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SENSATIONAL LIVES: BYRON AND ROBINSON'S LIVES MIRRORED IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Sensational Lives: Byron and Robinson's Lives Mirrored in Literature

This paper analyzes the lives and selected works of two controversial British Romantic writers: Mary Darby Robinson and Lord Byron. Both writers' lives and work were in the public eye in a manner more reminiscent of modern celebrity culture. Due to their celebrity, both authors' made use of their personal lives to enhance their written works. In some cases, they used their poems or novels as a way to manipulate or otherwise control their public persona. This thesis attempts to ascertain the level of personal experience apparent in the author's works through research of biographies and memoirs, critical texts, and explications of the subjects' literary material. The works examined include Mary Darby Robinson's "The Linnet's Petition" and *The Natural Daughter* and Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and *The Bride of Abydos*.

Keywords: Byron, Robinson, celebrity, persona, feminism, sexuality

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Chapter 1

Introduction

British poet George Gordon, Lord Byron is still known today for his sensational lifestyle as most English students have encountered his poem “She Walks in Beauty” or read parts of his epic *Don Juan*. Conversely, Mary Darby Robinson, poet, memoirist, and novelist, has only gained popularity recently by those interested in revising the canon to include more women writers among other minority groups. Despite the difference in the level of their current fame, both writers have a great deal in common, particularly in regards to their intentions for their writings. Both included aspects of their personal lives and reputations into their works.

During the Romantic period both writers had attained a level of status comparable to contemporary celebrities. Robinson’s exploits were often written about in newspapers and Byron’s were referred to and criticized in other poets’ works. In order to gain control over their public personae, Byron and Robinson used their own works to mirror their lives and perhaps alter the public’s perception.

Through research of biographies and memoirs, critical texts, and explications of the subjects’ literary works, it is apparent that the Byron and Robinson did use their lives as inspiration. It is also clear that the authors’ literary works were meant to determine the public’s impression of their respective personae. The works examined in this thesis include Mary Darby Robinson’s “The Linnet’s Petition” and *The Natural Daughter* and Canto I of Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* and *The Bride of Abydos*.

Chapter 2

Biographies

In order to fully understand how much of Byron and Robinson's lives are mirrored in their works, it is important to know specific details of their lives. Brief biographies detail the events in each author's life and will prove that through their works, Robinson and Byron were able to express aspects of their lives such as their troubled childhoods, their adultery, and, in Byron's case, bisexual experiences.

Mary Darby Robinson

Mary Darby Robinson's life, especially when studied through her memoirs, is a mix of the tragic, the scandalous, and the remarkable. Seeing the real facts through her hyperbole and tendency towards fantasy (particularly in her early life which seems bleak and Gothic compared to the bright quality of her acting career) can be difficult, but with or without embellishments, Robinson's life was out of the ordinary and her attitudes towards sexuality, gender, and the rights of women were ahead of her time.

Mary Darby was born on November 27, 1758, in Bristol. Much of how she depicts her early life in her *Memoirs* is a mix of fantasy and fact. She describes her home, which was situated near an old church, as being "supported by the mouldering arches of the cloisters," "dark," and Gothic (*Memoirs* 2). As a child, Robinson was particularly interested in the pipe organ, which, though in the church, was located near an area facing her nursery. These descriptions lend a dramatic flair to Robinson's story. Her description of her looks, as compared to her brothers, paints a picture of an unremarkable girl. Sharon M. Setzer suggests that this "evokes the story of the ugly duckling who was, in fact, a swan" (11). Although she began life in the home of a successful merchant, her father's ventures in America failed and his regard for her mother began to dwindle in favor of a mistress (*Memoirs* 17). Her parents had educated their

daughter quite well, though. She was schooled by the sisters of Hannah More, a popular female writer, and Meribah Lorrington, who was considered to be exceedingly accomplished by Robinson (*A Letter* 12).

As Mary Darby's interest in acting began to grow, her mother saw the need to obstruct her daughter's plans and have Mary Darby marry in order to retain her reputation. On April 12, 1773, Mary Darby, at the young age of fifteen, married Thomas Robinson, a man she had only met a handful of times (43). Unfortunately, this situation was not at all a pleasant one for the new Mary Robinson, and she states in her *Memoirs*: "I knew not the sensation of any sentiment beyond that of esteem; love was still a stranger to my bosom" (47). It is not surprising that because this marriage began as a loveless one, it deteriorated quickly. The way in which Thomas Robinson had presented himself, as an heir to fortune and a devoted spouse, soon turned out to be untrue. She further discusses how his early promises were lies: "Mr. Robinson had, *previous to our union*, deeply involved himself in a bond debt of considerable magnitude and he had from time to time borrowed money on annuity – one sum to discharge the other – till every plan of liquidation appeared impracticable" (*Memoirs* 81).

Inevitably, Mr. Robinson was forced to enter debtor's prison; his wife and child followed him. While in this situation, Mary Robinson began to write and sell her poetry (89). After leaving debtor's prison, Mary Robinson again contemplated theater work. She began to act at the Drury Lane Theater and was quite successful. Unfortunately at this time her relationship with her husband appeared to be beyond mending (*A Letter* 14). From nearly the beginning of the marriage, Thomas Robinson had been cheating on his wife with various women.

During a performance of *The Winter's Tale* on December 3, 1779, Mary Robinson was admired by the Prince of Wales (later King George IV), who formed an attachment to her (*A Letter* 14). In fact, according to Mary Robinson, he spoke highly of her while she was attempting to act on stage. She states, "Indeed, some flattering remarks which were made by his Royal Highness met my ear as I stood near his box, and I was overwhelmed with confusion" (*Memoirs* 157). Later that night, the Prince of Wales sent Mrs. Robinson a letter through Lord Malden. Apparently, Robinson had thought that Lord Malden was

using this as an excuse to send the letters himself, but it was made quite clear that the Prince of Wales was lusting after her. The letters were addressed to the character she played in *The Winter's Tale*, "Perdita" and the Prince signed as "Florizel," Perdita's lover in the play (159). Although this relationship appears to be particularly chaste in Robinson's account in her memoirs, the information provided posthumously suggests otherwise. Also, even if the rumors had not been true, a woman has little recourse and often the stain of lost virtue remains. As Setzer states, "Robinson, however, continued to be known as 'The Perdita,' and her identity as a 'lost' or 'fallen' woman was repeatedly reinscribed by cartoons, unauthorized memoirs, spurious editions of her letters, and a steady stream of newspaper gossip about her affairs with the Prince and his close friend Lord Malden" (*A Letter* 15). The affair between Mrs. Robinson and the prince lasted for only a year before he lost interest.

Partially due to her tarnished reputation, Mary Robinson left England and travelled to Europe. She visited France and was pleased to receive attention from Marie Antoinette and other nobles. When she returned home, her relationships continued to keep the British public fascinated, particularly those with Lord Malden, Charles James Fox (famous politician and liberal), and the Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton (16). These were not the only men interested in Robinson. At the same time Tarleton was attempting to win her affections, others were offering her money just to be in her presence for mere minutes. Robert D. Bass' book *The Green Dragoon* describes one such situation. Mr. Pugh, believing that Robinson was of a different "character," offered "twenty guineas for ten minutes of conversation" with Robinson (197). Robinson agreed to this and invited him to her home where she was entertaining Tarleton and Lord Malden. She took off her watch, turned away from her other guests, and devoted ten minutes of conversation to Pugh. Clearly, the other two men were involved in the joke and laughed at his expense (198). This minor annoyance did not stop Tarleton and Robinson from pursuing a relationship. Tarleton did not take the relationship as seriously as Robinson. In 1791, he found his interest wavering and became attached to another young woman after his return from a trip to Paris (Bass 312). His

relationship with Robinson would continue, but it was characterized by periods of Tarleton's wavering interest.

At this time Robinson also began to write more poetry, conceivably in an effort to remove herself from the vicious rumors. She began writing under different names in order to see how she would succeed without the influence of her reputation. For instance, "these pseudonyms and others helped Robinson to shed her identity as 'The Perdita' and 'to reinvent herself' as a circumspect woman of genius and sensibility" (*A Letter* 16). She was able to do this with mild success, though the type of writing she was interested in, the Della Cruscan School, typically concentrated on heightened emotions and extravagance, so critics did not always view her work favorably.

Despite the remarkable life she led, Robinson eventually succumbed to sickness, potentially caused by an infection stemming from a miscarriage. She began to have severe pains in her extremities which made travel difficult. Though she would often attempt to visit baths as a method of treatment, eventually her sickness became too great. On December 26, 1800 Mrs. Robinson died after suffering for some time through her illness (*A Letter* 20). Unlike Byron, Robinson was buried according to her wishes "at the corner of the churchyard at Old Windsor, just down the road from Englefield Green" (Byrne 390). In more recent years her importance to literature has been acknowledged due in part to a conscious decision on the part of literary historians to revise the canon. A selection of her poems was only released in 2000 and another multi-volume edition of her novels has recently been published this year.

Lord Byron

Lord Byron's life was riddled with scandal. From the family he was born into to his death from fever while fighting for Greek independence, very little about Byron's life was quiet. Byron used many

aspects of his life in his writing to both further his celebrity and also to manage the way in which he was viewed by the public.

Byron was born George Gordon Byron on January 22, 1788. His father, Captain Byron, was, in keeping with the family's manic history, unsurprisingly nicknamed "Mad Jack" (Peters 2).

Unfortunately, the future poet was born with a club foot, a physical disability that would affect his self-esteem for the rest of his life (Peters 4). His mother, Catherine Gordon, attempted to have this remedied by seeking the "treatment" a quack doctor offered. In Catherine Peters' biography of Byron, she describes how "Byron's life-long sensitivity about his disability, which his friends thought morbid, began with her [his mother's] taunts, and he never forgave her for them (4). On top of this unfortunate self-esteem issue, "the legendary beauty that made him irresistible to both men and women came later: he was a fat boy, and a contemporary recalled him as being a most unromantic figure" (10). His home life certainly exacerbated the issues he had with his deformity and his self-esteem. His mother's propensity to waver between kindness and criticism and his father's absence due to his creditors distinctly affected Byron emotionally (2). To add more uncertainty to his life, at the age of ten Byron became the 6th Baron Byron of Rochdale when his great uncle died (6-7).

A principle issue in Byron's life consisted of his tendency to fall in love easily and often with people of both genders. For instance, when Byron was a young boy he fell in love with his cousin Mary Duff (Peters 5). He would later, at the age of fifteen, fall in love with a more distant cousin by the name Mary Chatsworth, who was already engaged to be married. Her reaction to his infatuation is illustrated in her reply, "What! Me care for that lame boy!" (Peters 11). Obviously, this influenced his perception of women and of his disability. Later in his life, Byron would also begin to feel romantic love for his half-sister, creating a scandal that would become a recurrent theme throughout his work (2).

Outside of his youthful fascinations with his female cousins, Byron fell in love with a fifteen-year-old choirboy named John Edleston during his time at Cambridge. Allegedly, during his travels through the Mediterranean, Byron had clumsily dropped several sheets of paper that were intended to

record his early life. They included references to Edleston and the love Byron felt for him, which led Hobhouse, Byron's friend who had picked them up from the ground, to convince him to burn the work (MacCarthy 105). Charles Matthews, a friend of Byron's, was also "an acknowledged homosexual," which widens the circle of scandalous associations he had during his life (Peters 18). Homosexual acts were illegal during Lord Byron's lifetime (Peters 22). The only way Byron could safely experience relationships with other men would be to do so outside of England. During his travels between 1809 and 1811, particularly in Greece and Turkey, Byron was able to experiment with his bisexuality (Peters 33). Back at home in England, Edleston was charged with "indecent" while Byron was also alerted to his troubled finances (Peters 34). Byron's tendency ran towards the more Greek ideal, younger boys. He fell in love with a Greek boy named Eustathios Georgiou, who was effeminate, used a parasol to shield his face, and had a tendency to sulk and have tantrums. It is not surprising that this relationship did not last long. Another schoolboy named Nicolo Giraud kept Byron's affection significantly longer and was well cared for by Byron financially (Peters 38). After his trip to Europe, Byron returned to England with no money, with the need to sell his home, Newstead Abbey, and having had three illnesses: "malaria, gonorrhoea and hemorrhoids." He left Nicolo in Malta and arrived in England in 1811 (Peters 40).

When Byron returned, he began to pursue more relationships with women. One of these women was the notorious Lady Caroline Lamb, who popularized the description of Byron as "mad – bad – and dangerous to know." She was extraordinarily vulgar, particular by feminine standards, and her interest in Byron veered slightly towards stalking (Peters 57). In an effort to remove himself from the situation he knew he would have to get married soon. Meanwhile, between 1813 and 1816, Byron came into contact with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. His love for her was potentially the longest relationship of his life. It is strongly suggested that it was also a sexual relationship (53). Due to his strange relationships with the women in his life and the sudden success of his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron felt the need to settle down in one aspect of his life. He did this by marrying Annabelle Milbanke on December 24, 1814. Milbanke was extremely different from her spouse, as she was more of an analytical thinker and less

prone to emotion (53). The relationship between the two quickly deteriorated for many reasons. Milbanke perceived the relationship between Byron and Augusta and also may have been aware of Byron's taste for men. (66). In the aftermath of his marriage to Annabelle Milbanke, Byron may have fathered his sister's daughter Medora. He also had an affair with Claire Clairmont and fathered a child with her (77). Initially, Byron had wanted to take care of his daughter with Claire Clairmont, Allegra. Eventually, though, she was put into a convent where she died of illness (Peters 92). At this point, Byron had once again left England after finding the climate his celebrity had created to be toxic. He spent many years in Venice, where had an affair with his landlord's wife and many others. One significant affair would be his relationship with Countess Teresa Guiccioli. While she was his mistress, Byron completed the first five cantos of *Don Juan* (79).

Between 1819 and 1824, Byron managed to take on a new identity, that of the revolutionary. Despite Byron's previous love for Turkey, he believed in Greece's independence; he boarded a brig called *Hercules* and began to fight, though he later came to disagree with the way the Greek's enslaved the Turks (Peters 100-103). His time in Greece also included a final love, Lukas Chalandritsanos, a fifteen year old boy who acted as his page. Byron's love, however, was not returned (MacCarthy 499-501). During his campaign in Greece, Lord Byron fell ill and died. Against his wishes he was autopsied, and his memoirs were burned in an effort to disallow more scandalous material to be seen by the public (Peters xi and 104).

Chapter 3

Lives Mirrored in Literature

Both Byron and Robinson attempt to deal with the public nature of their lives by influencing the reader. Byron and Robinson's decision to make use of aspects of personal lives is a conscious one and it simultaneously served to increase their popularity and make use of the public's views on their more scandalous behavior. Also, both authors desired to color the reader's impressions of them. The scandal also helped to sell books.

Mary Darby Robinson's "The Linnet's Petition"

"The Linnet's Petition" by Robinson was published in 1775 in the collection entitled *Poems*. This particular poem has a song-like quality derived from its short four-line stanza, which are arranged in an abcb rhyme scheme with lines alternating between tetrameter and trimeter: ballad stanza. The short poem is made up of eighteen stanzas which tell the story of a linnet and a young woman named Stella. The descriptions of the linnet's imprisonment and its request for freedom mirrors Robinson's own situation in her marriage and allows her to attempt to alter the public's perception of her persona and make a statement about the institution of matrimony.

In a natural setting beneath a tree where a bird's cage is hung, the events take place, wherein the linnet communicates its loss of freedom. It says, "Ah! Pity my unhappy fate,/and let a captive free,/So may you never feel the loss,/Of peace, or liberty" (9-12). This initial lament assumes that Stella does not feel the same sense of imprisonment that the linnet does, although this is proven untrue as Stella is capable of empathizing with it. In the fifth stanza, the linnet's appeal takes on a more questioning, philosophical approach. It inquires why "A life so innocent as mine,/Should end in grief and pain," since this particular individual feels that he is one of the kinder specimens of his species (19-20). This

sentiment is mirrored in the tone and particular examples Robinson uses in her *Memoirs*. For example, she often alludes to her innocence and lack of knowledge about adult situations particularly in reference to her marriage. She claims to have had a somewhat short association with her husband Thomas Robinson before she married him and a lack of understanding in how to engage in social situations as a married woman. The year this poem was published was also the year she went to debtor's prison with her husband.

The ninth stanza tells of the linnet's inability to seek his mate as other linnets would for he must make himself appear pleasing to her eye in order to gain her attention and complicity in freeing him. This stanza is reminiscent of Robinson's marriage. As a man in a sexist society, her husband was able to seek companionship outside of the marriage with less impact on him. However, Mary Robinson was incapable of seeking out someone in particular to love. She instead, "tun'd" her "downy throat,/To please, and gladden thee" (35-36). The linnet had previously done this for Stella and was caged for doing so.

In the twelfth stanza the reader learns the name of the woman to whom the linnet is speaking. The linnet entreats, "Think, Stella think, the pain I feel,/And pity my sad case" (47-48). The importance of this name would not be lost on the readers of the time. The Renaissance poet, Sir Philip Sidney, wrote *Astrophel and Stella*, a series of sonnets about two lovers. Also, classical literature includes references to birds, such as Catallus' poetry. Clearly, Robinson is using a convention to tell a different story.

Interestingly, while this poem could simply be used as a cathartic release of the linnet's emotions, it also serves as a warning and a moral lesson. In stanza fifteen, the linnet offers a universal lesson to the reader when he says to Stella, "Then pity my unhappy fate,/And set a captive free,/So may you never feel the loss,/Of peace, or liberty" (57-60). This works in a gender context as well as a political. In Robinson's life men threaten her liberty or threatened to nullify it completely. Even after her separation from her husband, her life was still constrained by others' views. Reactions to Robinson's public love-life resulted in satires about her during the late 1700s. These were created out of the prevalent anti-adultery movement (Runge). The suggestion, then, is that Robinson feels these views are incorrect and

paint an unfair picture that imprisons her in the same way the linnet is imprisoned. For women of this particular time period, a negative reputation could prove to be extraordinarily damaging, so it would not be surprising that Robinson would attempt to alter the public's view of her (Cross 571).

The final stanzas offer a resolution for both the linnet and Stella, as well. In stanza seventeen, Stella releases the bird from the cage, and in the one that follows, Robinson writes, "When first she caught the flutt'ring thing,/She felt strange extasy,/But never knew so great a bliss,/As when she set him free" (69-72). It is interesting to note that the poem does not simply end with the bird's simple expression of freedom. Instead, it is what Stella experiences by setting another living thing free that is meant to make an impression on the reader. The poem implies giving another being freedom is almost as enjoyable an act as being set free. This works in a personal and political way. In Robinson's own life, it is clear that being set free from the conjecture, opinions, and derision of others would benefit her, so she attempts to make this idea palatable to her audience by suggesting they would also gain happiness from setting her free. In a personal sense, Mary Robinson also wishes to be set free from her marriage to Thomas Robinson; in such a public venue this poem also suggests that women should have more rights so as to form more harmonious marriages and not be bound by the judgments of others. In a political sense, in 1775, revolutionary thoughts, particularly related to issues of freedom, would be growing stronger between the colonies and Britain thereby lending another layer of significance to this poem and its symbolism.

Mary Darby Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*

Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* were intended to "undo the scandalous work" of others who had released unofficial biographies, and her literary work also served this purpose (Byrne 358). It is also clear that scandal follows years later in regards to the revision of canon, where feminists must deal with Robinson's views in relation to her roles as an adultress or "whore" (Runge 565). As Robinson's works

attempt to modify her public persona in the past, they also offer explanations of her actions for contemporary readers. Of all Mary Darby Robinson's poems and novels, *The Natural Daughter* is the work that most closely resembles Robinson's life. In this novel, Martha Morley, a character obviously based upon Robinson, is forced to deal with several men who wish to subdue her. In particular, she must deal with her argumentative father, a libertine who flaunts his immoral behavior proudly, and an overbearing husband whose lack of faith ruins her. The story specifically centers on what happens when a woman is perceived as "fallen" and what little recourse she has. In many ways it is reminiscent to "The Linnet's Petition" in that it indicts marriage and questions the altering of one's reputation due to rumor. Much of Robinson's life was affected by her perceived indiscretions with other men. Through *The Natural Daughter's* descriptions of the various unworthy men in Martha's life, Robinson is able to present the other side of the argument through a woman's eyes.

The first unworthy male in Martha's life is Mr. Bradford, her father. Through their interactions, Martha's wit and good sense is explored, while Mr. Bradford is made to look spoiled and unintelligent. The audience is made to see Martha as someone who is moral and concerned with those outside of her particular station in life. Martha is described in the initial chapters as "wild," "giddy," "buxom," and "bluntly sincere" (93). This contrasts with her sister, Julia, who is perceived as a "model of feminine excellence" (93). Julia and Martha's apparent differences exacerbate the issues Martha has with her father. He chooses Julia as his favorite due to her simpering nature and socially approved "female" characteristics. In their interactions with their father, these differences are clearly illustrated. When sharing a rational opinion with her father, Martha is rebuked when Mr. Bradford asserts she "had no business to think" and that it "was her duty to listen" (93). Bradford is only one character who expects the status quo to be upheld by the women in his life. His perception of women is made possible by his own personality which is filled with a sense of self-righteousness, a quality Robinson is quick to vilify. This heavy-handed, absolutist rule is reminiscent of the one exerted by Robinson's father despite his physical distance from his wife and child. It is also one that ties directly to Robinson's political feelings.

Clearly, Bradford serves as an outlet for many of Robinson's feelings towards her father, men in general, and the revolutionary time period by allowing her protagonist to defy the absolutist rule Bradford represents.

The next major male character mentioned in the novel is Lionel Beacon. Beacon is very much a libertine with connections to other wealthy, noble individuals. His friendship with Lady Penelope Pryer (more often referred to as Lady Pen Pryer) is uneasy and filled with sexual ambiguity. He casually spouts his philosophy and presumes it is something to be proud of when he says, "who the devil wants to be wise? I have all the pleasure of life without giving myself any trouble; and what should a man of fashion learn but to amuse himself?" (*A Letter* 99). Robinson often reserves an entire passage to the description of a newly introduced character. Often, aspects of their personality are listed rather than observed in interaction with other characters. Although this may seem odd, it helps to surprise the reader when the character contradicts his typical behavior at a later moment. Some of the ways Lionel Beacon and his life are described include: "splendid fortune," "model of symmetry and feature scarcely to be equaled," "liberal, open, and generous heart," and "thoughtless, dissipated, wild, and devoted to pleasure" (100). Lionel's affability makes him popular, but his callous outlook makes Martha, and the reader, wary.

The final major male character to be introduced, Mr. Morley, is a friend of Pen Pryer who is also initially visiting Bath with Lionel Beacon at the same time as Martha's family. The first time this character is introduced to the audience is similar to the way that Robinson and the Prince of Wales had met. Mr. Morley first observes Martha in the lobby. The next day she is confronted by him again, and Robinson describes the scene in this way:

Martha re-entered the shop, where the first person she saw was the lobby observer, who had the preceding evening watched her so inquisitively. His eyes oppressed her. She endeavored, but in vain, to avoid them: her confusion only tended to augment his interest; and during several minutes she was the exclusive objective of his attention (*Natural* 110).

The above description implies an inauspicious beginning between Morley and Martha, though it is obvious he has a romantic interest in Martha. Due to a disagreement between Martha and her father, Mr. Bradford, she and her mother are made to return to London. Bradford wishes to keep Julia with him because he says, “she neither advises nor contradicts” (114). Seeing that this is to transpire, Mr. Morley leaves Martha with a letter asking for her hand in marriage and giving her until she reaches home to make a decision. The speed at which their meeting occurs and their subsequent marriage happens is clearly a reference to Robinson’s hurried marriage. Part of the rationalization Robinson uses is reflected in Martha’s reasoning for accepting the marriage: “Yet Martha was not one of those romantic females who are led from the paths of rationality by the phantoms of vanity and caprice” (115). She knows that her best opportunity to escape the tyranny of her father and secure a future for herself is to marry Mr. Morley, as other offers may not appear in the future. She accepts the marriage out of practicality rather than out of romantic feelings for Mr. Morley. Although the meeting between Morley and Martha is reminiscent of Robinson’s meeting with the Prince of Wales, their relationship is similar to Robinson’s relationship with Tarleton. Like Tarleton, Morley proves to be unworthy of Martha’s affections (Ty 73).

As with the other men introduced in the novel, Robinson offers a series of descriptions of Morley that quickly describe his attitudes to the audience. To the audience it becomes clear that the character is a coded reference to the men in Robinson’s life. In the case of Morley, he is described as being “rigidly tenacious of an husband’s authority” and an enemy to anything that would corrupt his ancestry. Also, he is described as being, “one of those prejudiced mortals who consider women as beings created for the convenience of domestic life” (117). It is immediately apparent to the reader that the marriage between Morley and Martha should never have been and that Morley does not know his own wife. This is similar to the marriage between Byron and his wife, who also were clearly unsuited for each other.

The issue that sets the most important events in motion, however, comes when the heroine’s husband leaves for business to a distant part of England. Mrs. Morley finds a “female, young and pretty, with an infant lying beside her” (*A Letter* 118). Meeting this child and eventually being made to take care

of her leads her husband to believe that she has been unfaithful to him during his absence. It is at this moment that the stigma of the fallen woman falls upon Martha Morley in spite of her attempt to stand by her principles and help a child in need. At the same time, Julia fares differently, her story serving as an effective counterpoint to Martha's story. Through the comparison of the two sisters, Robinson is able to explore the inherent problems with labeling a woman as a "fallen woman" without proof. Where Julia becomes bold and wears rouge while her father dies, Martha exhibits philanthropic characteristics. This strongly suggests that the audience should apply the knowledge gleaned from this novel to her life and therefore alter the public's perception of her persona.

When Mrs. Morley's husband returns from his business, he is confronted with the image of his wife with a child that looks remarkably like her but is not hers. It is at this moment – when her husband has to decide what the truth is and whether he trusts his wife – that Martha's life is changed. Mrs. Morley's future is not merely a result of her husband's presuppositions. Other *women* also contribute to the insinuations and rumors thereby creating an atmosphere of distrust and wrongdoing. When Mr. Morley asks where Martha's little charge has come from, Julia chooses not to answer the question directly and instead remarks, "I dare say Martha will acquit herself" and that she believes her sister's story "even with all its improbabilities" (128). The seeds of doubt are first placed in the husband's mind by another woman. Robinson is clearly indicting women in general as helping to perpetrate the tragedy that is being labeled a "fallen woman." In many ways, this is reminiscent of the relationships Robinson had with the women in her husband's family. In the aftermath of Mr. Robinson's problems with his creditors, the Robinsons were forced to return to his father's home in Tregunter where some of Thomas Robinson's female relatives reside. "Miss Robinson barely bade us welcome, and Molly was peevish, even to insulting displeasure" (*Memoirs* 93). Their reaction was not due to their own brother's financial troubles; they were displeased with Mary Darby Robinson for not being from a wealthy family. As with Martha Morley, Robinson is being judged for a situation not of her own making and out of her control. Her relationships with other woman are strained, just as Martha's are, and this only helps perpetrate the issues

women must face. Depicting Mrs. Morley's relatives in this way clearly is intended to also bring pity to Robinson's own situation.

After being forced to leave her husband and home, Martha Morley has to adopt a different name, become an actress, and write professionally to support herself. Mrs. Morley adopts the name Mrs. Denison in order to shed the reputation she had undeservedly garnered (146). In an effort to support herself, Morley discovered herself in need of a job. Through her friendship with another female character, the talented Mrs. Sedgley, she finds herself pursuing the stage. During this particular time period, actresses, particularly those who travelled alone, were considered to have loose morals. In Robinson's own situation when she was just a young lady and unmarried, her mother entertained concerns about allowing her to enter the acting profession. Robinson wrote in her memoirs that her mother "dreaded the perils, the temptations to which an unprotected girl would be exposed in so public a situation" (*Memoirs* 4-5). These concerns are easily found in her characterization of Martha Morley. Through Morley, she is able to create a fantasy that disproves society's misconceptions about the acting lifestyle for a female. She describes Mrs. Morley's view of the dangers in the profession:

Mrs. Morley had to struggle against the all-potent tyrant Prejudice. She had engaged in a profession which vulgar minds, thought they are amused but its labours, frequently condemn with un pitying asperity. She was engaging, discreet, sensible, and accomplished: but she was an actress, and therefore deemed an unfit associate for the wives and daughters of the proud, the opulent, and the unenlightened. (181).

Robinson suggests that not all women are created equal and some have a better sense of propriety and safety. Martha Morley is a morally upright woman whose circumstances would normally be found in someone less sensible. Robinson is capable of proving that not all women in these situations are deserving of a bad reputation.

Outside of entering the acting profession, Martha Morley also began to publish poetry in order to support herself. Combined with her acting, this is a strong indicator that this character is based heavily on the author. Like Robinson, Martha employs the same Della Cruscan style of writing veering decidedly on the sentimental. She publishes a poem in a country paper that includes lines like “The fire-eyed wolf, which howls for prey,/Glares hideous in his briery way;/Yet, can he smile! For he has borne/The sneers or PRIDE and VULGAR SCORN” which clearly display strong emotions combined with an amazingly sentimental line that is repeated at the end of each stanza which capitalizes the strongest emotions in the work (*A Letter* 195). Another poem falls into the same category and displays emotions, particularly sad ones, which allow the character and the author to lament the misfortunes they face. Morley writes, “As o’er the world, by sorrow prest,/I wander, sad and weary;/In hopes to find a place of rest,/From scenes forlorn and dreary:/Where’re I go, I’m doom’d to trace,/If fortune smiles, the smiling face:/But if she frowns, I’m sure to see,/On every face, a frown for *me!*” (*A Letter* 216). The addition of these poems in the novel *The Natural Daughter* helps Robinson to advertise her own poetry while also suggesting that being a writer is one of the last reasonable and safe jobs a woman may have when left on her own. As with many sentimental novels, virtue is rewarded: After Morley’s death, Martha marries the only worthy man in the novel, Lord Francis, and she is redeemed from all slander and lies that had tormented her (Ty 83).

The Natural Daughter addresses many issues pertaining to the treatment of women that Mary Darby Robinson encountered in her own life. Although she may not have been as morally upright as her character Martha Morley, Robinson was often unfairly judged because of her chosen professions. In this novel, she was able to address the rumors spread about her cautiously and without entering into an actual dialog with the critics. Although many of the events are taken from Robinson’s life, the work and the lessons it offers can be attributed to many women and was revolutionary for its time period.

Lord Byron's *Don Juan*

Lord Byron's *Don Juan* is a new kind of epic, where the hero is altered from classical convention; it simultaneously satirizes the epic form while also allowing aspects of Lord Byron's personality and public persona to be displayed in a controlled, but personally liberating atmosphere. The narrator specifically echoes facets of Byron's personality. Through a study of Canto I of *Don Juan*, written in 1818, one is able to see how Byron has included his views on the individuals who have impacted him in his life and his view of sexuality in such a way as to shed light on the choices he has made. This is not unlike the half apologetic, half unrepentant semi-autobiographical Robinson novel, *The Natural Daughter*.

Byron's *Don Juan* was written in the *ottava rima* stanza form, which is comprised of eight lines with a rhyming pattern of abababcc and is of Italian origin; this form was used by Boccaccio, Tasso, and Ariosto, the Italian masters. This stanza form moves away from traditional British forms for epics, perhaps symbolizing Byron's distaste for Britain during this particular time period. The story begins with a narrator who is in want of a hero, and with this thought in mind, Byron reworks the legend of Don Juan. Instead of being the infamous womanizer, he is now the pursued rather than the pursuer. The narrator is the reader's window into the events, and, although the narrator is not Byron, we may glean some knowledge as to the feelings he had for his family, friends, and the social circle which both praised and judged him throughout his life.

Canto I serves as an account of Juan's upbringing from his parents' relationship to the effect his mother had on his education. It is a widely held belief that Donna Inez, Juan's mother, is a representation of Lord Byron's wife Annabelle Milbanke. In this way, Byron is able to launch an attack against his wife and bring to light the reasons why their relationship had not worked out from his point of view. Milbanke was particularly interested in the intellectual as opposed to her more outrageous and emotionally turbulent husband. In describing Juan's mother, the narrator states, "Her favourite science was the

mathematical,/Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity,/Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic all” (*Don Juan* 1: 89-91). As with Lord and Lady Byron, neither was suited for the other.

Of course, the questions of why their marriage ended became an issue for the public. Byron refers to this through the narrator when he discusses Don Jose and Donna Inez’s marital problems: “Don Jose and his lady quarreled. Why,/Not any of the many could divine,/Though several thousand people chose to try./’Twas surely no concern of theirs nor mine./I loathe the low vice curiosity” (*Don Juan* 1:177-181). Additionally, this illustrates Byron’s dislike of the public’s perception of him during this time period.

Byron’s social reception after his marriage to Milbanke became uncomfortable for him, due to rumors that had arisen of his steadily strengthening “bond” with his sister. The situation was made worse by Milbanke’s confessions to others that the marriage was problematic. The indiscretion of his wife is mirrored in the passage, “For Inez called some druggists and physicians/And tried to prove her loving lord was mad,/But as he had some lucid intermissions,/She next decided he was only bad” (*Don Juan* 1:209-212). It is interesting that these lines mirror the Caroline Lamb’s adage that Byron was “mad – bad – and dangerous to know” (Peters 57). It is not by chance that Donna Inez and Don Jose’s relationship follows this similar pattern. Both marriages presented in this canto are doomed, much like Byron’s own marriage.

The second marriage presented in this canto is that between Juan’s friend and, soon, lover, Julia, and her husband Alfonso. Although there is a large age difference between the two, Julia takes her vows seriously until she comes into contact with Juan. Her love for Juan begins innocently, especially due to the age difference. There are gentle caresses and innocent appreciation of each other’s company. Over time, though, Julia’s love for Juan begins to grow. Interestingly, she becomes the pursuer in this scenario which is contrary to the Don Juan legend. In some ways, this mirrors a relationship in Byron’s life. Lady Caroline Lamb and Claire Clairmont both pursued Byron, whose reputation for promiscuity was somewhat similar to the legendary Don Juan’s. In contrast, though, neither Lamb’s nor Clairmont’s

attentions to Byron were as innocent as Julia's. It is probable that Byron may have had his narrator gloss over vulgarities in order to display this aspect of his own life in a purer way. Also, this would make the reader less shocked by the adulterous relationship and more sympathetic to Julia. Instead of giving in to explicit detail, the narrator describes Juan and Julia's first sexual encounter in quite a disinterested or embarrassed way: "Or else 'twere easy to withdraw her waist./But then the situation had its charm,/And then – God knows what next – I can't go on;/I'm almost sorry that I e'er begun" (*Don Juan* 1:917-920). Instead of telling the sordid details, he avoids specifics and apologizes for even broaching the subject, although it was a natural and smooth transition. Byron may have consciously attempted to describe Julia in a more appealing light rather than strictly basing her characterization on Caroline Lamb or Claire Clairmont, as they strongly deviated from social norms.

Another factor presented in the first canto and throughout the poem is Byron's bisexuality. As *Don Juan* was written during Byron's time in Europe as opposed to England, he was only slightly more able to explore this factor of his life in his work. Although gay relationships are not heavily described in *Don Juan*, Byron's narrator uses sarcasm and insinuation to suggest that heterosexuality is not the only orientation explored. In fact, as Jonathan David Gross suggests in "'One Half of What I Should Say': Byron's Gay Narrator in *Don Juan*," the narrator attempts to suggest that the audience has a heterosexual bias and he implies that the narrator does not agree with this viewpoint. For instance when describing Juan's father, Byron's narrator says, "And therefore I shall open with a line/(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)/Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father/And also of his mother, if you'd rather" (*Don Juan* 1:53-56). Gross suggests that the narrator's preference is to start with Juan's father versus his mother, thereby suggesting "the audience's preferences are not his own" (Gross 136). Further references to Don Juan's father provide more insinuation, specifically in the reference to Jose in Canto I lines 69-70: "A better cavalier ne'er mounted horse,/Or being mounted e'er got down again." The play on the word "mounted," especially considering its sexual connotation, is often overlooked but strongly adds to the possibility that the narrator is indeed applying a gay viewpoint to Juan's story. In the essay, "Byron's

Don Juan: Myth as Psychodrama,” Candice Tate discusses Byron’s relationships through observation of how Juan reacts to the women in his life throughout the poem. According to Tate, Byron has “given Juan the characteristic erotic prowess, but he leaves him uncharacteristically vulnerable to women” and Juan’s virility is “coveted, manipulated, and subjugated by every female he encounters” (132). If Juan is subjugated by females, it is likely that he feels equal in relationships with his own gender, a preference mirrored by the narrator.

It is interesting that Byron dared to allude to homosexuality in his works, however subtly. Doing so may have been to challenge the British conventions, but it may also have been cathartic for him. Through the use of a remarkably innocent character and a world-weary narrator, Byron is able to safely disclose information about himself he was never able to before. Although written while living in Italy, he included homosexual subtext in his poems which is still surprising as love between two men was a capital offense in England and would be punished severely through the pillory or by hanging (Gross 139-140).

Not only do the initial cantos of *Don Juan* exhibit aspects of Lord Byron’s upbringing and bisexuality, they also delve into Byron’s incestuous feelings for his half-sister and his troubled relationship with his mother. In a direct link to Byron’s incestuous feelings for his sister, Julia, in particular, is described in such a way as to suggest a familial connection between herself and Juan. For instance, during their early knowledge of each other, “Juan she saw as a pretty child,/Caressed him often. Such a thing might be/Quite innocently done and harmless styled/When she had twenty years, and thirteen he” (*Don Juan* 1:545-548). Her original affection for Juan is more like that of a sister or even, arguably a mother, capable of giving nonsexual affection to him. This is furthered by the fact that Julia’s husband is twice her age and it is implied that he is having an affair with Juan’s mother, Inez. According to Tate, “the implication is, of course, that the young pair could be sister and brother” (139). These circumstances are convoluted enough to allow Byron to express his desire for his sister through his poetry without betraying himself or his sister socially.

Lord Byron's *Bride of Abydos*

The Bride of Abydos, written in 1813, is comprised of irregular stanzas divided into two cantos and begins to address the incestuous feelings Byron had for his half-sister. The first canto is comprised of fourteen stanzas which set the stage for what is to happen to the two main characters. In the second canto, comprised of twenty-eight stanzas, the resolution is explored. *The Bride of Abydos* is set in the near East and is most likely inspired by Byron's trip to Turkey in his youth. In the course of this poem, he was able to express and publicize his issues with parental authority and the love he had for his sister. Through this, he could acknowledge his feelings and do it in such a way as to keep the public interested yet not ruin his sister.

The Bride of Abydos tells the story of a woman named Zuleika who has been promised to another man by her father, Old Giaffir, the Pacha. The most unhappy individual in this situation is Zuleika's "brother," Selim. The plot also emphasizes the strained relationship between Selim and his father.

The character of Giaffir reflects aspects of Byron's parents – a father with whom he had little relationship, and a mother who was occasionally abusive. Giaffir refers to Selim as a "son of a slave" (1:81). He goes on to say, "Much I misdoubt this wayward boy/Will one day work me more annoy:/I never loved him from his birth,/And but his arm is little worth" (1:132-5). With the exception of his relationship with Zuleika, Selim feels isolated and alone. The loneliness mirrors Byron's estranged relationships with his parents and his wife. Perhaps he felt that displaying such an image to the public would help to counter the rumors that had already proliferated.

While Selim's relationship to his "father" is strained, Zuleika is adored by Giaffir. In some respects, this enhances the difference in experience for Selim and his "sister" while also drawing a picture for the reader that leans more toward fantasy than realism. In many regards, Byron's descriptions for Zuleika mirror the poetic illusions Robinson had built around the truth of her upbringing. His portrait of Zuleika is "idealized" so much so that Byron begins to mix auditory observations with the visual

(Mekler). Around her is “the light of love, the purity of grace,/The mind, the Music breathing from her face” (1:178-9). Clearly, the mixing of the music comparison and the image of her face is impossible, but highlights the preternatural beauty that makes it impossible for men not to love her; this is also an example of synaesthesia, the mixing of sensory descriptions. Also, the narrator describes Zuleika as being “fair as the first that fell of womankind” (1:158). This unique simile also makes public Byron’s ambivalent relationship with women. He finds them beautiful and mysterious, and, like Eve, potentially fraught with danger. It is easy to see that the idea of danger may also reside in his relationship to the women he loves. Byron’s incestuous love for his half-sister might have ruined her and himself. Furthermore, while writing these works abroad, Byron engaged in relationships with married women.

Interestingly, Zuleika’s father is also enraptured by her beauty, adding to the theme of incest. The narrator states, “Zuleika came – and Giaffir felt/His purpose half within him melt” (1:187-8). Her looks and charms make Giaffir second-guess his decision to marry her to another man. The inclusion of the father-daughter love is even more incestual than the love between Selim and Zuleika. It helps temper the reader’s reaction to the latter relationship.

The reader may look on Selim with judgment for loving his sister, but it is not his fault alone. Zuleika also feels a strong attachment to Selim. The narrator describes her feelings for the situation she finds herself in saying, “Her heart confess’d a gentler flame:/But yet that heart, alarm’d or weak,/She knew not why, forbade her speak” (1: 260-2). She is unable to express the emotions she has for Selim because society labels them as wrong, but they do exist. Events within the story of *The Bride of Abydos* draw these emotions to the forefront. For instance, Zuleika states quite clearly that she is particularly attached to Selim. She declares, “My love thou surely knew’st before,/It ne’er was less, nor can be more./To see thee, hear thee, near thee stay/And hate the night I know not why,/Save that we meet not but by day;/With thee to live, with thee to die” (1:387-92). The emphasis on discussing the difference of their relationship during the day and during the night highlights that she recognizes that there are two sides to it: the platonic, familial side and another that borders on the romantic.

The second canto resolves the problems of the first canto: Zuleika's impending marriage and Selim's love for her. The beginning of the canto sets the emotional stage through descriptions of landscape and atmosphere. The "winds are high," it is "stormy," and "shrieking sea-birds" are sending out warnings, all of which serve to create a sense of foreboding (2: 1,2,9). Selim is making his way to one particular spot: Zuleika's chambers in a tower. She is there residing among her many beautiful objects which serves as a contrast to her morose mood. When they go to a grotto, Selim begins to tell Zuleika that he is not her brother but is actually her cousin. The Giaffir had killed his brother, Selim's father. Interestingly, Zuleika does not process this information in a positive way. She declares, "Oh! not my brother! — yet unsay —/God! am I left alone on earth/To mourn — I dare not curse the day/That saw my solitary birth?" (Bride 2:165-8). She seems to regard her deep love and affection as hinging on her relationship to him as a brother. She feels as if the hatred Selim endured from her father would set him against her: "And I, alas! Am Giaffir's child,/For whom thou wert contemn'd, reviled./If not thy sister — wouldst thou save/My life, oh! Bid me be thy slave!" (Bride 2:180-3) She feels guilt over how her father has treated Selim and a sense of loneliness and lack of connection between Selim and her due to this revelation. The play of emotions at the loss of the familial relationship and the existence of another connection is complex and it may provide insight into Byron's own feelings about his relationship to his sister.

Selim's response to Zuleika's concerns highlights this complex situation. He replies to her, "But, gentle love, this transport calm,/Thy lot shall yet be link'd with mine" (Bride 2:185-6). This line explicitly states that it is possible for Selim to replace the familial connection with a romantic one. The insinuation is that the relationship is somehow connected to both kinds of affection. It is also clear that Selim feels that any connection between the two is essential.

In stanza XII of the second canto, Selim admits that his father was really the Giaffir's brother, which will, thankfully for Selim and Zuleika, mean that the two are only cousins, somewhat less of an incestuous taboo. Yet, this does not conclude Selim's story. His father was killed by the Giaffir and,

though he does not understand why, he was spared and raised with Zuleika. As he had come to understand his uncle's plot to kill his brother and take control of their clan, his relationship with the Giaffir soured and he had come to know and befriend others who knew the truth – that his father was the true leader of their group and that Selim should rightfully be in that place now. Stanza XX is a long monologue in which Selim communicates his love for Zuleika through various metaphors in which she is always the positive to any negative situation. The beginnings of a potential future are sown in this section until, 'When, at the instant, hiss'd the ball —/"So may the foes of Giaffir fall!"/Whose voice is heard? whose carbine rang?/Whose bullet through the night-air sang,/Too nearly, deadly aim'd to err?/"Tis thine — Abdallah's Murderer!" (*Bride* 2:571-6). Selim is killed before they can explore their new relationship because of Giaffir's fear of both Selim's revenge and power. In reaction to the death of Selim, Zuleika dies of grief making her father's plans useless.

Compared to Byron's own life, this ending is not surprising in its use of the tragic. Despite the resolution of the incest issue within the poem, the ending would not fit Byron's own experience if it had ended happily. Although some parts exhibit fantasy and wish fulfillment, much as Robinson's memoirs serve to enhance certain aspects of her life, fundamentally the poem's emotional journey stays true to Byron. He was unable to have the relationship that he desired with his half-sister. The only illusion of happiness one might be able to gather from the resolution of the poem is that the two are together in death. In Byron's life, he often attempts to cure his infatuations by putting physical distance between himself and those he desires. It is also important to note that this ending makes the poem publishable in his day, as it would have been too scandalous otherwise and condemned by most readers.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The beginning of celebrity culture is hinted at in the lives of Lord Byron and Mary Darby Robinson. The opinions of the public press and the readers' consumption of them have the power to give fame or to create a toxic atmosphere for those under extreme scrutiny. It is clear that both writers self-consciously included aspects of their lives in their works to adjust the public's view and create a more positive perception of them.

Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and *The Bride of Abydos* deal frankly with many of Byron's choices in an effort to justify his actions in life. Byron's difficult relationship with his parents, his love for his sister, and his failed marriage with Annabelle Milbanke together affected his public reputation, oftentimes negatively. Although Byron frequently sought to pique the interest of the public through scandalous behavior, there were clearly times he would have preferred to control the information that circulated concerning his private life. Because his memoirs were burned by his friends and associates, there is no way to know the entire truth except through study of his works and letters.

Mary Darby Robinson could not afford to have the fame that came with sensational behaviors. If one became labeled a "fallen woman," there were few options available for employment in order to stay alive. Although there is no doubt that Robinson enjoyed the fame that accompanied her appearance in the newspaper stories, she also experienced first-hand how damaging some information could be. Her upbringing, hasty marriage, and affairs with other men were all downplayed or refuted in her autobiographical and fictional works as a means of countering the condemnation of the public. It is clear that her published works offered her an important outlet to express her response to the judgments imposed on her by others. Clearly, both Byron and Robinson managed their individual public personas in their published works and did so in order to attempt to modify what they wished to be known about their personal lives, as well as to increase their fame and the sales of their works.

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EDUCATION

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The Writing Center, Penn State Brandywine, Media, PA,

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Peer Tutor

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AWARDS

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The Lion's Eye Newspaper, Penn State Brandywine

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- Met with Lion's Eye every Monday and Wednesday to discuss the progress of each issue and introduce new article ideas.
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Penn in Hand, Literary Art Magazine, Penn State Brandywine

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- Created advertisements and visited classes to incur interest in submitting to the literary art magazine.
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