragility. Her concern with women's invisibility in the collective memory of England, also moved her to the used sexual difference to seek the recognition of women as a group, and to promote knowledge as the way in which women could access the public sphere.

Robinson uses *A Letter* to acknowledge English women's literary contribution at a time where their work were greatly disseminated, although not properly appreciated by the "Tribunal of British Literature" (*A Letter* 97). Robinson wrote,

There are men who affect, to think lightly of the literary productions of women: and yet no works of the present day are so universally read as theirs. The best novels that have been written, since those of Smollet, Richardson, and Fielding, have been produced by women: and their pages have not only been embellished with the interesting events of domestic life, portrayed with all the elegance of phraseology, and all the refinement of sentiment, but with forcible and eloquent, political, theological, and philosophical reasoning (*A Letter* 95).

The necessity of leaving an evident trace of women's active participation in the history of British literature is the reason that, rather than continuing her acknowledgement of great female characters via a sort of transnational approach (what we can appreciate in the main content of the text), she chose to, as part of her own publication, list specifically by name British women who dedicated their intellectual capacities to writing. With this catalogue, she concludes in

Letter her efforts of subverting the dominant preconception of women's lack of reason, while also contributing to a future in which women writers might be remembered in the same way as their male cohorts. She was aware of the urgency to create a registry of the existence of women authors in order to preserve their names and works for posterity. Their literary production was to be appreciated as part of the British canon, to avoid their disappearance from the history of the country (Sodeman 2015: 12).

With this intention in mind, Robinson searched through history to find exemplary women who could be emulated by "enlightened countrywomen" (*A Letter* 3). The list she created was based on a sexual and national difference, as it included only English women writers. It served her aim of developing a genealogy of women intellectuals, who could counteract mainstream ideas of women's intellectual incapacity and unsuitability for rational endeavours. Apart from the "List of British Female Literary Characters", Robinson reproduced *ad verbatim* in the body of her text "an extract" of Gerardus Joannes Vossius's text *De Philologia*, "concerning illustrious WOMEN who had excelled in polite literature" (*A Letter* 30-31). Further, she asserted that "the list might have been very much enlarged, since the time that Vossius wrote" (*A Letter* 30). In this regard, Cross considers Robinson's act of quoting Vossius a manner of demonstrating her "desire to produce a different history" (Cross 2016: 152). In this new history, women would take credit for an equal, if not a leading, portion of intellectual merits.

English Romanticism Professor, Sharon M Setzer (Setzer), asserts that Robinson's list was an active resistance to "exclusionary practices of earlier biographers". Among these biographies were "George Ballard's *Memoirs of British Ladies* (1775), William Alexander's *The History of Women* (1779), or the anonymously published *Biographium Faemineum*" (Setzer 2003: 23). Setzer explains that Robinson's text gives more examples and included women that were neglected or marginalized even in the aforementioned biographies.

Through this practice of rewriting a different history, Robinson goes also beyond Wollstonecraft's few examples of legendary women who "defied the general rule of mental subordination" in *A Vindication*. Robinson believed in women's excellency, one that could surpass that

of male opponents (Setzer 2003: 21-23). Robinson declares:

There is no country, at this epoch, on the habitable globe, which can produce so many exalted and illustrious women (I mean mentally) as England. And yet we see many of them living in obscurity; known only by their writings; neither at the tables of women of rank; nor in the studies of men of genius; we hear of no national honours, no public marks of popular applause, no rank, no title, no liberal and splendid recompense bestowed on British literary women (A Letter 64).

Robinson considered it crucial, in order for women's literary works to endure for posterity, that they were included in the pages of the literary history of Britain. Robinson's "List of British Female Literary Characters" responded to her desire of disseminating knowledge on women's contribution to the literary history of the country, which could then be emulated by other English women. Women authors were a significant number during the Romantic period, but their names were at risk of ending to be effaced from the memory of their time. Indeed, Robinson's project was to give women's authors the same portion of fame as their male cohorts.

We see, then, that women's erasure from history was a concern that dominated discussion long before in the 20th-century feminist historian decided to counterattack the way history has been allied to the patriarchal system in its practice of excluding women. The category of women writers, so crucial to Robinson, is still relevant today, in times in which women's literary works sometimes remain invisible. Although, this category also brings along some challenges, is necessary nowadays when women still struggle globally to have access to education and to receive recognition as producers of culture.

CONCLUSION

The researcher has here tried to navigate Robinson's literary activism against women's subordination via a feminist historical and critical literary approach shaped by various literary scholars and romanticists. She has demonstrated how, in advocating for equal women's rights, Robinson's text *A Letter* obliged her to play with the contradictions embedded in the use of sexual difference for her literary activism. Her provocative discussions on equality contribute to

the proto-feminist history of the 1790's, and demonstrate the variety of forms of resistance that women have employed for centuries to promote their aims for equal rights. Likewise, her advocacy for the recognition of women writers' works was strategic in avoiding women's disappearance from the literary history of her country, and provided to the readers a wide range of figures that they could emulate to finally become citizens of the world.

As has been shown, feminist studies interested in history and literature, offers us significant tools to understand critically the present. Moreover, revisiting traces of past feminist discussions on equality could show us a diversity of practices of resistances, their failures and merits, but also gender dynamics that were pertinent for the production of a culture of gender equality in the past and could be inspiring for the gender equality activism these days.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 675378.

NOTES

- 1 For a brief biography of Mary Darby Robinson, see the website A Celebration of Women Writers From <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/robinson/biography.html>> (Retrieved on 20 August 2017)
- 2 Mellor discusses in her essay titled *English Women Writers and the French Revolution* the work of three English women writers who had experiences living in France, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Shelley (Mellor 1992: 255).
- 3 Adriana Craciun describes Mary Robinson as a "chameleon figure", for her many avatars and pseudonyms (Craciun 2005: 60).
- 4 Ashley Cross mentions that this feminist tract is part of a "shared project" among other women as Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Priscilla Wakefield, Mary Ann Radcliffe, and others (Cross 2002: 57)
- 5 According to Hodson both Wollstonecraft and Robinson publish A Vindication of the Rights of Men in 1790, Impartial Reflections in 1791, respectively. The readers believed that both writers were male (Hodson 2002: 90).

REFERENCES

A Celebration of Women Writers. Uppen Digital Library. Mary Darby Robinson Biography. From <[http://](http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/robinson/biography.html)

- <digital.library.upenn.edu/women/robinson/biography.html> (Retrieved on 15 May 2017).
- Brock C 2002. Then smile and know thyself supremely great: Mary Robinson and the splendour of a name. *Women's Writing*, 9(1): 107-124.
- Craciun A 2003. Violence against difference: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and women's strength. In: A Craciun (Eds.): *Fatal Women of Romanticism*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-75.
- Cross AJ 2002. He-She philosophers and other literary bugbears: Mary Robinson's A Letter to the Women of England. *Women's Writing*, 9(1): 53-68.
- Cross A 2016. *Vindicating the writing woman in Mary Robinson and the Genesis of Romanticism: Literary Dialogues and Debts, 1784-1821*. New York: Routledge.
- Culley A 2014. *The Literary Family and the 'Aristocracy of Genius' in the Memoirs of Mary Robinson in British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hodson J 2002. The strongest but most undecorated language: Mary Robinson's rhetorical strategy in letter to the women of England. *Women's Writing*, 9(1): 87-105.
- McInnes A 2013. Wollstonecraft's legion: Feminism in crisis, 1799. *Women's Writing*, 20(4): 479-495.
- Mellor AK 1992. English women writers and the French revolution. In: SE Melzer, LW Rabine (Eds.): *Rebel Daughters*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 255-272.
- Mellor AK 2002. Introduction: Women and the public sphere in England, 1780-1830. In: AK Mellor (Eds.): *Mother of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England 1780-1830*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-13
- Robinson D 2011. Introduction: The wreath of fame. In: D Robinson (Eds.): *The Poetry of Mary Robinson Form and Fame: Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-14a.
- Robinson D 2011. The English Sappho and the legitimate sonnet. In: D Robinson (Eds.): *The Poetry of Mary Robinson Form and Fame: Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 111-152.
- Romantic Circles. A Refereed Scholarly Website Devoted to the Study of Romantic-period Literature and Culture. A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination with Anecdotes (1799). From <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/robinson/mrletterfirst.htm>> (Retrieved on 15 May 2017).
- Rooney M 2006. Belonging to no/body: Mary Robinson, the natural daughter, and rewriting feminine identity. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 18(3): 355-372.
- Scott JW 1992. A woman who has only paradoxes to offer: Olympe de Gouges claims rights for women. In: SE Melzer, LW Rabine (Eds.): *Rebel Daughters*. New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 102-120.
- Scott JW 1997. Preface. In: JW Scott (Eds.): *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Men*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. ix-xiii.

- Setzer S 2003. Introduction. In: S Setzer (Ed.): *Mary Robinson, a Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, pp. 9-32.
- Shoemaker RB 1998. Conclusion: The emergence of separate spheres? In: RB Shoemaker (Eds.): *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* London, New York: Longman, pp. 305-318.
- Sodeman M 2015. Introduction. In: *Sentimental Memorials: Women and the Novel in Literary History*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-19.