

Exterior and Interior Injustice and Selfhood in the Poetry of Mary Robinson

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ABSTRACT

Mary Robinson was a writer who made important contributions to the earliest phases of the Romantic movement. Infamous in her own time for having been the mistress of the Prince of Wales, but soon forgotten after her death, her work is largely understudied. Seeking to understand the work of this writer, this paper explores the theme of justice in Robinson's work through a close reading of her poetry and finds her understanding of this theme shifts through her career, but is always connected to identity and selfhood. Her earlier poems suggest injustice is exterior to one's sense of self and does not inhibit one's ability to autonomously actualize their identity, while her later views suggest that injustice is interior to the self and can permanently inhibit the formation and actualization of the victim's identity. Further, this paper connects events in Robinson's life during the earlier and later phases of her writing that might have resulted in this shift in her views. In light of this research, further investigation of Robinson's writing is necessary to advance an understanding of her unique voice in particular and the Romantic movement as a whole.

The Life of Mary Robinson

Living during the latter half of the 18th century, the most prolific years of Mary Robinson's writing career coincided with the emergence of the earliest writers of the Romantic movement. While Robinson was a celebrity for most of her life, she was unstudied until recent decades. Her neglect in scholarship of the Romantic period is an extension of problems Robinson faced in her own lifetime: the inability to control reputation and identity. First as an actress, then as the Prince of Wales' mistress, and then a writer, Robinson spent the majority of her life trying to manage and live with public perception. When Robinson turned to writing to mediate her public image, she devoted the final years of her life to creating a literary legacy that could outlast her infamous reputation.

Robinson was born in 1758 and grew up comfortably in Bristol until 1767 when the discovery of her father's failed business venture and extramarital affair resulted in her parents' separation and her move to London with her mother and brother (Pascoe 23). This event was the first of many in Robinson's life where the men she formed intimate relationships with

caused disruption through financial instability and infidelity. Robinson married Thomas Robinson in 1773, who presented himself as a wealthy heir but was actually an illegitimate son (Pascoe 24). This deception, coupled with her husband's gambling and lifestyle habits beyond the couple's means, placed Robinson in a position of financial instability that followed her for the remainder of her life.

Robinson turned to acting to support herself and her daughter, which created the conditions for a defining incident of her life: becoming the mistress of the Prince of Wales. In 1779, Robinson caught the attention of the Prince while acting the role of "Perdita" in *The Winter's Tale* and he began to pursue her under this name. After some resistance, Robinson accepted the Prince's advances and left her husband. This affair ended within a year when the Prince left Robinson for another woman, but its effect on Robinson's reputation lasted her whole life. Following this event, Robinson's romantic life became a constant topic of social gossip, cementing her in the mind of the public as a figure of emotional and sexual promiscuity (Pascoe 29). According to Pascoe, "it is

probably impossible to overplay the role of Robinson's affair with the Prince of Wales in her later literary and social reception" (38). Robinson began writing full time as a way to support herself in 1789. Even ten years after her affair with the Prince, she was still publicly identified by critics as "Perdita," recalling her status as the Prince's former mistress. As a result, "Robinson the poet was also always Robinson the fallen woman" (Pascoe 20). Navigating her reputation and the public's opinion was a basic condition of Robinson's participation in society, which she sought to address through her writing.

From "Fallen Woman" to "Author"

One of the most striking features of Robinson's writing is the development of diverse voices in poems published under pseudonyms, many becoming recurring characters. This manipulation of voice and character extended to her use of her own name, making it one of the many public personas she carefully presented to the world, crafting herself as a subject (Ty 24). With her reputation as a figure of female scandal and passion, Robinson was "constrained discursively by social definitions of her identity even as she wishes to free herself of the public's misconceptions about her" (Ty 27). Thus, Robinson "has problems establishing and maintaining herself as a subject" because her reputation was public territory, and the identity she crafted was always in conflict with the reputation that she could not control (Ty 29). The theme of identity, therefore, is a factor in virtually all of Robinson's work as she established herself as a writer while being known as the epitome of a fallen woman.

In particular, much of Robinson's poetry explores the consequences of conflict and unjust criticism on one's sense of self. This exploration is transposed into the diverse voices of different pseudonyms. Her poetry processes the speaker's "self" as unique in each case. According to John Barresi and Raymond Martin, during the eighteenth century there was a "revolution of personal identity theory" in which there was a "movement away from substance accounts of personal identity, according to which the self is a simple persisting thing, toward relational accounts of personal identity, according to which the self consists essentially of physical and/or psychological relations among different temporal stages of an organism or person" (ix). As Barresi and Martin explore throughout their book, this changed view of self was no longer the immaterial and immortal concept of the soul but instead was defined by the connection between an individual consciousness and its experiences (1). Robinson's poetry utilized this new concept of the self shaped by experiences to explore different "selves" as different speakers in her poems.

Robinson's exploration of the self focused on how experiences affect the formation of the self. In particular, Robinson explored how instances of injustice, defined by the OED as actions that violate "moral right... reason, truth, or fact," impacted the formation of the identity or the self ("Justice"). Robinson's view of this type of injustice evolves significantly throughout her career. Up until the middle of the 1790s, Robinson's writing shows these types of unjust conflicts as exterior to the formation and externalization of identity, and therefore shows identity as only superficially affected by instances of injustice. Robinson's later poetry, however, presents injustice as interior to selfhood, so that instances of injustice incapacitate one's ability to form an identity. Romanticism, which was beginning to emerge as a distinct movement by the 1790s when Robinson was writing, was defined by its emphasis on "the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional" ("Romanticism"). Robinson's personal experiences as well as the cultural shifts that occurred while she was writing help to make sense of the changes in her views throughout her poetry.

Early Poetry: Injustice as Exterior to Selfhood

In the late 1780s, Robinson began to use writing, which had largely been an amateur interest, as a means of supporting herself, starting with the popular Della Cruscan movement. This movement originated with the poem "The Adieu and Recall to Love," written by Robert Merry under the pseudonym "Del Crusca" and published in the newspaper *The World* (D. Robinson 40). Robinson joined this movement in 1788 by beginning a poetic exchange with "Della Crusca" under her own pseudonym, "Laura." Her poem "The Muse" was the first to gain a response from Merry as a new character, "Leonardo...Della Crusca in disguise" (D. Robinson 48, 53). The subsequent exchange between Merry's Leonardo and Robinson's Laura became a love triangle when Della Crusca's former correspondent, Hannah Cowley, writing as "Anna Matilda," published a poem exposing Leonardo as Della Crusca (D. Robinson 55). Thus, Robinson's participation in the Della Cruscan network involved artistic identity under several layers of disguise, all used in support of the erotic, playful, pretentious style of the movement. Throughout this exchange, however, a scholar of Robinson's work, Daniel Robinson, notes that she consistently exhibits greater sincerity and earnestness in her engagement with themes of poetic genius, showing that she "is seriously establishing herself through her avatar" (52).

Ainsi va le Monde

Robinson's first poem with a serious literary topic was

Ainsi va le Monde, published in 1790. In this poem, Robinson critiques contemporary English art and supports the beginning of the French Revolution. Beginning the poem with an inscription to Merry, Robinson praises him as “Thou, to whom superior worth’s allied, / Thy Country’s honour— and the Muses’ pride” (Robinson lines 1-2). Robinson’s interest in identity is clear from these first lines when she suggests that superior worth is Merry’s ally, implying a distinction between his artistic skill as part of him, while superior worth is gained through his proper use of that skill. Robinson summarizes her admiration of Merry’s poetry in his ability to harmonize nature, genius, and his own identity to produce true art: “Nature glows in ev’ry classic line— / Still genius dictates—still the verse is thine” (lines 29-30).

However, Robinson laments that Merry alone is a true poet and artist, since the qualities of true art, personified in the Muse, are neglected: “Too long the Muse, in ancient garb array’d / Has pin’d neglected in oblivion’s shade; / Driv’n from the sun-shine of poetic fame, / Stripp’d of each charm she scarcely boasts a name” (lines 31-34). The Muse is not present within or clothed by the aesthetic materials of the contemporary age, remaining present only in ancient art. Instead, “motley mumm’ry holds her tinsel reign,” an incongruous composition of artistic features that superficially resemble the true art of the Muse but without the same nature (Robinson line 49). Society proves unjust by conferring value on the unworthy derivative of art while worthy artists are neglected. Consequently, “art” as society defines it does not signify the presence of true art. The solution for true artists is to create new cultural spaces, using reason to produce and evaluate art, which will affirm objective and universal artistic values and qualities, regardless of public opinion: “When Reason, sated with life’s weary woes, / Turns to itself— and finds a blest repose... / Then, calm reflection shuns the sordid crowd” (lines 95-96, 101). The real artist “shuns promiscuous praise,” since the corrupt judgement of society is apparent to the reasonable mind and public acknowledgement would indicate the same corruption within their work (line 127).

Halfway through *Ainsi va le Monde*, Robinson shifts her focus to the French Revolution. Just as the Muse is the figure that embodies the identity of true art, Robinson appeals to “Celestial Freedom” as the embodiment of humanity (line 184). In France, however, freedom is violated by the aristocracy who claim humanity is embodied in the luxuries of art and culture:

Enlighten’d Gallia! what were all your toys...

Did not insidious Art those gifts bestow,

To cheat the prying eye—with tinsel show?

Yes; luxury diffus’d her spells to bind

The deep researches of the restless mind;

To lull the active soul with witching wiles,

To hide pale Slav’ry in a mask of smiles.

(lines 185, 189-94)

The aristocracy claims that only those who rightly admire luxuries are humane, which allows the nobility to categorize commoners as sub-human and justify their violations of their freedom. Robinson identifies Françoise D’Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, as a primary perpetrator of the injustice committed against the French people. Labelling her a “monstrous hypocrite,” Robinson condemns Maintenon because she “liv’d the slave of passion—[and] died a saint” (lines 205, 220). The pinnacle of Maintenon’s hypocrisy was earning the status of a “perfect devotee at the convent of St. Cyr,” an honour that did not match her actual identity since she was also the mistress of King Louis XIV and used that position to encourage his religiously intolerant policies (notes on lines 202, 220). Although Maintenon died in 1719, seventy years before the French Revolution began, her hypocrisy in earning this title while orchestrating violations of human freedom against the commoners makes her the epitome of the injustice in Robinson’s poem. Thus, the French Revolution is a necessary restoration of what it means to be human and the rights this confers: “Rous’d by oppression, Man his birth-right claims, / O’er the proud battlements red vengeance flames” (lines 245-246).

Ainsi va le Monde as a whole presents two conflicts occurring in very different contexts, yet they are presented as parallels of each other. Both artists and French commoners are groups that face injustice stemming from the failure of others to treat them justly according to their identities. While the suffering this causes is substantial, it is ultimately exterior to the actual identities of these groups. Robinson’s poem distinguishes the exterior from the interior with her use of physically embodied figures, representing collective identities, who are displaced but not injured or destroyed by this injustice. The Muse is “banish’d” and replaced by “spurious offspring” and Freedom is in Heaven while “THE TYRANTS, GALLIA, nurs’d the witch DESPAIR” (lines 52 and 232). These descriptions reveal that the Muse and Freedom are physically displaced. But this displacement is not permanent or corrosive to their actual identities, since both the Muse and Freedom are able to return intact when the social climate is suitable. The Muse is prized again “when the mind, with sick’ning pangs oppress’d, / Flies to the Muse, and courts the balms of rest” (lines 93-94) and it is a “Day—transcendent on the page of Fame! / When from her Heav’n, insulted

Freedom came!" (Robinson lines 93-94 and 239-240). While these identities fail to find space within the current social climate, they remain fully intact to regain in the future the spaces they justly deserve. These figures embody what Robinson is claiming for individuals as well: their identities remain intact even if they are not given the recognition they deserve. While aspects of individuals' identities are not given adequate space to be expressed in society, this does not affect the wholeness of their identities or their ability to live out this identity in spite of society. Since injustice is shown as exterior to the self, Robinson suggests that injustice is superficial, both in the fact that it only affects the external situation and in how its consequences are resolved. If the self is objective, then the actualization of that identity is directed from the inner, independent self out toward the external social space. This distinction between the interior and exterior is affirmed by the solution Robinson's poem offers to English artists and French commoners, to use their autonomy to enact their true identity in defiance of the forces of injustice. If injustice only affects the self in a superficial way then one's agency remains equally accessible regardless of the scale of injustice. Thus, Robinson presents a commonality in all instances of injustice and equates the actions of an artist to those of a French commoner. The use of agency to rectify injustice is further expressed through the use of epic conventions in *Ainsi va le Monde*. Heroic couplets, invocations of the Muse and Celestial Freedom to embody collective identities, and epic catalogs of both true and false artists, all emphasize the external orientation of the poem's conflicts and again imply these very different topics are of equivalent importance, worthy of the epic style. Thus, Robinson's early poetry shows that while those in the midst of injustice might struggle to recognize their identity, acts of injustice can only ever superficially manipulate one's perception of their selfhood, not permanently inhibit it.

This more optimistic view of how injustice can be rectified was likely influenced by Robinson's own success at restoring her good standing in society through her early writing in the Della Cruscan movement. According to Sharon M. Setzer, "Robinson's infamy as former mistress of the Prince of Wales and others was almost overshadowed by her burgeoning fame as the author of pseudonymous poems" (16). This new fame allowed her to move beyond her old reputation to become "a circumspect woman of genius and sensibility" (Setzer 16). Robinson obviously took seriously the emotional impact that injustice could have on one's sense of self but concluded, likely because of her own experience, that energetic action to defy such injustices can allow a victim to restore their identity.

Later Poetry: Injustice as Interior to Selfhood

In contrast, poems of Robinson's later career show injustice affecting the interior formation of the victim's identity. In this view of justice, the process of identity formation is simultaneous with, and dependent upon, the actualization of this identity in the external world. Instances of injustice occur when an individual's sense of selfhood is challenged by society's refusal to allow the externalization of certain aspects of their identity. Unlike her earlier poems where one's agency would enable the assertion of this identity in defiance of society, the social acceptance of one's identity is treated as a necessary condition for the assertion of one's agency. Victims' identities are permanently fragmented as the rejection of society becomes an internal and irresolvable conflict in their sense of self.

This understanding of justice and selfhood is most clearly seen in Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*, the last collection of poetry published before her death and a response to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth and Coleridge were emerging young writers who exemplified their goal of creating a new poetic genre in their first collection's title. Their poems linked the emotive and internally focused lyrical genre to the narrative driven and externally focused ballad genre. Robinson's collection, *Lyrical Tales*, is an imitation of the young poet's innovative project, contributing to the reconception of poetic genres. Ashley J. Cross argues that Robinson did so to create a "literary debt" between herself and these emerging poets of serious literature in an attempt to join the legacy of poetic geniuses that would last beyond her lifetime (Cross 577). Further, this new genre developed by the young poets was ideal for Robinson's exploration of newer theories of the self and their relationship to justice. Ultimately, she contributes to the emergent Romantic genre an "abundance of voices, modes of representation, and fertile creativity [that] collide with [a] sense of continual thwarting of potentiality to accomplish a thematic tension between means and ends, past and future, consummation and consumption" (Curran 26).

"The Lascar"

One of the poems from *Lyrical Tales* in which justice and the self is explored is "The Lascar." The term lascar was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to refer to natives of South Asia who were hired to work on British ships during return trips to England (Stadtler and Visram). These sailors were often unknowingly being stranded in England since many were unable to find ships returning to South Asia during the winter. This resulted in groups of

homeless and impoverished sailors in England. These sailors were often denied charity due to racial discrimination, leaving them to suffer or die from starvation and exposure during the winter (Stadtler and Visram). Robinson's poem shows an Indian sailor dying of starvation in England, ignored and threatened when he begs for assistance. This narrative poem is told by an omniscient third person narrator, but begins with a speech from the sailor, introducing the reader to the narrative context through his state of emotional tension as he compares his current reality in England to his remembered home. The sailor notes the dawn and describes two contrasting images of the sun, symbolic of the two distinct climates that have produced two different societies. His experience in England is evoked through the description of its "sickly Sun," which he contrasts with the "gaudy Sun" of the home where he was free and happy (Robinson line 4, 23). However, the home sun is now the reason for the alienation and hostility he is experiencing in the new cooler climate, since the sun is what darkened his skin and differentiates him from those in England: "Where'er I turn my sleepless eye, / No cheek so dark as mine, I see; / For Europe's Suns, with softer dyes / Mark Europe's favour'd progeny!" (lines 73-76). In the midst of this suffering, the sailor wants the symbol of the two conflicting environments to be eradicated by the night: "Shut out the Sun, O! pitying Night! / Make the wide world my silent tomb! / O'ershade this northern, sickly light, / And shroud me, in eternal gloom!" (lines 37-40). The sailor's feeling of tension is caused by the external climate infringing on his internal world, but the narrator's description of the setting reveals the futility of his complaints, since the climate is unaffected: "The morn had scarcely shed its rays / When, from the City's din he ran; / For he had fasted, four long days, / And faint his Pilgrimage began!" (line 85- 88). The environment is unaffected by the sailor's memories of home, the reference to the sunrise emphasizing the futility of the sailor's pleas for night.

Following this section, the starving sailor wanders begging for assistance. His requests are not only refused but met with threats of violence, first by the porter of a lord's house where he is threatened by "a fierce mastiff... / Eager to bathe his fangs in blood" (lines 131-132). The lascar "turn'd away, / For trembling fear his heart subdued," but finds that "his heart began to feel / As though, it were not quite subdu'd" (lines 133-134, 147-148). Similarly, he is met "with keen reproach, and menace rude.../ now again he seem'd subdu'd" when he begs from a monk (lines 157-158). The repeated use of the term "subdued" frames the lord and monk's refusals as attempts to emotionally and mentally subjugate him through the denial of humane charity. As a racial minority, the sailor is not only denied his physical, emotional, or

psychological needs, he is also threatened with violence when he petitions for the attention and assistance of society. In the face of these threats, the sailor must attempt to quell his needs to protect himself from violence. However, to submit himself to these physical and emotional limits enables the injustice, since it implicitly accepts that his race places him below the consideration of English society. If the sailor attempts to physically assert himself to gain material assistance, he risks physical violence, while ceasing to request assistance tolerates an act of emotional and psychological violence which invalidates his identity. Thus, the sailor is a victim of injustice that is interior to his selfhood and agency because there is no active or passive decision that does not violate his autonomy and selfhood. The use of third person narration in the poem emphasizes that the sailor cannot externalize his internal world. However, the portions of first person dialogue allows the reader to observe the ways the external world infiltrates the internal and highlights the sailor's lack of agency, since he is shaped by his context but cannot assert himself in return.

The final event of the poem shows the psychological violence the sailor has experienced culminating in an act of physical destruction. An unknown traveller passes the sailor on a stormy night and the sailor instinctively calls out to him. The narrator tells the reader the traveller is anxious to protect his gold and is unable to see the dark skinned sailor in the night, so he stabs him: "He nothing saw, while onward prest, / Black as the sky, the Indian's breast... / Then, struggling to be free, he gave— / A deep wound to the LASCAR Slave" (lines 235-236, 239-240). Dying, the sailor laments his life: "'What have I done?' the LASCAR cried— / 'That heaven to me the pow'r denied / To touch the soul of man, and share / A brother's love, a brother's care?'" (lines 245-248). The arbitrary act of violence which kills the sailor is a symbol of the internal injustice that he has suffered, society's refusal to allow the sailor to actualize his identity through participation in community. The sailor's last words lament the lack of acceptance and compassion as his greatest source of suffering. His murder is not the ultimate act of injustice, rather it is the external symbol of the destruction already done to the sailor's selfhood emotionally and psychologically.

The murder of the sailor in the middle of a storm at night uses Gothic imagery important to much of Robinson's later poetry. Jerrold E. Hogle, in a study of her use of Gothic imagery, claims that Robinson uses "Walpolean Gothic, especially its foundational contradictions, to suggest underlying cultural quandaries and their effects on dispossessed people" (17). Hogle defines the "Walpolean Gothic" as the expression of fundamental tensions between the

romances of the ancient and modern (3). The ancient, represented by supernatural and Gothic imagery, evokes the appealing explanations of reality in the past. While the characters assume their veracity, the reader is meant to understand them as fictitious and see the actual meaning of the fictional elements in explanations of modern theology and psychology (Hogle 3). The death of the sailor exemplifies this complex use of the Gothic to physically depict a gruesome and horrifying event, in which the natural world almost supernaturally participates by disguising the sailor's dark skin, all while finding the actual meaning for these seemingly random circumstances in the incident's psychological effects on the sailor's identity. The use of Gothic imagery to define the injustice emphasizes that these injustices require some violation of the natural order. Yet the power and force of these supernatural elements are also beyond human capacity to counter, as these injustices are. While in principle these injustices obviously violate what is right, as the fear conjured by Gothic scenes obviously conflicts with scientific explanations of natural events, in practice it is as far beyond the victim's control to reject and rebel against the injustice he faces as to combat the darkness of the night and storm that disguises his skin.

"The Hermit of Mont-Blanc"

Several other poems in Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* include similar concluding acts of violence that are seemingly arbitrary, but are explained through an emotional or psychological reading of the poem. One of the most poignant examples of this is found in "The Hermit of Mont-Blanc." The narrative poem describes the life of a hermit in the Alps, who lives an ascetic life out of devotion to a woman he loves who is trapped in a convent, symbolically uniting his life to hers. Mysteriously, the hermit wakes one night and wanders through the Alps in fear, hearing terrifying sounds. In the final lines of the poem, the hermit encounters a group of criminals holding the necklace belonging to the woman he loves and realizes that she has been raped and likely killed by these men. The hermit's terrified wandering from an unknown pursuer can only be explained by the end of the poem as a supernatural sympathy with the woman's experiences, suggesting that the hermit's devotion to her has been so extreme that his identity has become an extension of the woman.

The poem's abrupt ending, stating that the hermit dies three weeks after this event, places the actual act of injustice and the suffering of the victim on the margins of the poem and denies the reader the ability to process its consequences fully. The act of injustice, and the identity which it violates, does not belong to the hermit but the woman. Robinson is again exploring injustice as destructive to the ability to form

an identity, particularly the feminine identity. The reader is introduced to the woman as the romanticized object of the hermit's desire and an involuntary member of a religious convent, defining her by how external forces either repress or liberate her sexuality. Both facts about the woman presume her sexuality is the principal aspect of her identity without any space for the woman's sense of self. The rape and murder of the woman continues to define her by her sexuality, by forcing nonconsensual participation in sex and lamenting it primarily as a loss of religious purity: "Thy VESTAL Saint, by his unhallow'd hands / Torn from RELIGION's Altar, had been made / The sport of a dark Fiend, whose recreant Soul / Had sham'd the cause of Valour!" (lines 198-201). The poem's focus on the hermit's sympathetic fear and death causes all of the consequences of the woman's life and death to centre on the male experience, erasing the woman's interior world and identity. Therefore, the injustice she experiences is interior to her sense of self, since both the identity and the experience of emotionally processing that identity within the poem are exclusively male, and any aspect of the woman that does not relate to male perception is erased. The woman's physical death in the poem is a symbolic completion of the annihilation that had already occurred to the woman's identity. Consequently, the Gothic, supernatural connection between the hermit and the woman is used to show the woman's distance from any degree of personal autonomy by filtering the events through a sympathetic male experience.

Robinson's exploration of justice in her later poetry, therefore, views acceptance within an external social space as an essential condition for forming one's identity internally. Injustice occurs when society refuses to provide opportunities for actualization to those in possession of certain attributes, especially those indivisible from their physical person like race or gender. Rather than healthily internalizing how one's identity relates to society, the individual internalizes the rejection of certain attributes, creating disconnection and unresolvable conflict within the self. In this state, an individual's ability to act with agency is hindered since any action must place them in conflict either with their sense of self or the society which rejects the self they have attempted to create. This more pessimistic view of how an individual's identity is affected by injustice seems to result from the public's harsher criticism of Robinson in the final years of her life. The Della Cruscan style, which had been the means of restoring her reputation years earlier, now fell out of favour and the style became the basis of criticism for her work. Similarly, Robinson's infamy as a fallen woman of passion caused a negative, moralizing tone in much of the criticism she received.

One prominent example of this type of criticism were reviews of Robinson's novels *Angelina* and *Hubert de Sevrac*, both published in 1796 and reviewed by an anonymous critic later identified as prominent feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's review of the first novel was positive and "carried an implicit vindication of Robinson's own character" (Setzer 18). In the intermediate months, however, Wollstonecraft and Robinson became acquaintances and the tone of Wollstonecraft's next review took a negative turn, using Robinson's writing to make statements about her character: "She seems...to think herself so happily gifted by nature, that her first thoughts will answer her purpose. The consequence is obvious; her sentences are often confused, entangled with superfluous words, half-expressed sentiments, and false ornaments" (qtd. in Setzer 19). Setzer accounts for this personal criticism as "a touch of jealousy for a woman who probably could have spent more time writing if she had spent less time entertaining William Godwin," who was Wollstonecraft's husband (19). The review of a feminist writer containing judgements of Robinson's character, similar to claims of promiscuity she had faced for her whole life, is one example among many of the negative criticism that likely caused Robinson's apparent disillusionment in the power of personal autonomy to overcome injustice in a lasting sense. Her feminist essay, *A Letter to the Women of England*, also published near the end of her life in 1799, critiques the social conventions which deny women the ability to redress instances of injustice without losing womanhood in the eyes of society (43). The views expressed in this essay conflict with the implicit views suggested by her early poetry and substantiate the reading of her later poetry as pessimistic to an individual's ability to overcome injustice against their identity. Thus, in the final years of her life, Robinson's views of injustice and its consequences for the self clearly changed, likely in response to the regression of the public's opinion of her which, until these final years of her life, she believed was replaced by her skill as a writer.

Robinson's poetic style and the views represented in her poetry evolved significantly throughout the course of her career as a professional writer, but her interest in exploring how the identity of an individual is influenced and shaped by the treatment they receive from society remained fundamental to her writing. At the start of her career, she depicted society's treatment of individuals as exterior to their actual sense of self, so that injustice against an individual has emotional consequences but is not permanently destructive to that identity. Conversely, the poetry Robinson wrote later in her career, especially her last collection *Lyrical Tales*, depicted society's treatment of individuals as interior to the process of forming a

sense of self, and therefore injustice is capable of permanently inhibiting the individual's identity and their ability to live fully actualized within society. The change in her views on this issue shows Robinson's ability to adapt her thinking, along with the obvious evolution of her poetic style. Additionally, the consistent exploration of identity, informed by her own experiences, shows her commitment to seeing the individuals that made up the larger social dynamics and conflicts. The issues of race, gender, class and more, which commonly divide society today are many of the same categories Robinson explored. Her willingness to do so, with an eye to the individual who experiences the consequences of injustice rather than a social agenda is a sensitivity that is worth exploring and understanding more deeply.

This paper has aimed to focus on how Robinson explored the theme of justice throughout the whole of her poetry, and has focused on her deep concern with identity as a result. Since this study has aimed to cover such a large scope of Robinson's work, it has remained limited to discussing her poetry without reference to other forms, and remained mostly at the level of a survey of her poems, excepting the close readings that are outlined in this paper. Further study could improve these findings by including a survey of her other writings and closer readings of other poems.

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