

# Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson

*Paula Byrne*

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## **Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson** Paula Byrne

This compelling and richly researched book presents a fascinating portrait of Mary Robinson—darling of the London stage, mistress to the most powerful men in England, feminist thinker, and bestselling author. Though one of the most flamboyant free spirits of the late eighteenth century, Mary led a life that was marked by reversals of fortune. After being abandoned by her father, Mary was married, at age fifteen, to Thomas Robinson, whose dissipation landed the couple and their baby in debtors' prison. On her release, Mary rose to become one of the London theater's most alluring actresses, famously playing Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* for a rapt audience that included the Prince of Wales, who fell madly in love with her. Never one to pass up an opportunity, she later used his ardent love letters for blackmail. After being struck down by paralysis, apparently following a miscarriage, she remade herself yet again, this time as a popular writer who was also admired by the leading intellectuals of the day.

Filled with triumph and despair and grand accomplishments, the amazing life of "Perdita" is marvelously captured in this stunning biography.

## **Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson Details**

Date : Published March 14th 2006 by Random House Trade Paperbacks (first published November 1st 2004)


ISBN : 9780812970791

Author : Paula Byrne

Format : Paperback 464 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Nonfiction, Historical, Literature, 18th Century

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# **From Reader Review *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson* for online ebook**

## **Jane Austen says**

Being an actress used to be considered highly immoral. In the early 1700s being an actress was almost synonymous with being a prostitute, or at the very least a “loose woman”.

Figures such as Mary Robinson, who was a mistress of George IV when he was the Prince of Wales, reinforced this image in the minds of some members of the public.

*Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson* by Paula Byrne goes into more detail about this fascinating lady in an informative and entertaining way.

A full review of the book can be found at: <https://www.janeausten.co.uk/perdita-...>

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## **Hannah says**

Mary Robinson lived a very interesting life in very interesting times. Famous stage actress, first mistress of Prince George (later George IV aka "Prinny"), influential fashion icon & trend setter, political activist, proto-feminist, loving mother, and celebrated poet/writer, Mary (aka "Perdita" from one of her most famous stage roles) embodied the culture and pagentry of the 18th century English world. She was arguably a woman born ahead of her time. A woman who had a sense of who she was and what she wanted out of life and was able to capitalize on both her strengths (as well as her weaknesses) to make a name for herself. Her turnaround from young, naive actress to tawdry mistress of powerful men to respected author is almost unimaginable, and she did all this before her death in 1800 at the age of 43.

Her beauty was legendary - by her mid-20's she had already been immortalized by Gainsborough, Reynolds, and other famous painters of the period. She introduced new fashions and almost single-handedly changed the style of female clothing from the tightly-corsetted and hoop-skirted designs of the mid-1700's to the flowing, body-freeing styles of the late 1700's and early 1800's. Not until the Victorian period would women's bodies be tortured again for the sake of fashion.

Her views were radical for the time and for her sex, but she never waived in them, even when it made her unpopular. She was an exceptional mother and daughter, keeping both near to her for her entire life and sharing close ties to many women of both high and low estate; from Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire to an actress/prostitute friend fallen on hard times. Her relationships with men weren't so advantageous; her father and later her husband deserted her. Her lovers failed to keep their promises of protection and fidelity (although to his credit Prince George gave her an annuity for the rest of her life and stayed a friend to her).

While still a young woman, she became crippled and was never able to walk again. At that point in her life, she determined to re-invent herself and re-gain respectability by becoming a lady of learning and culture. Although her poetry and books aren't remembered today, she had fame and influence with her writing at the time.

All in all, an enjoyable read, although I have to give it only 3 stars due to author Paula Bryne's ponderous

and sometimes dry writing style. It took me a long time to get through this book - not because Perdita's life story wasn't fascinating (*oh, it was*), but because Byrne's writing wasn't fascinating. I think I would have really liked Perdita a lot, and would now include her in one of my dinner-with-my-favorite-dead-historical-figures party (I wonder how she'd get along with the likes of Anne Boleyn, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Daniel Boone?...hmmm)

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### **Leslie says**

What an interesting woman. I wish this book were twice as long or that someone would make a big, fancy expensive movie about her. I liked it more than *Duchess of Devonshire* and it would be a much better movie. Not so darn depressing. If you like Marie Antoinette and *Duchess* (both were in this woman's life), read this next!

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### **Hazel Mills says**

I found the first three quarters of this book far more interesting than the last, partly due to the change in Mary Robinson's circumstances but also in the writing which didn't always hold my attention. It is however a most informative book about a really interesting woman who reinvented herself from actress to Royal mistress and then an author of both poetry and prose. I hadn't realised the word 'celebrity' had been around for so long!

The latter part of the book contains much more of a literary criticism feel whereas I wanted more biography, but I do recognise the two are inextricably linked in that Mary Robinson put so much of herself into her writing. I feel I have rather overlooked Mary even though I must have seen her portrait several times at Chawton. She deserves to be remembered along with the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mrs Radcliffe!

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### **Eleni says**

It was a very good biography of a woman who was both notorious and famous in the seventeenth century but of whom most people -- unless they specialize in the period -- have never heard of. I read most of the biography when I was teaching a course on The Romantics for the OSHER programme. It's only a five-week course, and for only one week we read a handful of female authors, one of which was Robinson, who was admired by Coleridge and Wordsworth for her metrical innovations. She was most famous for her Gothic novels - and for briefly being the Prince Regent's mistress. I finally had some time to finish off the biography this week.

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### **Vivienne says**

A highly researched biography of a fascinating woman who has for many years been ignored by history.

A fashion icon, actress and celebrity of her day she was also a woman of letters writing poetry and novels, a political radical and a feminist. I was very inspired by this life though it was quite dry in places.

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## Rebecca says

Actress, novelist, courtesan, poetess, fashion icon, feminist, 'most beautiful woman in England', political activist. All this, and Perdita even did time for debt!

\*awed rendition of 'Mrs Robinson'\*

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## Sherwood Smith says

Occasionally I have performed on stage. When that happened, the lights were so bright that I couldn't see beyond them, though one can hear the rustles and exhalations of a great crowd packed into a small space.

How much tougher must it have been in the eighteenth century, when candlelight was the most powerful source of light--when it was easy to watch the people in the boxes watching you?

This book was not only a meticulously researched account of a fascinating woman who, like so many eighteenth century female writers, was overlooked by male writers of history, except the salacious references to her *amours*, specifically with Prinny. Mary Robinson (later known as "Perdita" after she played in *Winter's Tale*) began her career on stage. And what a time for the stage! Famous writers and actors, an enthusiastic audience and especially an enthusiastic press. In fact, the accounts of the morning papers' articles about performances, performers, and the puff pieces and responses by those same performers, reminds me of the interactions between artists and audience today, only instead of Twitter-fests, you had the caricatures printed overnight and posted in shop windows the next day, and those gossipy morning papers.

Well, Mary Robinson, the sole support of a worthless husband at the ripe old age of twenty-two, caught the eye of the young prince who would eventually become Regent. According to her (she wrote up her autobiography, and in true eighteenth century fashion, managed to present herself as eternally young, frail, innocent, and pursued) she caught the eye of the seventeen year old prince, who was stunned by her beauty and talent, and who pursued her first with a secret correspondence. He signed himself as Florizel. According to the prince and his friends, she flirted with *him* from the stage, and pursued him via letter, becoming his Perdita.

When they commenced their affair, she retired from the stage and paraded around town in the latest hot car, er, that is, carriage, but she had not given up her connections to the literary world. When the torrid affair cooled, and she found herself partially paralyzed, she started up a literary career that made her a famous name then, hobnobbing with the likes of Godwin and Sheridan, and supporting women in drama and writing.

The book relies heavily on quotations from her letters and writings, from others, building a fascinating, complicated picture not only of a life, but a time.

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## Catherine says

Carefully researched and highly detailed biography of Mary Robinson: actress, courtesan, Prince's mistress, prominent poet, famed novelist and essayist of the late 1700s. Robinson lived during a fascinating time, one that encompassed both the American and French Revolutions, as well as massive periods of social change. She was considered the most beautiful woman of her time and was romantically linked to a number of men, including, if somewhat improbably, the Prince of Wales, liberal politician Charles James Fox and General Banastre Tarleton (scion of a slave-holding family and remembered in American history as "Butcher Tarleton"). While Robinson was remarkable in many ways, her ability to achieve acclaim and notoriety, good and bad, on stage, at Court, in society and on the page, was exceptional. At one time, she was a more acclaimed poet than William Wordsworth, as well as the author of several reasonably successful Gothic novels. Like many of the acclaimed female authors of her time, however, her work is not sadly remembered now. I'm intrigued enough to read some of it.

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## John says

Mary Robinson married young and not well (in her defense, she was duped into thinking that her suitor had an inheritance coming which, in fact, he did not) and she gave up a career in theater to do so, as such a profession was not socially acceptable for a proper woman. The couple lived beyond their means, which soon landed them in debtors' prison. Mary nevertheless stood by her husband quite a long time, even when she discovered an affair or two that he was having. She did, however, go into acting after all, which proved to be the start of her independence. She turned out to be a pretty decent actor and was regarded as one of the most beautiful English women of her age.

To condense the story, her acting career brought her to the attention of the young Prince of England who eventually convinced her to leave acting and become his mistress. They were lovers for a year or so before he cast her off. She ended up drifting between several men and being the fashionable trend-setter of her day.

If that had been the extent of her life and her celebrity of the day, she would no doubt have been just an interesting side-light to the late 18th Century. However, a debilitating illness, which made it impossible for her to walk, proved to be the transition to a radically new life as a woman of letters. She became one of the leading writers of her day, publishing poetry, novels, and essays, the most mature of which were praised by such intellectual and literary luminaries of the day as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (parents of Mary Shelley, as it happens) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. While they were contemporaries (that is, before she died) she was a bigger poet than William Wordsworth, though she admired his work and they influenced one another (ditto with Coleridge, who was a more intimate friend to Robinson). And she knew all of these people, as well as other writers, thinkers, and artists of the day really rather well. She becomes a political radical and feminist over the course of her literary career.

Really, a fascinating story about a fascinating woman and an amazing, vibrant period in English history. Byrne writes very well, so that although this is a scholarly work (and thoroughly documented, as such) it reads very easily and maintains the reader's interest.

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## Amanda says

Compelling story of someone I had not previously heard of. From a teenage bride of a deceptive spendthrift, she went on to reinvent herself over and over: first as an actress, then a royal Mistress, society trendsetter, poet, novelist, political force, and feminist.

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## Samantha says

The poor quality of Paula Byrne's writing in Perdita astounded me as I read it. She seemed to think that being a good biographer means having dozens of unnecessary excerpts from her subject's poems and novels (hello, this is a *biography*, not literary analysis) and infinite references to Mary's Robinson's autobiography that begin with "in the Memoirs Mary said," or "Mary wrote in the Memoirs..." In other words, Byrne's editor let her run a muck and fill up the book with filler that could have (and should have) been cut. Byrne's ramblings made the book so tedious one has to slog through it to the end.

This is the biography of Mary Robinson, who was a famed actress, infamous royal mistress, courtesan, and best-selling author in late-eighteenth century England. What a resume, right? It should have been impossible to make this woman boring. Byrne not only made Robinson's story boring, she didn't make me like her. I felt like half the text was Mary whining to ex-lovers for money and the other half was her bed-hopping from one politician/war hero/prince to the next. I didn't find Mary accessible or even likable. And towards the end, during Mary's writing career, when more of her personality was starting to shine through, Byrne ruined that too by filling up pages and pages with practically every poem Mary ever wrote and every review ever published on her novels. Boring!

Do yourself a favor and don't waste your time reading this. If you want a great biography on a woman from this time period, try The Duchess by Amanda Foreman or Privilege and Scandal by Janet Gleeson.

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## TLW says

The more I read of 'classic' novels/historical biographies the more I realise people haven't really ever changed. I can identify with a Jane Austen heroine as much as I can with any modern character and it's easy to pick out the social stereotypes that still exist today. Perdita is an excellent example of this. I fell in love with Mary Robinson through this book - I genuinely hadn't realised such radical feminists had existed in the 1700s, plus her political beliefs still chime with me today. Slightly depressingly, I feel that over 300 years on we're still pretty far from getting to her vision of a world of equality.

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## Caroline says

This book is an interesting contrast to the previous book I read and reviewed, Claire Tomalin's *Mrs Jordan's Profession*. Both biographies are about Regency actresses who became royal mistresses, Mary Robinson to the Prince of Wales, subsequently George IV, and Dora Jordan to the Duke of Clarence, later William IV. Both women left the stage for their royal lovers, who subsequently abandoned them; although Dora Jordan's abandonment after twenty years contrasts strongly with Mary Robinson's fling of less than a year, and Dora

returned to the stage numerous times through her relationship with Clarence.

So there are strong similarities between the books, and yet whilst I could not put Claire Tomalin's down and felt real affection for Dora Jordan, I can't say the same for this book. Whether that's down to the author or the subject I cannot tell. Certainly, on the surface Mary Robinson is far more an interesting figure than Dora Jordan, who effectively settled down to domesticity and her large brood of children. Whereas to dismiss Mary Robinson as an actress and royal mistress is to do her a disservice: whilst she too was a celebrity, both in the Regency and modern sense of the word, she reinvented herself after a serious accident all but crippled her and was in her later years a notable and lauded literary figure, a writer of poems, plays, farces, operettas, essays, who moved in the same circles as William Goodwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others. She also became a radical and an early feminist.

And yet somehow this book never gelled for me - I never felt wholly absorbed in Mary's life, I never came to care for her, in the way that the best biographies can make you thoroughly partisan on the side of the subject. I was almost bored, to be honest. Part of that could have been the over-abundance of quotation of Mary's poetry - melodramatic purple 'Romantic' poetry has never been my taste - and part perhaps is the fact that I could never quite believe Mary herself. So often a biography comes to life through the subject's own words, but with Mary Robinson I could never shake the feeling that mentally she never left the stage, that she was always playing a part. And whether that role was actress, society belle, fashion innovator, woman of letters, radical or feminist, I never once felt that Paula Byrne had managed to penetrate to the real heart of Mary Robinson. Again, that could be a failing of either author or subject, I don't know. But it meant that for me this biography only painted a picture of Perdita, much as Reynolds, Gainsborough and others painted her, that it never really captured her.

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## **Sarah Beth says**

Mary Robinson was an "actress, entertainer, author, provoker of scandal, fashion icon, sex object, darling of the gossip columns, self-promoter" (xvi). Born in 1757, she was considered by many to be "the most beautiful woman in England" (xv). So beautiful that the Prince of Wales, seeing her play the part of Perdita, began writing her love letters. She subsequently had the dubious honor of being the first of his mistresses. Her life was characterized by a series of misfortunes: her father essentially abandoned the family, ultimately leading to Mary marrying Thomas Robinson as a teenager in hopes of improving her station in life. Sadly her husband landed himself, Mary, and their infant daughter in debtors' prison. Mary looked to the stage to support herself and her daughter, which led to her celebrity status and becoming a fashion icon and the mistress of several prominent men. Later as her looks began to fade, she supported herself through writing and became the author of "seven novels, two political tracts, several essays, two plays, and literally hundreds of poems" (xvi).

It was remarkable to me that the daughter of a merchant who was essentially raised by her mother with few resources grew to such prominence that she looked to Georgiana the Duchess of Devonshire as a patron, met Marie Antoinette, and was a friend of William Godwin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. When her affair with the Prince of Wales ended, after much haggling, he settled an annuity of 500 pounds on Mary for life and they remained close correspondents until her death - indeed one of her treasured possessions was a small portrait of the Prince.

Much of this book is written through the veil of public opinion and writings of Mary, meaning that this biography constantly had to weigh public gossip against what Mary's correspondence and the historical



record reveal. "It always irked her that she achieved her greatest fame not as an actress or woman of letters, but - the word was current then as well as now - as a celebrity" (119). Her every movement was the cause of much speculation in the press, not all of it accurate. Her clothing was described in detail in the press; "she caused envy among the upper classes, while the lower classes were inspired to emulate her" (165). Mary made a dress first made fashionable by the Queen of France fashionable in England, where it caused quite a sensation. The loose, free flowing style of the dress is considered to have revolutionized female fashion in England (189). In addition, she was likely the most frequently painted female subject of her time. Her most "celebrated sittings were for Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Romney, but there are also portraits of her by an array of lesser artists including Richard Cosway, John Downman, George Engleheart, and Jeremiah Meyer the miniaturists, in addition to William Grimaldi, Thomas Lawrence, William Owen, and many others" (173).

At times I had a hard time following the timeline of Mary's life. Additionally, I found the sections that analyzed portions of her writing less compelling. Yet it is incontrovertible that Mary Robinson, or Perdita, was a sensation during her lifetime and had a great impact on multiple areas of British life including fashion, theatre, royal affairs, and writing. Indeed, Mary Robinson's "*Memoirs* is one of the earliest examples of an English writer's autobiography" (358). In order to survive and escape her ever encroaching debts, Mary continually innovated her means of survival, displaying a grit and determination to succeed. A remarkable woman, she defined reinvention of the self; "the transformation from royal mistress to one of the most admired authors of the age has never been achieved before or since" (392).

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