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### **Candor and Reticence: Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson**

Those who are bold enough to advance before the age they live in, and to throw off, by the force of their own minds, the prejudices which the maturing reason of the world will in time disavow, must learn to brave censure.

—Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

As a form, life writing can be traced to Saint Augustine, whose *Confessions* (circa 400 AD) is considered to be the first published autobiographical book (Smith and Watson 105). From this spiritual *Confessions* to Jean Jacques Rousseau's 1782 secular *Confessions*, life writing moved from a primarily religious form to one of self-exhibition. Rousseau's *Confessions* "helped to initiate the culture of celebrity that has become so pervasive in our personality and media driven world" (Stelzig 1).

Into this late eighteenth century landscape of experimentation in life writing and an emerging "culture of celebrity" came two memoirs of women—Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson, contemporaries who moved in the same radical intellectual circles. The memoirs of Wollstonecraft and Robinson—both published posthumously, both with political aims—are two very different texts. Each serves a specific agenda; both use a combination of candor and reticence to tell the story of each woman's life.

On the spectrum of revelation, these two memoirs fall at different points. William Godwin wrote a memoir of his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, in part because of his belief in the "reformist potential of biography" by examining the lives of those who contributed to society

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<sup>1</sup> From a 1797 letter from Wollstonecraft to Mary Hays

(Clemit and Walker 13), as well as his commitment to the Dissenting principle of candor<sup>2</sup> and the “liberating power of total sincerity” (Clemit and Walker 14). It is a touching portrait, marked by sentiment that details many intimate and controversial aspects in the life of Wollstonecraft, of a woman who was quite radical in her actions and beliefs. Mary Robinson wrote a portion of her own memoir, and it was finished and published by her daughter, Mary Elizabeth. Robinson was familiar with the unrelenting nature of the press in late 1700s London, having been an object of gossip, derision, and slander for many years. Her response was to write a carefully considered, tightly controlled memoir that constructs a life narrative at odds with her public persona. Famous for her beauty and her affairs with influential men, Robinson’s memoir would have been expected to titillate the reader with intimate details of the affairs, yet she is in fact circumspect about these aspects of her life. In contrast with Godwin’s use of candor to promote his political beliefs, Robinson’s political act is to use a comparatively reticent memoir to regain agency over her public image.

Because the circumstances under which these texts were written are quite different, direct comparisons between the two are not always possible. However, they share enough similarities that a more nuanced comparison is possible, one that serves as a way to explore space between a lived life and a written personal narrative, as well as the different ways memoir can be deployed and received. They both wanted to be remembered as women of letters, and yet for a time neither of them was. One because her husband had his own political agenda, and the other because she could not fully counteract the notoriety of her life. In both texts, the disclosure or withholding of information is intended to sway the audience’s sense of who these women were. The composition of one’s self with a reconsideration of role, relationship, and justice ties both memoirs together.

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<sup>2</sup> Defined as freedom from reserve in one's statements; openness, frankness (OED).

### **Cultural context of Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century London**

In late eighteenth century London, increasing newspaper circulation coupled with other societal shifts gave rise to increased interest in the lives of the fashionable, famous, or notorious. This shift led to a society where a woman who made her living in the public eye, whether as a writer, actor, or thinker, would have been subject to very public scrutiny. Along with this celebrity came censure,<sup>3</sup> and Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin and Mary Robinson felt the effects of both celebrity and censure on their lives.

London in the late 1700s was a rapidly expanding metropolis, attracting gentry and laborers alike with the enticement of jobs, entertainment, or fashionable society. Throughout Britain, but in London particularly, the newspaper was revolutionizing the way Britons read and consumed news and culture. In 1785 there were twenty-eight London newspapers, and in 1793 there were thirty-five, the circulation of which was roughly 50,000 for a population of 900,000 (White 253-4). These papers were read by people from all walks of life, and while politics and commerce were the primary content, fashionable people, along with their lives and scandals, became a driving force for a sizable segment of the publications. Increased access to newspapers coincided with increased demand for satirical caricatures, aided by constant political turmoil (White 287). The public appetite for such caricatures spilled over from politics, and people of fashion or famous cultural figures often became subjects of satirical caricatures.

The King and monarchy established the accepted social norms of behavior for the aristocracy. For most of the eighteenth century, the court condoned or excused a variety of behaviors including gambling and adultery. In the 1780s, the recently of-age Prince of Wales was a leader in sexually promiscuous behavior and set an example which many of the gentry

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<sup>3</sup> Defined as an adverse judgement, unfavorable opinion, hostile criticism; expression of disapproval or condemnation (OED).

followed (White 375). However, the promiscuity of the royal princes eventually led to a public backlash against adultery in the 1770s, the effects of which Mary Robinson would feel strongly in the 1780's and beyond (Runge 577).

The theater was a wildly popular entertainment at the time for Londoners, as everyone from the aristocracy down to day laborers could access it at some level. Theater impresario David Garrick was instrumental in elevating acting as a profession into something relatively reputable. Despite this move toward respectability, female actors were still viewed with some amount of suspicion that they were no better than the prostitutes who populated the alleys behind the theaters (White 359). Many, though certainly not all, female actors used the stage as a stepping stone toward other livelihoods, often as mistresses or courtesans. Whether or not they started their careers as actors, mistresses of politically powerful men wielded influence over those men and were often bribed by favor seekers for access to said men. Thus, the role of courtesan was more than a diversion from one's wife, but had a social and political component as well (White 380).

### **Mary Wollstonecraft**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a pioneering writer and champion of women's rights. Wollstonecraft's desire for independence was formed early on, as her family was unsettled and unstable. She witnessed alcoholism and violence in her parent's relationship and subsequently in her sister's marriage as well. Wollstonecraft attempted to support herself in a variety of ways, including opening a school for young women and by writing and translating for a liberal political publication, the *Analytical Review* ("Wollstonecraft, Mary" 412). Through this work she became involved with a circle of radical intellectuals in London, including married Swiss painter Henry Fuseli, with whom she fell in love. During the French Revolution,

Wollstonecraft went to Paris to recover from her disappointment over Fuseli, and met and became involved with Gilbert Imlay, an American businessman. In France, Wollstonecraft lived as his wife, called herself Mrs. Imlay, and had a child with him. On their return to England, Imlay lost interest in her and she subsequently attempted suicide twice. Wollstonecraft eventually recovered her mental health, wrote and published a great deal, and met and became romantically involved with William Godwin. Despite their political objections to the institution of marriage, when Wollstonecraft became pregnant in 1797, they married. With this marriage, it became apparent that she had never been married to Imlay at all. Some friends of the couple groused at the betrayal of their politics, and the more conservative of them dropped their acquaintance entirely, worried about the effect on their own reputations (Todd 419). Despite this response, Wollstonecraft and Godwin continued on together, happily married but living in separate houses and leading relatively independent lives, until her death due to complications in childbirth, only five months after their marriage.

### **Mary Darby Robinson**

Mary Darby Robinson (1757/8?-1800), a contemporary of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, was an actor, poet, and novelist who was famous in her own time for her beauty, her acting, and her love affairs with the Prince of Wales and other eminent men. Born Mary Darby, a beauty from a young age, she married Thomas Robinson when she was just fifteen, while being trained for the stage by the influential David Garrick (Byrne 19). Upon her marriage she gave up training for the stage and began to socialize with London high society, and was pursued by many men. The Robinsons lived well beyond their means, and in 1775 Thomas Robinson was sent to debtor's prison ("Robinson, Mary" 92). As was common, Robinson and their young daughter went to prison with him for the nine months of his sentence. Like Wollstonecraft, Robinson

attempted to support herself through her writing, and published a book of poems while her husband was still in prison. Writing not being sufficient to cover their expenses and debt, Robinson convinced Garrick to come out of retirement and continue training her. She debuted on the London stage in December 1776 to great success (Byrne 67). From 1776-1780 Robinson was a star performer and in 1779 attracted the attention of the future King George IV, then the 17 year old Prince of Wales (“Robinson, Mary” 92). A public year-long affair with the Prince followed. When dropped by the Prince, Robinson went to Paris, where she kept company with Marie Antoinette (Byrne 160). Upon her return to England, Robinson met Colonel Banastre Tarleton, and though she was then living with the Lord Malden, she began an affair with Tarleton that would last 15 years (Byrne 179). A 1783 miscarriage followed by infection and acute rheumatic fever left her partially paralyzed and ill for the remainder of her life. No longer able to move in society as the tastemaker she had been, Robinson again turned to writing. Despite her physical disability, she was prolific in her writing and published works of poetry, drama, and novels under her own name and pen names. Though she published regularly, Robinson was almost penniless when she died from heart failure in 1800.

### ***Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman***

A year after Wollstonecraft’s death in 1797, Godwin published a radically candid memoir of her entitled *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Godwin’s commitment to the philosophical and political ideal of candor was as much a driving force behind his memoir of Wollstonecraft as his regard for her. At the time Godwin was writing, “recognition through a biographical process was an increasingly popular form of memorialization” (Buss 121). However, as a memorial, the expected mode would have been one

of remembering the deceased “through a tender haze or a luminous mist” (Wordsworth 58), which is not at all how Godwin chose to depict Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft was no stranger to public censure or autobiographical candor,<sup>4</sup> yet before her death she had been moving away from her “earlier commitment to absolute truthfulness” (Spongberg 171), and throughout her life she had preferred to keep her controversial actions separate from her philosophy. She kept many unconventional aspects of her life out of the public eye. Though her behavior may have generated disapproval in her immediate circle, and her work was publicly reviewed, Wollstonecraft was not an object of derision in the press like Robinson was. The details of her private life would not have been known to the public had Godwin not published his memoir, writing about her life as a “theoretical statement” (Rajan 518).

Godwin’s *Memoirs* depicts Wollstonecraft’s life as reflected through his philosophical beliefs. His “philosophical tenet of sincerity rendered him an opponent of biographical reticence” (Myers 301). To this end, he writes of Wollstonecraft’s romantic attachment to Fuseli and Imlay, her attempts at suicide, her relationship with him and the gruesome details of her labor and death. Godwin’s political aims in publishing this memoir were to memorialize Wollstonecraft’s life and works, and to use confessional writing to show that a woman could fit the model of genius and grow and change throughout her life.

Helen Buss suggests that Godwin wanted to use the memoir as a way to honor his wife, while also memorializing and institutionalizing her ideas and her works (122). Although Godwin has been criticized for depicting Wollstonecraft in a sentimental light, the title of the memoir indicates that he was also wanted her remembered for her intellectual contributions. Throughout the text, he writes about her work as a writer and philosopher. Godwin identifies aspects of

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<sup>4</sup> Her novels *Mary, A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* had strong autobiographical components, and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* was an autobiographical travelogue.

Wollstonecraft's material that he finds fault with, though he is by and large positive about her contributions. Writing about the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which he calls her "most celebrated production" (74), Godwin describes the "spirited and decisive way in which the author explodes the system of gallantry" (75) and the "luxuriance of imagination and a trembling delicacy of sentiment" (75). He acknowledges that he thinks the work is "deficient in method and arrangement" (76) but also that it displays an "eminence of genius" (76).

Godwin believed that "confessional life writing would create new openness among men and women, thus generating a more virtuous and egalitarian society" (Spongberg 169). This reason for life writing was also strong with individuals connected to the French Revolution, whose works were available in English translation at the time (Clemit and Walker 21). Godwin's construction of Wollstonecraft's life is influenced by Rousseau and by the life writing of the French revolutionaries. He writes about Wollstonecraft as an agent of change, with the emotional and intellectual capacity to overcome adversity and change herself, and to be a catalyst of change for others. He constructs her life narrative in a way that "furnishes an etiology of genius, a personality gradually assuming its own unique form" (Myers 313), which was not the usual mode for remembering women. The construct of genius as something created over a lifetime was reserved for men, women were written about in a way that solidified or defended their reputations. As such, a memoir of an author such as Wollstonecraft would have been expected to showcase only her best qualities.

James Treadwell argues that one major purposes of early life writing is the conveyance of the literal truth, that the author will provide factual data, that the "factual narrative content of the book is its most important feature" (83). The review in the *Analytical Review* of Godwin's memoir takes up this issue and complains that the memoir doesn't offer enough truth, or the kind



of truth they are looking for—namely information about the development of Wollstonecraft’s mind in listing what books she read or the hours she spent in her study. Myers’ response is that Godwin did provide insight into Wollstonecraft’s intellectual development, though not by listing her habits. Rather, by giving “full weight to her childhood remembrance” (313) and by indicating “how her life and temperament shaped her work” (313), Godwin provided a broader and more holistic view of Wollstonecraft’s intellectual development.

Godwin’s decision to adhere to his philosophical idea of candor, and the details he discloses, make it seem like he did not leave out any major aspect of Wollstonecraft’s life, and yet he did. Actions or incidents that do not conform to the narrative he is constructing are not included “He omitted, for instance, what still remains one of the most problematic episodes in Wollstonecraft’s career—her leading role in engineering her sister Eliza’s separation from her husband” (Myers 309). Wollstonecraft was convinced that her sister, Eliza Bishop—who was likely suffering from post-partum depression—was actually depressed due to her recent marriage and her treatment at the hands of her husband. Though Meredith Bishop had not treated his wife poorly in any way, Wollstonecraft was determined to ‘rescue’ Bishop, and ultimately succeeded in removing her from her husband and newborn daughter (Todd 50-51). This incident showed Wollstonecraft to be officious and imperious, believing she alone knew what was best for her sister, with no regard for the feelings or desires of the others involved. About this incident, Godwin says only Wollstonecraft attended Bishop during labor and then “continued with her sister without intermission, to her perfect recovery” (54)

Neither does Godwin address Wollstonecraft’s similar behavior toward the intimate friend of her young adulthood, Fanny Blood. With the history of tyrannical behavior she experienced—and escaped—in her own family, Wollstonecraft could not bear to see Blood

controlled by her mother. Wollstonecraft attempted to remove Blood from her family, going so far as to rent lodgings for them to move into together. Ultimately Blood did not leave her family, to the dissatisfaction of Wollstonecraft. These excluded areas of her life show a side of Wollstonecraft that did not conform to the creation of genius. Instead of overcoming hardships, she created them for others with her unyielding and dominant personality.

### **Critical Reception**

The critical reviews at the time suggest that Godwin's commitment to candor was not shared by a wide segment of the population. The memoir was widely reviewed, and while some reviewers were concerned with Wollstonecraft's behavior, others took issue with Godwin's act of writing the memoir, criticizing him for politics that would allow exposing his wife in such a way.

The comments about Wollstonecraft's behavior were often mild. The *Analytical Review* (a radical publication that Wollstonecraft wrote for) called her indelicate and imprudent, but not immoral (171). The *New Annual Register* offered the reproach that Wollstonecraft never had "those good principles instilled into her mind, which would have enabled her to control and govern her passions" (182). Others, such as the *Lady's Monitor*, were warm in their praise of Wollstonecraft: "we cannot easily be mistaken in our estimate. She was a woman of high genius" (183).

Some of the strongest negative reaction were directed at Godwin himself, ranging from the polite disapproval in the *Monthly Review* to the vitriolic *Anti-Jacobin Review*. Had they been asked, the *Monthly Review* would "have advised the author to bury in oblivion. Blushed would suffuse the cheeks of most husbands, if they were *forced* to relate those anecdotes of their wives which Mr. Godwin voluntarily proclaims to the world" (179). The *Anti-Jacobin Review*, a

conservative publication that styled itself the nemesis of the *Analytical Review*, says that the memoir “does not shew what it is wise to pursue, it manifests what it is wise to avoid” (173). The *New Annual Register* described the information Godwin details as things that might be “whispered concerning her while living, but which the good natured part of mankind were willing to resolve into scandal and calumny” (182).

The negative press around the memoir continued for several years after its publication, and a revised edition of the work published almost a year after the first was largely ignored by the press. There were those, however, who admired Godwin for what he had written and Wollstonecraft for what she had achieved in her life. A *Public Characters* biography of Godwin, published in 1800, praised him for not “prefer[ing] cowardly silence, nor treachery to the public, [instead] having chosen to write” (Fenwick 192).

### ***Memoirs of Mary Robinson***

Mary Robinson’s memoir, *Memoirs of Mary Robinson* (also published as *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*) was published a year after her 1800 death. It was started by Robinson herself then completed by her daughter Mary Elizabeth. It is a memoir of a very different kind than Godwin’s. Though candid about some aspects of Robinson’s life, it is also quite reticent about others. This is due in part to Robinson’s concern about shaping her own legacy, though in some part also because of the revision and editing by Robinson’s daughter. Here we are chiefly concerned with Robinson’s choices, insofar as they can be distinguished from Mary Elizabeth’s.

Robinson’s goals in writing her memoir were many. She wanted to rehabilitate her public persona, to publish an account of her side of the affair with the Prince, and also to be remembered as a woman of letters (Byrne xvii). While the critical response to her memoirs was somewhat kinder than those Godwin received, the memoirs were not enough to change the

public perception of her, and only recently has Robinson been considered as an author, separate from her role as mistress.

During her life, Robinson was the subject of much attention from the popular press, primarily because of her connections with powerful men, including the Prince of Wales. Laura Runge notes that “between 1780 and 1788 Robinson is the subject of at least six satirical pamphlets...numerous newspaper paragraphs and some thirty-eight satirical prints” (569). Much of this press was scurrilous in nature, depicting her as a whore<sup>5</sup> or a calculating, controlling woman. The barrage of negative press had Robinson concerned about her literary reputation during her life, having been given authority as an author less through the merit of her works than through her reputation as a celebrity (Cross 581). Additionally, as Robinson knew Wollstonecraft and Godwin, she would have been well aware of the negative response in the press to his memoir. In opposition to Godwin’s extreme candor in his memoir, Robinson was quite selective about what she included in order to regain some of the agency that celebrity had stripped from her. She was also careful to emphasize her sensibility, maternal affection, and some amount of female weakness in the face of male desire.

In her writing, Robinson was candid about the state of her marriage, her husband’s infidelity and money troubles, the men who pursued her, and her experience in debtor’s prison. She did not address the hoped-for detail about her relationship with the Prince, and took pains to present herself as more innocent and less shrewd than she was. Robinson also directly acknowledged the negative press she received and her intention to offer an alternative view of herself “Probably these pages will be read when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave, when that God who judges all hearts will know how innocent I was of the smallest conjugal

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Robinson’s portrayal in the press, see Laura L. Runge “Mary Robinson’s Memoirs and the Anti-Adultery Campaign of the Late Eighteenth Century.” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (May 2004), pp. 563-586.

infidelity. I make this solemn asseveration because there have been malevolent spirits who, in the plenitude of their calumny, have slandered me by suspecting my fidelity even at this early period of my existence” (83).

Though she was being trained for the stage and was regularly in society at theaters and other public events, on the eve of her wedding Robinson described herself as follows: “I had till that period worn the habit of a child, and the dress of a woman so suddenly assumed sat rather awkwardly upon me” and “only three months before I became a wife I had dressed a doll” (46). This does not quite square with her description of the first time she was introduced to her future husband, where she described herself as wearing a dress “of pale blue lustring, with a chip hat trimmed with ribands of the same colour. Never was I dressed so perfectly to my own satisfaction; I anticipated a day of admiration” (38). From very early in her narrative, Robinson started to write a new truth about herself, by positioning herself in the role of the innocent.

Writing about women’s memoirs of eighteenth century England, Caroline Breashears posits a concept of the appeal memoir, which is “a self-authorized memoir that narrates peculiarly female distresses and appeals to the public for sympathy or aid” (608). Of the specific attributes that Breashears identifies in the genre of the appeal memoir, three of them are particularly apt to Robinson’s memoir: that the text is a self-authorized memoir of female distress, that it appeals to a public tribunal, and that it includes an arraignment of the memoirists oppressors. Whether she knew it or not, Robinson was crafting a specific style of narrative. A component of the female distress in the appeal memoir is a narrative of loss. Robinson depicts many losses in her memoir—her lost virtue by becoming mistress to the Prince of Wales, her loss of money and social status through her husband’s poor financial behavior, and ultimately her loss of health. While the act of publishing the memoir can be seen as part of the appeal to the

public tribunal, Robinson makes several statements that are a direct appeal to the public.<sup>6</sup>

Robinson is particularly adept at arraigning her oppressors. On more than one occasion, Robinson calls out by name the specific men who have wronged her in a variety of ways—be it by attempting to seduce or even kidnap herself, or by enticing her husband to gamble and spend beyond his means.

On the issue of her husband's infidelity, Robinson goes so far as to name her husband's mistress and detail her confrontation with the mistress, and lament that "my husband, even at the period of his marriage, had an attachment which he had not broken, and that his infidelities were as public as the ruin of his finances inevitable" (Robinson 80). Robinson goes on to list further details of her husband's neglect and "illicit advances" (166) toward servants in their household as well other women. She sets this behavior against her own romantic correspondence with the Prince, which she carried on unbeknownst to her husband. Robinson "revises her history, not as the repentant whore, but as the embodiment of the virtues and contradictions that drive the discourse against adultery. She complicates the story of her own adultery by dramatizing the libertinism of the elite lords of her acquaintance, and she exposes the predatory nature of masculine power and its economic stranglehold over women" (Runge 575).

The blatant statements about her husband's infidelities are in contrast to her account of some of her own experiences with men. She is perfectly willing to detail the machinations of both Lord Lyttleton and George Robert Fitzgerald in their attempts to woo her, yet in another instance she is not willing to name the many men who proposition her because "[w]ere I to

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<sup>6</sup> "Indeed the world has mistaken the character of my mind; I have ever been the reverse of volatile and dissipated. I mean not to write my own eulogy, though with the candid and sensitive mind I shall, I trust, succeed in my vindication" (53). And "Probably these pages will be read when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave, when that God who judges all hearts will know how innocent I was of the smallest conjugal infidelity. I make this solemn asseveration because there have been malevolent spirits who, in the plenitude of their calumny, have slandered me by suspecting my fidelity even at this early period of my existence" (83).

mention the names of those who held forth the temptations of fortune at this moment of public peril, I might create some reproaches in many families of the fashionable world” (Robinson 142). Immediately following this statement, however, Robinson goes on to name the Duke of Rutland and the exact amount of money he propositioned her with. She situates herself in two classically female roles—roles with no agency—the wronged woman and the aggressively pursued woman. In many instances, Robinson portrays herself as the innocent victim of an unethical man’s force of character—setting herself against the common depiction of her as a whore. In this way the memoir uses carefully crafted reticence along with candor to create a particular picture of the author.

Robinson continues to utilize both candor and reticence in naming certain men but not others. She draws attention to those specific men she feels have victimized or oppressed her in more serious ways and deserve to be called out by name. By disclosing the names of men, she offers satisfaction to readers interested in the gossip, without disclosing information about herself or her actions. Further, James Treadwell suggests that that all autobiographical writing is transactional, and this is particularly relevant in what he calls the “courtesan memoir”<sup>7</sup>, where commodification is a key theme (164-65). As courtesans, women’s bodies and lives are reduced to commodities, submitted to the marketplace. Robinson may have wanted to call attention to the specific nature of some of the financial transactions she was subjected to, again disclosing information about others instead of herself.

Though women were on the stage and in the public eye in many ways in the late eighteenth century, the social convention for women at the time would have still been one of domesticity, sensibility and innocence. Having been portrayed during her life as a woman

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<sup>7</sup> Breashears argues that the courtesan memoir is a specific and separate genre from the appeal memoir, and that Robinson’s memoir is firmly of the latter.

without these attributes, Robinson kept her memoir to very conventional scripts about how a woman was supposed to be—a mother, an innocent, prone to excessive feelings. These themes keep her memoir firmly in the realm of what would have been considered appropriate areas for women’s writing to address. “As long as authors stay within a proper and appropriate position, they are observing ‘decorum.’ Women writers, therefore, are admitted in so far as their self-writing is visibly determined by appropriate sociocultural roles. So Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs*, posthumously published in 1801, keep well within the conventions of victimized female sensibility...” (Treadwell 71). Robinson’s portrayal of herself in these conventional roles was useful as a rebuttal against the attacks she received in the popular press, as a meddler in politics or a lascivious woman. Treadwell also suggests that the narrative of excessive sensibility in memoir is a “resistance to the constraints of a courtesan’s life” (166). Despite her work as an author, in the public sphere Robinson was well known for her beauty, which she was forced to commodify, because of the necessity of earning a living. The sensibility Robinson foregrounds in her memoir was in some way pushing back against the commodification of her body, by placing the emotions of her inner self over the physical body.

### **Critical Reception**

Robinson’s memoir was less widely reviewed than Godwin’s was,<sup>8</sup> and the response was more an attack on Robinson for her behaviors, not her act of disclosing them in print, as had been a large part of the reaction to Godwin. Was this type of disclosure less shocking because of her life as a public figure, actor and author? Was it is expected of her in some way? By the time

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<sup>8</sup> I was only able to find two contemporaneous reviews.



Robinson's memoir was published, there had been a history of memoirs by women writing about their 'scandalous' lives,<sup>9</sup> so readers may well have expected this type of memoir from Robinson.

In *The Monthly Review*, the reviewer acknowledges Robinson's goal of rehabilitating her public image by saying the reviewer "had herself a favorable opinion of the effects of these memoirs, in clearing her fame, is evident..." (345). But though the reviewer does indulge in some amount of censure, calling her a "*pretty* but not a *prudent* wife" (346), the review overall is quite mild, as acknowledged because "when ladies write their own memoirs, we must perform our task with as much mildness and delicacy as possible" (345). It seems that once she is dead, the press is somewhat willing to look more kindly upon her, in an "attempt to soften the censure (in part certainly unmerited) of the world, and to convert reproach into compassion..." (345).

The conservative periodical *The Anti-Jacobin Review* came down much harder on Robinson. Though they praise her "uncommon command of poetic language" (258), they otherwise revile her story and her writing style, saying that they "will not rake into the kennels of licentiousness" or injure any readers "with a recapitulation of the improprieties" and refer to Robinson as a "profligate seductress" (256). They also suggest that the use of the work is to "deter men of sense from communicating...with a scribbling lady of pleasure" (256). Robinson's daughter Mary Elizabeth received significantly less criticism than Godwin, and was only briefly chastised in one review for "giving the vain and licentious narrative to the world" (*Anti-Jacobin Review* 254).

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of these memoirs, see Caroline Breashears "Scandalous Categories: Classifying the Memoirs of Unconventional Women." *Philological Quarterly* 82.2 (2003): 187-212 and Caroline Breashears "The Female Appeal Memoir: Genre and Female Literary Tradition in Eighteenth-Century England." *Modern Philology* 107.4 (May 2010): 607-631.

## Conclusion

While early concepts of life writing were strongly bound to literal truth and factual data,<sup>10</sup> contemporary literary theorists take a much broader view on the relationship between truth and life writing. Smith and Watson suggest that, at least for autobiography, “truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (16). This could certainly be applied to Wollstonecraft as well as Robinson, for even though Wollstonecraft did not write her own memoir, the text Godwin produced does not fall within conventions around truthfulness that were expected of life writing at the time. While Godwin has been criticized for the impact his memoir had on Wollstonecraft’s legacy, Buss says “new approaches to writing lives are not accomplished by taking safe paths” (123) and that by writing as candidly as he did, Godwin has provided us “a more valuable book” (123) in the long run, one that reveals the true nature of both author and subject.

Wollstonecraft and Robinson lived very different lives. Robinson’s was spent largely in the public eye because of her personal life, and Wollstonecraft’s personal life went largely unnoticed, though she was a public intellectual figure. In a time where the personal story was just beginning to be used for political ends, it is interesting that, because of Godwin, it is Wollstonecraft’s story that was used for overtly political reasons. While Robinson’s stated goal was personal, her memoir can also be seen as an attempt to change the ways that women’s stories are told—a political act in the end.

Ultimately, both works use a combination of candor and reticence to tell the story of each woman’s life. Godwin espoused candor, but was careful to omit content that did not conform to the life narrative he was constructing of Wollstonecraft. Robinson has no history of commitment to candor and deploys it to reshape the narrative of her own life. Each author uses candor in

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<sup>10</sup> See Treadwell, pages 8-9 of this paper.

specific and different ways, and the reception of each differed, with Godwin being censured for exposing his wife and Robinson being censured for her behavior.

In the short term, neither memoir was successful in its goals. Robinson's writing could not counteract her reputation, and Wollstonecraft's contemporaries did not take to Godwin's narrative of genius. For a significant period of time, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson were remembered for how they lived their lives and only secondarily for the quality of their minds. Though both the memoirs and their subjects were disregarded for a time, the current reading of both texts is in line with the author's original intentions. Mary Wollstonecraft's life story has indeed enlightened and enriched the lives of those who have read it; Mary Robinson's legacy as a writer is now acknowledged, researched, and studied.

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