

**Seeking Refuge in the Quotidian: Mary Robinson's
London's Summer Morning
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Abstract

This paper analyzes *London's Summer Morning* (1800), a poem published in the final year of the turbulent life of Mary Robinson (1758-1800), a prominent poet, novelist and actress. This poem seems frivolous in view of Robinson's repertoire, ranging from typical Romantic poems of great sensibility, to politically charged comments on the French Revolution of 1789, to feminist tracts, novels and autobiography, among others. While criticism has profusely dealt with Mary Robinson's notoriety for unorthodox morality and her rapport with the canonized, male masters of the Romantic Movement in England, this study is a feminist analysis of Robinson's interest in the quotidian. Her choice of the detailed depiction of the daily activities of London merchants is a significant one. Robinson departs from Romantic melancholy and political dissent. She makes no transcendental flights of the imagination. Nor does she seek refuge in Nature. Instead, Robinson appears to be retreating from all past suffering into the shell of a domestic scene, recording the minute details which only a woman's eye can see. Thus, this paper highlights Robinson's *London's Summer Morning* as evidence that Romantic poetry defies categorization. Though the domestic may furnish the exhausted female psyche with a sense of security in the familiar, the question arises as to how far Robinson succeeds in distancing herself from the depicted scene. One wonders how far *London's Summer Morning* reflects her own struggle to "sell" herself as a writer, and not as a woman, in the male dominated literary "market".

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البحث عن ملاذ في وصف الحياة اليومية: دراسة تحليلية لقصيدة

((صباح صيفي في لندن)) للشاعرة ماري روبنسون

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ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث قصيدة ((صباح صيفي في لندن)) التي نشرت في عام 1800، أى في العام الأخير من حياة واحدة من أبرز شاعرات العصر الرومانسي في إنجلترا، ألا وهي الشاعرة، والروائية، و الممثلة المسرحية ماري روبنسون (1758-1800). قد تبدو هذه القصيدة لأول وهلة قليلة الأهمية إذا ما قورنت بمجمل أعمال الكاتبة من قصائد رومانسية مرهفة، أو خواطر سياسية حول الثورة الفرنسية في 1789، أو مقالات نسوية، أو روايات، أو سيرة ذاتية، إلا أن هذا البحث يسلط الضوء من خلال قراءة تحليلية نسوية على موضوع فريد في سياق موضوعات الشعر الرومانسي، ألا وهو اختيار الشاعرة لرصد أنشطة الحياة اليومية - وبخاصة التجارية - بأدق تفاصيلها، ودلالات ذلك الاختيار في تلك الحقبة و قبل انتهاء حياتها العاصفة التي اتسمت بالتمرد و الثورة.

إن قصيدة ((صباح صيفي في لندن)) تبدو وكأنها احتفالية بالأنشطة العادية اليومية في حياة سكان لندن. فهي بعيدة كل البعد عن جو الكآبة و الحزن الذي ميز أغلبية قصائد الأدب الرومانسي، أو التمرد السياسي، أو تمجيد شعارات الثورة الفرنسية من حرية و مساواة و إخاء، أو التحليق في عالم خيالي للهروب من واقع شخصي أليم يتسم بالوحدة، والإحباط، والشعور بالخذلان، واشتداد المرض على الشاعرة. ذلك أن القصيدة بعيدة كل البعد عن المسلك الشائع للشعراء الرومانسيين في لجوئهم إلى الطبيعة بعيدا عن الإحباطات الاجتماعية و السياسية بالمدينة. فعلى العكس من ذلك نجد ماري روبنسون تتسلخ عن كل معاناتها العاطفية، والمادية، والجسدية، والإبداعية، وتتفوق داخل المشهد الواقعي و المحلي عن طريق وصف مشهد البيع والشراء في شوارع لندن في أوائل القرن التاسع عشر. وبهذا يتضح أن الشعر الرومانسي يتحدى التصنيف.

ويثير البحث عدة أسئلة تتعلق بمدى انفصال الشاعرة حقا عن واقعها الأليم في تلك القصيدة المرحة، ومدى إسقاطات مشهد البيع والشراء على حياتها الشخصية بوصفها امرأة و كاتبة، وشاعرة تعيش في مناخ أدبي اتسم بالتحيز للكتاب والشعراء من الرجال، والخلط الدائم ما بين نقد المرأة والكاتبة. إن القصيدة مجرد محاولة - قد تتجح أو تفشل - لنسيان المأساة الشخصية لشاعرة مرهفة الحس مثل ماري روبنسون.

Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800) is one of the most intriguing women poets of the Romantic Movement in England. Despite her short life, her career abounds with literary accomplishments and social scandals. Robinson embodies the social, literary conflicts of a woman writer breaking loose from the shackles of consigned domesticity and hypocritical, male “protection”, in quest of intellectual liberty, social equality and financial independence. An actress, and later, a prolific writer, she was victim to the typical conflation between woman and poet. Her talents were tragically overshadowed by her unorthodox personal life.

Robinson’s poems of great sensibility resulted from her extreme alienation as a typical Romantic heroine singing in solitude. Since her childhood, she experienced a father’s abandonment. His infidelity to her mother, and his reckless business transactions denied the family all bliss. Moreover, Robinson’s melancholy poetry arises from her own disastrous marriage at a very young age to her pretentious, disloyal, reckless husband. Failing to provide her with any emotional or financial support, he exposed his unprotected wife to the “snares” of his scheming acquaintances.

On the other hand, her hopeless love-affair with the young Prince of Wales, who broke his promises of fidelity, shattered her dreams of love and stability. Having temporarily sacrificed a theatrical profession for his sake, she was jeopardized as a woman without fortune in the merciless, calculating London metropolis. In fact, Robinson’s *Memoirs* disclose her utter indignation at the Prince’s issuing a bond to her, thus placing an uncalled for “price” for her affection. Even when the Prince deserts the young actress and denies her the bond, she has to negotiate a “settlement” supposedly capable of healing her wounds. As a result, she is ridiculed as a beggar, or even a streetwalker in the London tabloids. Later, she is again betrayed by Banastre Tarleton who departs for France to marry a rich heiress. Thus Robinson appears to have striven endlessly to find emotional stability and esteem as a woman, not merely a lovely spectacle to the male gaze. Not only does she willingly give her love, but she also supports her unfaithful husband and, later, Tarleton

himself, financially, only to be rewarded with infidelity. On the other hand, her vulnerability as an actress, preyed upon for her female charms, at once places her on a pedestal, and exposes her to the merciless machinery of London gossip.

Therefore, the only refuge offered Mary Robinson after her severe, debilitating illness, which bars her from pursuing her theatrical career, is to turn to the profession of writing as of 1787. In poems such as *The Adieu to Love*, *Why do I Live*, *Ode to Melancholy*, *Why Art Thou Chang'd*, *Sonnet to Ingratitude*, *Elegy to the Memory of Werter*, and many others, Robinson emerges as a poetess suffering, due to the "progressive evils of a too acute sensibility." (*The Memoirs of Mary Robinson*, 8)

In fact, Mary Robinson's *Ode to Beauty*, *Life*, and *Ode to Health* reflect her acute awareness of the transience of life, health and beauty. Crippled by rheumatism, Robinson, previously the epitome of beauty and elegance, faces the world with an ailing health, a broken heart and a ruined reputation. At the close of her eventful, tragic life, poetry becomes the only means to emotional solace and material well-being. However, from the abyss of utter despair emerges a most peculiar poem, at once delightful and extremely puzzling; namely *London's Summer Morning* (1800).

In my opinion, this poem is a complete departure from the typical manifestations of Romantic poetry. It is a quotidian poem, characterized by a detailed listing of the "busy sounds" and familiar activities of merchants. Except for the two final lines, it stands out as a poem of apparent self-effacement. No Shelleyan cry of Romantic agony, or complaint of the "thorns of life" is uttered. Nor is the poem characterized by any Wordsworthian apotheosis of Mother Nature as the healer of the poet's tormented soul, or the nurturer of the appropriating, male Philosophic Mind. The poet doesn't express her excruciating pain in a supernatural "Nightmare Life-in-Death", on being crucified and cruelly ostracized "Alone, on a wide, wide sea". Nor does she seek remedy in the intoxication of a Xanadu. Besides, the poem is remarkably free of any mention of the French Revolution of 1789. *London's Summer Morning* does not condemn the unjust,

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suffocating reality of London's "chartered street", or the "plagues of the marriage hearse". Though "The Sooty chimney-boy, with dingy face/And tatter'd covering" (4-5) is among her quotidian heroes, there is no condemnation of his exploitative society or parents who, as Blake's sweeper cries, "cloth'd me in the clothes of death/And taught me to sing the notes of woe". Mary Robinson chooses not to transcend reality in a flight with the nightingale. On the contrary, the same woman, who has been stigmatized in London, appears to be glorifying the machinations of the self-same city. In a manner foreshadowing Jane Austen, she is meticulously recording a "slice of life" in this delightful quotidian epic.

In his essay entitled "Touring the Country of the Quotidian", Warren Motte interestingly links the idea of the quotidian to that of spectacle. Motte refers to Goffman's suggestion that "daily life is played out as theatre, as spectacle, and that it could be analyzed usefully in just that light. He states that twentieth-century thinkers "proposed reinterpretations of the quotidian, helping thus to enfranchise that site as an object of legitimate aesthetic interest." Thus, quotidian literary works are "veritable epics of the trivial." (82)

Indeed, Mary Robinson's choice of the quotidian is a remarkable, extremely early one. Like Wordsworth, she casts a fresh light on the ordinary. Robinson seeks to reconstruct a cheerful, repetitive pattern, in an attempt to find a meaning for her life. In Motte's words, writing about the quotidian could be "a question of rethinking those ways of being, of reconfiguring our interpretative habits, and of willing to look for meaning in these spaces of the ordinary where meaning seems to be most elusive." (93)

In *London's Summer Morning*, this is evident in the reiteration of the word "now" which introduces every new spectacle : "Now begins /The din of hackney-coaches" (9-10), "Now every shop displays its varied trade"(15), "Now the sun darts burning splendour on the glittering pane"(20-21). One wonders whether the poet, alienated, paralyzed and approaching her death, could be drowning herself in the particulars of the here and the now. Linking repetition to poetry, Motte observes:

The iterative patterns of ... [the poet's] text play out circles within circles, commenting wryly and incisively thus upon the fundamental iterativeness of poetry itself. If we can accept the idea that highly codified structures of repetition in poetry such as rhyme and rhythm can convey meaning...why is it that we habitually dismiss the repetitive patterns of our daily existence as meaningless? (97)

Thus, in a statement that could be true of Robinson's quotidian poem, "meaning indeed can be found there, right where we least expect it."

In this context, William Hendricks quotes Christensen's notion of a "generative rhetoric of the sentence" and the view that "composition is essentially a process of *addition*...the addition of...noun clause clusters, adjective clusters, prepositional phrases, absolute constructions, etc ... the cumulative sentence;" (*Poetics and Quotidian Verbal Art* 12-13). Indeed, the poem abounds with adjective clusters that reveal a woman poet's eye for detail. Among these are "the busy sound", "the sultry smoke", the "sooty chimney boy, with dingy face/And tatter'd covering", "the sleepy housemaid", "the tinkling bell", "the limy snare" and "the green abyss".

Commenting on women poets' contribution to quotidian literature, Amanda Gilroy reminds us that Joanna Baillie (1776-1851), Scottish poet and successful dramatist, had published a 72-page polemic

arguing for naturalness in poetic language two years before Wordsworth wrote his 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in which he makes the same plea. Baillie and other women poets preceded Wordsworth in bringing the vigour of common life and language to their poems. Thus, his 'Preface' endorses a cultural revolution that was already taking place. But Wordsworth also tries to reclaim the genre of poetry for men in the face of competition from women writers... (*Women Poets 1780-1830* 178)

Significantly, Wordsworth's claim that a poet is "a man speaking to men" at once encapsulates "the democratic emphasis of

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Romanticism” and ignores women poets. Likening the poet to Anna Barbauld, who “criticized an ‘unearthly’ Romanticism divorced from the contingent ‘things of life’” in her poem entitled *To Mr Coleridge*, (196) Gilroy admires Robinson’s depiction of daily life:

Her use of a listing rhetoric celebrates and particularizes the human life of the city... This is not Wordsworthian ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’... nor a transcending of the life of things; rather, it demonstrates a loving attention to the ordinary. No hierarchies of significance are set up, and sight is allowed to be itself without having to generate insight into the poet’s self.

Thus, according to Gilroy, Robinson is one of the poets who “dignify the domestic and the quotidian as the subject-matter of poetry.”(200) However, in my opinion, the poet’s sudden intrusion at the end of the poem casts doubt as to how impersonal this quotidian epic really is.

In her essay entitled “The Melody of the Quotidian”, Sandra Gilbert states that “The quotidian...not only has or causes a malady; it may, itself, be a malady. At the same time... the quotidian may be a remedy or at least a stop-gap solution to its own problem. ...” Referring to modern, post-Thomas and post-Stevens poetry, Gilbert sees modern poetry as “drawing upon the strengths of dailiness even as it acquiesces in the modesty, the minimalism, of the ordinary.”

To my mind, Robinson’s achievement lies not only in the modernity of her theme, but also in its poetic treatment. Her poem is a rich, densely populated, highly figurative tapestry of everyday scenes. On the other hand, Gilbert’s notion that writing about the quotidian is a sign of “mistrust of grand ideas” (154) raises the question whether Mary Robinson has lost faith in the slogans of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Referring to Radcliffe Squires’s poetry, Gilbert states that the poet often seeks “refreshment by the ordinary.” (157) Thus, the ingenuity of Jane Austen’s “little bit of ivory” which continues to shine till this very moment, regardless of all futile wars and failed revolutions, is foreshadowed by Robinson’s attempt to immerse herself and her reader in the world of everyday business.

It is remarkable that the lines of the poem, unlike the crippling, static reality of the poet's physique, vibrate with the movement of "hackney-coaches, wagons, carts" (10) "the early walkers", "The ruddy housemaid" twirling "the busy mop"(18), "the lamp-lighter" mounting his ladder "nimblely venturous,/To trim the half-fill'd lamp;" (29-31) and the porter, who, significantly "Bears his huge load" along "the burning way", (40) One wonders whether the hitherto self-effacing poet, seeking refuge in this delightful, supposedly innocent, quotidian scene, is not suffering from a relapse into Romantic introspection. Perhaps Robinson is suddenly reminded that her days are slowly "burning" out, and that she is expiring on the "burning way". Hence, the sudden warning against drifting away into self pity, as "the poor poet wakes from busy dreams, / To paint the summer morning." (42-43)

On the other hand, the poet seems to be silencing her internal, lonely voice by drowning herself, as well as the reader, in a torrent of familiar sounds. In fact, the poem is packed with the quotidian bustle of "noisy London". Thus, the chimney boy "shrilly bawls his trade", "The milk-pail rattles, and the tinkling bell/Proclaims the dustman's office". (7-8) In this quotidian epic, the street echoes the "din" of coaches and carts, "noisy trunk-makers/Knife-grinders, coopers, squeaking cork-cutters/Fruit barrows, and the hunger-giving cries/Of vegetable vendors". (11-14)

Thus, *London's Summer Morning* is clearly a poem of the senses. Unlike Wordsworth's *London in Lines Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*, Mary Robinson's city is highly populated and extremely alive. The poem exhausts us with a myriad of colours, sounds, movements, and smells, in an attempt at total immersion in reality.

In Robinson's description of a London summer morning, the poet assumes the role of spectator. According to Judith Pascoe, "Robinson, the public spectacle, becomes Robinson the poet-spectator." (*The Spectacular Flaneuse* 165) Besides, her depiction of the shop window could be a reflection of her own career:

First as an actress, then as the mistress of the Prince of Wales,

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finally as a literary figure, Robinson was the focus of public attention. Her *Memoirs* are a record of increasing public exposure. ...The spectacle of Robinson out-draws the other shows of Ranelagh and a glimpse of her person, framed by a shop window invites more interest than the wares exhibited. By her own account ... she becomes the most attractive object on a large urban display. (166)

Thus, it could be said that the lines

Now, spruce and trim,
In shops (where beauty smiles with industry),
Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger
Peeps through the window, watching every charm

(23-26)

are a reflection of a culture that commodifies women and views them as mere “objects” to be gazed at and admired for their female charms, not their intellectual prowess. Pascoe significantly points out that Robinson had become so notorious that she became the centre of “the urban mythology of Mary Robinson promulgated by cartoons, newspaper accounts, her own *Memoirs*, and those of her peers...” (167)

Moreover, Pascoe observes that, from her carriage, “she is able to move from being the object of the gaze to having the power to see - while still occupying the same position.” Thus, the image of the shop window could be a mirroring of the poet’s attempt to “sell” her “merchandize” in an age where publishing is associated with the “selling” of the self; “a kind of prostitution game which results in a compromising of reputation in quest for financial prosperity.” In other words, *London’s Summer Morning* may be an instance of what Pascoe labels a “doubling of positions”.

Indeed, the poem is “preoccupied with looking.” As Pascoe remarks, *London’s Summer Morning* “presents many eyes without providing a guiding “I.” On the one hand, the passenger “Peeps

through the window, watching every charm.” (25-26) On the other hand, the “pastry dainties catch the eye minute/Of humming insects”. (27-28) The poet’s perceptive eye thus moves “from the macroscopic to the microscopic”, “from the world outside to the world within the window.” Even the “eye minute” of observed insects carries on with their own observations. This is “a Foucauldian realm where everyone is subject to another’s gaze.” (168)

Indeed, Robinson’s success as an actress, trained and supported by Garrick, and famous for her role as Perdita, tragically places her under the male gaze of the Prince of Wales. Consequently, she steps outside the domestic sphere of morality into a more tempestuous, public existence.

It is interesting to point out the parallelism between gazing, attraction and negotiation in quotidian business. Commenting on the mercantile element of *London's Summer Morning*, Judith Pascoe states that

The visual exchange in Robinson’s poem parallels its preoccupation with social and financial exchange. The poem is preoccupied with business, and the word “busy” repeatedly appears...The poem portrays a companionable kind of commerce where even the most sinister practitioner, ‘the old-clothes man’ who “cries/In tone monotonous, and side-long views/The area of his traffic” is entertaining. (168)

Stuart Curran significantly reminds us that the poem depicts reality without passing any moral judgments. Referring to the “domestic spoiler”, Curran argues that “his presence in the poem is dictated by reality, not morality. He and the old-clothes man exist as parasites on the social body, an inextricable, inescapable part of the general economy of exchange in which every person in the poem is engaged.” (*Mary Robinson and the New Lyric* 15)

Besides, one of the most fascinating images of the poem is “the limy snare” that “Waits to enthrall” everybody. There is no doubt that the “snare” image is recurrent in Mary Robinson’s work. In her

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Memoirs, she declares that all her life she has been entrapped in several snares; her youth and inexperience, her husband's neglect of her and his expensive style of life, and her unfortunate affair with the Prince of Wales, among many others.

Robinson's poem is peopled with a chain of spectators and spectacles. In Pascoe's words, "Everyone becomes "gay merchandize" in the glittering display of Robinson's poem." Thus, Pascoe regards the description as a cheerful one, especially when contrasted with Swift's *Description of the Morning*.

However, one senses a subtle, cynical bitterness in the depiction of the passenger examining the shop-girl, and the humming insects examining the limy snare. There seems to be a vindictive joy at transforming the passivity of being watched to the activity of trapping the male reader or spectator. In fact, Judith Pascoe views the commercial involvement of women in Robinson's poem as "a liberating fact, exhibiting none of the ambivalence toward a market economy associated with male writers." In her *Letter to the Women of England* (1799), Robinson asserts:

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

Thus, Robinson, like Mary Wollstonecraft, rejects the notion of a private, domestic sphere for women, and seeks to achieve financial independence and fulfilment as a poet, making "a dangerous move outside the private, domestic sphere." (*Women Writers and Readers* 104) In this manner, she challenges the masculine perception of women as objects of the male gaze.

In this context, Robinson's success as an actress, and later as a writer represents an affront to her male contemporaries who attack her only on the basis of her notoriety as an actress and royal mistress. As Betsy Bolton points out, to Wordsworth, all the dangerous seduction inherent in theatrical romance seems to be embodied "in the figure of

Perdita – both a figure of Shakespearean romance and the nickname of the notorious actress-turned-royal-mistress (as well as novelist, playwright and poet): Mary Robinson.” (*Romancing the Stone* 730) Indeed, Wordsworth’s frequent silencing of the female voice in his poetry makes him exclude “from his account[s] the economics of seduction that the historical Mary Robinson readily and publicly acknowledged.” (732)

Emphasizing the contrast between Wordsworth’s portrayal of London and that of Mary Robinson, Judith Pascoe is surprised at the lack of mention of any successful or affluent women in the former’s poetry. For, “In book seven of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth populates London with prostitutes and actresses while, as he acknowledged, leaving out more affluent women.”(165) Besides, Pascoe notes Wordsworth’s contradictory attitude to “dangerous” women figures such as actresses or prostitutes. On the one hand he silences them, and on the other, he turns to them when in distress. (166) Feeling threatened by contemporary women writers, Wordsworth seeks refuge in rural women because he perceives in writers like Robinson “a potential literary rival.”

Indeed, Betsy Bolton emphasizes Wordsworth’s indebtedness to Mary Robinson in his *Mad Monk* and *The Solitude of Binnorie*, (*Romancing the Stone* 741) though he is “generally unappreciative of women poets and with particular reason to resent the work of Mary Darby Robinson.” This could be due to the fact that

As actress, as abandoned woman and as namesake to the Belle of Buttermere, Mary Darby Robinson embodies and enacts the blasphemous transgressions of theatre... [To Wordsworth], Robinson becomes...a woman...‘to open shame/Abandoned, and the pride of public vice.’ (739, 740)

As Tim Fulford explains, “Shakespearean actresses in the 1780s were not seen as being different in kind, but only in degree, from the more obviously sexually available performers of her brothel.” (*The Electrifying Mrs Robinson* 24) Referring to Robinson as the embodiment of a culture of display, Fulford adds:

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Because Robinson became the most conspicuous mistress by virtue of her affairs with the Prince and with Fox, she was viewed as the embodiment of a culture of display, an embodiment who, moreover, revealed the sexual consumption of women by monied men. (30)

Indeed, the controversy over Robinson's affair with the Prince is a manifestation of her awkward position as a common woman, an actress, and a financially underprivileged woman. Added to her daring negotiation of a settlement with the Prince, is her ironical treatment of the figure of the Monarch in *The Old English Tale* in which Robinson preaches virtue and wisdom. (*Romancing the Stone* 745)

Fulford establishes an interesting link between Robinson's disease, her alienation and her exposure of the exploitative hypocrisy of aristocratic men. He remarks that

The disease certainly ensured that Robinson lost the attention of the princes and politicians who had loved her beauty and her availability. And so, when she became a writer, she knew from personal experience the exploitative hypocrisy that the aristocracy maintained towards their social inferiors. (*The Electrifying Mrs Robinson* 30)

Thus, in her own way, Robinson was as radical as her contemporary thinkers like Matthew Lewis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For, like them, "her writing attacked aristocratic government by focusing on its indifference to those who suffered as a result of its conspicuous consumption. The sexual consumption of women by noblemen, in *The Monk* and in "Christabel", acted as a figure of more general corruption."

As Fulford points out, Robinson turned the tables on men of authority:

caricaturists, politicians, natural philosophers – who profited from displaying women, she saw penetratingly through the culture that commodified women's beauty in the name of fashion and science. She did so becoming the spectator of the strategies and devices by which women like herself had been put on show. (32)

Moreover, in her *Letter to the Women of England*, she attacked the world of conspicuous consumption which “treated women as consumable bodies to be cast off when their physical attraction waned.”(33) However, it is typical that her *Letter* had to be published under a pseudonym. As Fulford explains,

Even as a radical writer, then, Robinson was represented through the public image of her body and its power, a fate that helped to ensure that her arguments were never taken at face value and were quickly forgotten – not to be revived until the late twentieth century.

Robinson's choice of the acting profession, her “effrontery” against a noble person, and her later liaison with Tarleton, inevitably subjected her to ridicule, and put her on “display”. She became a spectacle as a woman. Besides, her successful efforts to publish her work in a male-dominated market caused her to be viewed with curiosity through the “shop window”. In Pascoe's words, “Mary Robinson could portray with greater precision... [how] consumption and corruption currently met.” (30-31) In fact, Fulford writes:

Display, Robinson knew, spelt danger to the women who were commodified by it. James Gillray was to caricature Robinson herself like a figure on a shop window... [and, like the dainty pastries], another object opened for inspection and quick sale. (32)

On the other hand, Claire Brock speaks of Robinson's investment in her fame as an actress “to ensure maximum publicity for herself both as a notorious actress and mistress, but also, later, as a writer.”(*Mary Robinson and the splendour of a name* 107) Interestingly, Brock warns us against picturing a shy, self-effacing woman, striving to avoid scrutiny, and refers to Robinson as “a woman writer only too aware of how to keep the wheels of the fame machine in motion.”(109)

Referring to Robinson's attempt to sell her work, Labbe states that she uses Charlotte Smith's strategy of “selling one's sorrows” to market her writing. However,

Mary Robinson takes Smith's strategy further in “London's

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Summer Morning.”...as one unravels the metaphor central to the poem, one arrives at a picture of the needy female poet as prostitute, selling her wares through an open window, on view to the buying public. (*Selling One's Sorrow* 70)

In addition, Labbe sees the metaphor of the “limy snare”, as a cynical revenge:

Her position in the window is echoed by the sweets, and the reader, in the shape of the passerby, becomes the insect about to be ensnared... Robinson herself, the distressed poet, is a product on display, just like the shop girl: as a female poet, as a notorious member of the demimonde, as a woman whose life events are discussed [displayed] regularly in the press along with descriptions of her ravishing wardrobe ,... as an actress. She inhabits the public sphere to the point of saturation, and “London’s Summer Morning” shows us her awareness that the position she exploits – her attractively needy status – is simultaneously her downfall. (71)

Labbe adds that

Robinson may be for sale, but her revenge lies in the limy snare that implicates the masculine consumer whose demand for feminine helplessness ensures the continued supply of embodied “pastry dainties”. [Thus] Writing to support herself, Robinson makes that self as attractive as possible, but in “London’s Summer Morning” she dispenses with the respectability Smith utilizes in her sonnets...

In his essay entitled “The Dangers of Over-Refinement”, Diego Saglia highlights the theme of consumption recurrent in the poetry and prose of the Romantic Age as typical of eighteenth century discourse. He states that “it is indeed a familiar fact of cultural history that the early eighteenth century saw a profound reorganization of the discourse of luxury, a renewed incitement to talk and write about consumption and the need to rationalize and regulate its effects...” (641) According to Saglia,

Mary Wollstonecraft is an important example of women writers condemning luxury and consumption. Wollstonecraft depicts

luxury as “alienating because it deviates the natural into the artificial, thus...transforming a woman into a ‘lady of quality’.”

Indeed, Robinson's *London's Summer Morning* is an embodiment of confusion about luxury and consumption. On the one hand, Robinson herself fell into the snare of luxurious consumption, ordering the same dresses as Marie Antoinette, riding expensive phaetons and striving to make ends meet by writing poetry for consumption. On the other hand, the image of the “limy snare” reveals her disgust with the commodification of women and the whole process of commercial exchange. Thus, Robinson's *London's Summer Morning* could be seen as a celebration of merchants, in keeping with what Saglia regards as the eighteenth-century tradition of “praise for the mercantile profession.” But it is also a warning against falling into the “snare” of material progress and luxury. In Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*,

“Enfeebling Luxury” is a factor of inequality and a cause of national crisis together with “ghastly Want”, so that the plateau of development depicted by the poem can only be followed by a phase of decline, as “fairest flowers expand but to decay.” (660)

Similarly, Robinson's posthumous triumph ode, *The Progress of Liberty* (1806) contains a “double-edged critique of conspicuous consumption as an indicator of injustice, tyranny, [and] the ancien régime.” (662) The ambiguities of commerce and culture appear to provide a link between the public and private spheres. As Diego Saglia points out,

women writers reverse their stereotypical roles as victims of the fashion system or as monstrous consumers... the texts...often betray a fascination with the spectacle of luxury as,...., the verse itself is turned into a rhetorical performance, the incantatory rhythms of language drawing in the reader whilst remaining in sharp contrast with the repeated denunciations of sumptuary accumulation. (671)

Consequently, their ambivalence signifies the conflict between public and private, domesticity and the extra-domestic, and the

differences of class and gender.

In view of Saglia's argument, *London's Summer Morning* emerges as an indirect celebration and condemnation of the political, social, and gender ramifications of the commercial practices of contemporary London. In my opinion, this appears to refute Judith Pascoe's argument that "Robinson's tendency to depict the city as a place of amusement is evidence of her limited view, the social and material remove of a carriage rider..." (*The Spectacular Flaneuse* 168) and an attempt to "gloss over the grittier realities of the city, depicting a London of clean and busy workers, rather than a London of beggars, prostitutes and freaks." Pascoe sees this idealistic image of London as contradictory to Robinson's humiliation in the London tabloids like the caricature published in 1784 and entitled "Perdita on her Last Legs".

It may be true that Robinson makes no direct mention of her personal indignation in *London's Summer Morning*. Nevertheless, the poem is rich in implications of fraud, theft and temptation. Thus viewed, it is a bittersweet portrayal of a web of consumption and exploitation.

However one wishes to consider the presence or absence of any private or public symbolism in *London's Summer Morning*, or the poet's motives for writing such a quotidian poem at a time of physical and emotional decrepitude, there can be no doubt that this is an important, experimental poem. Curran stresses the necessity of studying the "surfaces" of Robinson's poetry. For, "it is to those surfaces ...that we should look for the influence Robinson exerted on later poets of the nineteenth century. For her successors in the English-speaking world... she changed the very nature of the craft of poetry." (9) Besides, he highlights "the surprising technical effects of her poems." (11-12)

Among these is the "disjointed quiddity" that "constitutes both medium and message" in the poem. (14) Alluding to the "unusual timbres" of the opening cadence of the poem in lines (1-14), Curran links Robinson's experiments with blank verse to those of Robert

Southey and emphasizes “the ongoing technical experimentation engaging Robinson’s sustained attention.” However,

whereas Southey’s deliberately flattened blank verse in general reads like prose chopped up into ten-syllable lines, in a poem like this [*London’s Summer Morning*] Robinson maintains a delicate balancing act, which through conspicuous enjambment and enumerative serialization manages to represent the prosaic within a verse form that calls attention to its own status as verse...we actually feel the effect of beginning every sentence after the first mid-line, as we cannot avoid the sense of impacted details dictating the lines’ closure.

In addition, Curran points out the “ten-syllabic lines forced by necessity to accommodate a reality that does not reduce to iambic pentameter regularity” and the cacophony in line 12 which is “a masterful tongue-twister, combining cacophony and an inescapable verbal Englishness...these values [being] essential to the poem’s success.” *London’s Summer Morning* is thus “a deliberately rude poem, unconcerned with nicety, palliation, euphemism...meant to recreate Swift’s world within the confines of another London street scene ninety years later.”(15)

Significantly, “Once the poet enters the scene,...the iambic pentameter, however roughly drawn, disappears, trailing off into a seven-syllable phrase – ‘To paint the summer morning’- with an unstressed ending and, pointedly, no closure.” Calling it a “recyclable poem”, Curran argues that, “as a substitute for a finite closure, there is only the recyclable poem, ending where it begins, recording the prismatic surfaces of the ever-recycling street scene.” (16) Though at the time Robinson is writing, “the imagination has yet to receive its various Romantic elaborations and definitions,” Curran sees Robinson as

pursuing an aesthetic that is strikingly modern ... one where there is nothing beyond representation itself – no ineffable realm that transports figures into symbols, no moral or religious absolute by which the poet’s utterances are privileged, nothing whatsoever that can be considered transcendental, only textuality in its manifold

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forms...The endings of *January 1795* and *London's Summer Morning* are notably stronger because, paradoxically, they have only technique...to carry their conclusions."

Finally, Mary Robinson's *London's Summer Morning* is certainly a unique, quotidian poem in which the poet breaks from the literature of sensibility in a poem which makes no mention of the French Revolution of 1789. Instead of flights into the realm of the imagination, or Mother Nature, Robinson seeks refuge in the quotidian. By drowning her senses, and the reader's, in the bustle of quotidian details, she seeks to find a reassuring pattern in the daily manoeuvres of survival on a London street.

Robinson definitely breaks new ground for Romantic women writers. As Amanda Gilroy points out, the poem is a break from "the parallel between the poet's identity and the female heart," (188) "the conjunction between a woman's poetry and her heart, echoed by the poets themselves and their reviewers." Besides, it is a deviation from L.E.L.'s characterization of Felicia Hemans as "an angel" and Barbauld's "angel pureness which admits no stain". (190)

As Lisa Vargo points out, Robinson's tragedy lies in the fact that "her literary authority is of less interest to her readers than her sexual notoriety." (*The Claims of 'Real Life and Manners'* 134) Even Coleridge asks Southey to publish Robinson's poem *Jasper* in his *Annual Anthology* "for my sake, & out of respect to a Woman poet's feelings." Though he praises Robinson as "a woman of undoubted genius", he reads her poetic aspiration as a simple desire for domestic bliss! He writes, "O Poole! That that Woman had been married to a noble Being, what a noble Being she herself would have been." (137)

In conclusion, though literary criticism will continue to focus on Robinson's controversial life and her poems of great sensibility, *London's Summer Morning* stands out as a puzzling poem. At once amusing and greatly disturbing, it is a subtle, quotidian epic, and a painting which only a woman's brush could accomplish.

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