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“Abused, neglected,—unhonoured,—unrewarded”: The Economics of Authorial Labor in the Writings of Mary Robinson

Abstract

This essay examines one of the central preoccupations of Mary Robinson’s authorial career, a concern with the poor financial treatment of authors. Writers, Robinson suggests, are demeaned by predatory publishers, heartless or anti-intellectual aristocratic patrons, and a disinterested, distractible reading public, none of whom care to compensate the author for the labors of her pen. In a culture that neither recognizes nor rewards female intellect, women authors are particularly vulnerable, but Robinson’s criticisms transcend the problems caused by gender alone; male authors, too, could fall into penury when their labor was insufficiently valued. Rejecting the Romantic ethos of the solitary genius dying for his art, Robinson calls for a reassessment of authorship’s value, not only as a social and cultural good, but as a valid form of work; she insists that mental labor is labor in the economic sense of the term, and that it deserves compensation with a living wage. Her writings are thus marked by a keen sense of disgust at a culture that neither recognizes economic value in literary creation, nor feels obligated to remunerate the artist for her creations.

Keywords

Mary Robinson, authorship, economics, Thomas Chatterton

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Cover Page Footnote

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Midway through Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* (1799), heroine Martha Morley discovers in a scene of dark humor that she has been cheated by her publisher. Imprisoned in a "private mad-house" (7:140), and surrounded by all the trappings of a Gothic horror novel, Martha is neither terrorized by her surroundings nor shaken by the barrage of torturous medical treatments she is forced to endure. Rather, she succumbs to despair only when she realizes the extent to which she has been financially duped. Holding in her hands "the sixth edition of her own work" (7:141), a novel her publisher swore would never sell, Martha falls into a very real bout of madness: "she threw the book on the ground in an agony of vexation. Another consultation was held, and Mrs. Morley was pronounced to be in the most decided state of raving insanity" (7:141). The realities of the literary marketplace undermine Martha's sanity in a way that the corrupt medical practices of the asylum could not.

Written in 1799, *The Natural Daughter* offers a powerful indictment of the publishing industry, and reveals one of the central thematic preoccupations of Robinson's authorial career, a concern with the poor social and financial treatment of authors. Robinson's discontent with the financial realities of authorship surfaces throughout her oeuvre. As early as 1790, she invoked in *Ainsi va le Monde*, her poetic celebration of the French Revolution, the memory of Thomas Chatterton as proof of the world's failure to recognize and remunerate literary talent. "Too long the Muse, in ancient garb array'd, / Has pin'd neglected in oblivion's shade . . . Her eye beheld a CHATTERTON oppress'd" (1:78). Chatterton starves because the world does not sufficiently appreciate or compensate his art. Similar imagery recurs in *Poems* (1791), in *Angelina; A Novel* (1796), and in *Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature: A Domestic Story* (1797). As Robinson's own financial situation declined, however, she became by necessity increasingly attuned to the injustices of the authorial marketplace, and the passing concern with artistic labor practices present in her earlier novels becomes a central focus of her later works. As we shall see, *The Natural Daughter*, the *Sylphid* essays (1799-1800), and the *Present State of Manners, Society, &c. &c. of the Metropolis of England* (1800) are striking in their anger at a culture of artistic financial neglect, and they reflect the reality of Robinson's own economic struggles.

This essay will examine Robinson's understanding of authorship as work and trace her growing preoccupation with unfair artistic labor practices over the course of her career. Writers, Robinson suggests, are demeaned by predatory publishers, heartless or anti-intellectual aristocratic patrons, and a disinterested, distractible reading public, none of whom care to compensate the author for the labors of her pen. In a culture that neither recognizes nor rewards female intellect, women writers are particularly vulnerable, but Robinson's criticisms of British culture's treatment of authors transcend the problems caused by gender alone; as the case of Chatterton proved, male authors, too, could suffer at the hands of an uncaring marketplace. Robinson therefore calls for a reassessment of authorship's value, not only as a social and cultural good, but as a valid form of work. Rejecting the growing tendency to romanticize the solitary genius dying for his art, Robinson insists that mental labor is labor in the economic sense of the term, and that it deserves compensation with a living wage. Her writings, I argue, are increasingly marked both by her frustration at her inability to support herself via her pen, and her disgust with a culture that neither recognizes economic value in literary creation, nor feels obligated to remunerate the artist for her creations.

Mary Robinson's modern critics have generally focused on the gender politics of her works.¹ Without intending to diminish these excellent contributions, I want to suggest that Robinson does not intrinsically link her indignation at the injustices of the literary marketplace with her gender. 1790's *Ainsi va le Monde* holds up the male Chatterton as a symbol of her culture's disinterest in rewarding artistic talent. A year later, Robinson would return to this theme in her "Monody to the Memory of Chatterton" (1791). By the 1790s, Chatterton, who died by suicide in 1770, had begun to be mythologized as the "Romantic embodiment of young, misunderstood genius" (Thomson 110). Robinson, however, eulogizes Chatterton by focusing not only on his genius, but also on his poverty, proof that neither talent nor masculinity shields authors from penury:

Hard was thy lot, from every comfort torn;
In POVERTY's cold arms condemn'd to mourn;
To live by mental toil, e'en when the brain
Could scarce its trembling faculties sustain;
To mark the dreary minutes slowly creep:
Each day to labour, and each night to weep . . . (1:109)

Robinson foregrounds Chatterton's financial circumstances, treating his poetry as work for which he was insufficiently compensated. Her description of Chatterton's "mental toil" strongly differs, then, from Wordsworth's more romanticized description of Chatterton's demise. In "Resolution and Independence" (1807), Wordsworth acknowledges that poets may fall into "distress, and poverty" (l. 35), but he is more interested in lamenting Chatterton's thwarted poetic genius. Wordsworth's Chatterton, "the marvellous Boy" whose "sleepless Soul . . . perished in his pride" (ll. 43, 44), is the victim of his own poetic madness, "the blueprint of the tragic young Romantic" (Cook 1). "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness" (ll. 48-49), Wordsworth opines, suggesting that Chatterton died for his art; he could not cope with the weight of poetic genius coursing through his veins.

Chatterton was a very popular subject for Romantic verse in the 1790s, the symbol of "a society that left social provision in the uncertain hands of Charity" (Fairer 235). Coleridge, for example, acknowledges the material circumstances of Chatterton's demise. In his "Monody on the Death of Chatterton," first written in 1790,² Coleridge begins by explaining that "Want and cold Neglect had chill'd thy soul" (l. 5), and he describes the effects of hunger on Chatterton's physical form: "In vain I seek the charms of youthful grace, / Thy sunken eye, thy haggard cheeks . . ." (ll. 49-50). Chatterton's suffering, Coleridge suggests, is ultimately the fault of a British society that did not sufficiently value his genius. Even more so than Coleridge, however, Robinson is invested in drawing attention to the real world circumstances of Chatterton's poverty. Robinson's Chatterton suffers not because he is filled with genius, but because he is poor. His literary activities are not a joy, but a form of daily drudgery that his brain can "scarce . . . sustain," a "mental toil" that does not even provide sufficient compensation to save his life. Unlike Wordsworth, Robinson does not mythologize Chatterton as too good for this world, but instead condemns the marketplace and the aristocratic patrons that failed him: "Obscurely born—no gen'rous friend he found / To lead his trembling steps o'er classic ground. / No patron fill'd his heart with flatt'ring hope" (1:109). Had Chatterton found even one interested patron, Robinson implies, he would possibly still be alive. Authors cannot survive on creativity alone, nor should starvation be proof of genius.³

Chatterton reappears throughout Robinson's work as a symbol of authorial penury. *Angelina's* Mrs. Horton, for instance, confidante to heroine Sophia Clarendon, mourns "the shade of Chatterton," a boy who "fled from his home, to perish among strangers; because that home afforded no patron, no kind congenial spirit" (3:87).⁴ Likewise, the eponymous narrator of *Walsingham* calls Chatterton an "ill-fated child of genius and of sorrow" (5:142). The same novel also depicts in graphic terms the reality of authorial poverty. Mr. M'Arthur, a talented but impoverished writer, has been unable to churn out enough prose to pay his rent, and thus his landlord threatens to cast him out into the street. M'Arthur begs for more time, swearing that "A bookseller has promised to give me five guineas for [his work] when completed" (5:226), but the landlord is uninterested in M'Arthur's art. "Burn your wicked books! -your lying books! - your prophane books of the devil's own inventing!" (5:226). The landlord must be paid, and M'Arthur is only saved by the financial intervention of Mr. Optic, "a character well known in the literary world, and no less distinguished for talents than esteemed for benevolence" (5:200). Only an act of charitable patronage stands between M'Arthur and starvation.

The difficulties associated with writing for the marketplace are also foregrounded more humorously in *Walsingham* in the figure of Mrs. Woodford, Walsingham's landlady. Mrs. Woodford, Walsingham's letter explains somewhat derisively, has attempted without success to chase the whims of the marketplace, only to find that tastes change too quickly ever to be caught. "In her early days," Walsingham explains, "Mrs. Woodford had felt an ungovernable inclination to wear the laurels of Parnassus" (5:190). As such, she moves from genre to genre in a fruitless quest for fame. Her moralistic novel is "consigned" by young female readers "to the lash of puerile ridicule" (5:192). Her satiric poetry is condemned in the press, her romance novel "executed, cut up, hashed, frittered, minced" (5:193). Her tragedy is condemned as "frothy bombast" (5:193), and her comedy "nearly fatal in its effects," as its "unpalatable qualities, threatened to banish her for ever from the Paradise of fashion" (5:194). Robinson is clearly less sympathetic to Mrs. Woodford than she is to Mr. M'Arthur. After all, Mrs. Woodford is writing for attention, not to express her genius or pay her bills; her primary source of income comes from her lodgers. Yet implicit in Mrs. Woodford's story, as in M'Arthur's and Chatterton's, is the acknowledgment that one cannot rely on the literary marketplace alone for survival.

Robinson's interest in the economics of authorial labor, present throughout her career, became increasingly central as her own financial circumstances began to deteriorate. In her later years, Robinson could not count on the promised annuity from the Prince of Wales, and her declining health did not permit her to retake the stage, so she turned to the pen to provide for herself and her daughter, initially with some success; the first edition of *Walsingham* sold out in a day. Yet Robinson never succeeded in translating public interest into financial security. According to Jan Fergus and Janice Farrar Thaddeus, "In spite of the fact that in 1796 Robinson was the best-selling single author at Hookham, she cleared over her four-and-a-half year relationship with them less than £10" (196). Fergus and Thaddeus explain that Robinson was not treated unfairly either by Hookham and Carpenter or by Longman, the publishers of her novels; her problems were caused as much by her own errors in judgment as her publishers'. Eighteenth-century authors had four main options for financial compensation. "The available schemes were: subscription, fee for limited copyright, profit-sharing, and publishing on 'commission' (whereby the author assumed responsibility for repaying the capital if the book did not make a profit"

(Fergus and Thaddeus 192-93). While working with Hookham and Carpenter, Robinson frequently elected to publish on commission, the most potentially lucrative, but also riskiest of the options, and sadly, she misjudged the size of her audience. She printed more copies of her novels than she could ultimately sell, and as a result, derived minimal profits from her works, and in several cases, even found herself owing money to her publisher. Later, when she switched to Longman, she opted for the safer option of selling her copyright, at which point she enjoyed a steadier income. “For the last three years of her life, she averaged about £150 per year” (Fergus and Thaddeus 197), a more reasonable sum, but not enough to sustain her lifestyle, and not as much as Robinson clearly felt she deserved.

Thus while there is no evidence to suggest that Robinson was actually cheated by her publishers, there is ample evidence to suggest that Robinson believed herself to have been cheated. On October 4, 1794, following the tepid sales of her novel *The Widow*, she wrote in a letter, “My mental labours have failed through the dishonest conduct of my publishers. My works have sold handsomely but the profits have been theirs” (7:303). That same year, she threatened in frustration to tear up any existing and future works. Unable to “see the point of working so hard when it was her publishers who reaped the financial reward” (Byrne 306), Robinson wrote, “I will never publish another line while I exist, and even those manuscripts now finished I WILL DESTROY” (7:303). As Robinson’s financial situation grew more desperate—she was arrested for debt in 1800—and as her health declined, she grew ever more bitter towards an industry that could not or would not support her. Robinson had become, in Claire Knowles’s words, “one of the most popular poets of her generation” (31), but in August 1800, she explained in a letter to William Godwin that fame could neither comfort her nor pay her bills. “You tell me that I have ‘Literary Fame!’ How comes it then that I am abused, neglected,—unhonoured,—unrewarded” (7:320).

Robinson’s awareness of her dire financial situation and the deleterious effects of writing on her health are persistent themes in her later letters. “My health and my spirits are *worse than ever*” (cited in Setzer, “Original Letters” 312), she wrote on August 15, 1800, and two months later, she added, “I *know* that I am sinking *very rapidly* to the grave. My powers are all decaying. I am withering into nothing” (cited in Setzer, “Original Letters” 324). In the letters of this time period, she repeatedly refers to her need to write for money, despite her ongoing illness. On October 22, 1800, she wrote of her work for the *Morning Post*:

I have for some weeks past laboured at the hazard of my life, and have frequently written verses when my physician absolutely forbade me the use of my pen. During near twelve months I have *incessantly* labored for the paper. I could not continue those labors with quite so much *industry*; and now that I most *want* the reward of my toil,—the season of my harvest is over, and my prospects for the present blighted! Such are the vicissitudes of literary occupations! I am weary of them. (cited in Setzer, “Original Letters” 322)

Here, as in her “Monody to the Memory of Chatterton,” Robinson flies in the face of the Romantic ethos of writing as the product of divine inspiration, a manifestation of the genius’s internal drive.⁵ This is not writing as a necessary expression of self, an internal compulsion unsullied by contact with the marketplace, but writing as a real form of work undertaken out of

economic necessity. Robinson wrote because she needed money, admitting in the same letter, “[I]f I had a mountain hovel, with a *certain* and *regular income*, however small, I would bid farewell to scribbling—for ever” (322). As late as November 11, 1800, less than two months before her death, Robinson wrote, “I have ever since last June supported myself wholly by the exertions of my pen” (cited in Setzer, “Original Letters” 325). Thus while Robinson was a famous and popular author, writing never provided her with the financial security she so desperately craved. She was, by her own account, constantly engaged in strenuous, difficult labor that resulted in little by way of financial reward.

As Robinson’s economic fortunes declined, her frustrations became more apparent in her writings themselves; authorial financial neglect, a passing interest in *Angelina* and *Walsingham*, becomes a central preoccupation of *The Natural Daughter*, and the ridiculous figure of Mrs. Woodford is reimaged as the wholly sympathetic Martha Morley. *The Natural Daughter* offers one of Robinson’s most explicit condemnations of society’s treatment of authors, the difficulties of trying to survive through literary labor made manifest in the biting satiric depiction of Mr. Index, the publisher who abuses Martha’s trust. Mr. Index is very attuned to the whims of the marketplace, and he implies that Martha, like Mrs. Woodford, must chase a fickle reading public. Unfortunately, like Mrs. Woodford, Martha quickly discovers that audience tastes are hard to anticipate: “she was now at a loss what kind of story to delineate. The terrific had been worn to a mere spectre . . . the sentimental would no longer suit the languid nerves of those who were devoted to dissipation . . . chivalry was out of fashion . . . and the sober lessons of good sense and morality had long been consigned, exclusively, to the shelves of boarding-school libraries” (7:109). One by one, Mr. Index shuts down her ideas. “We have our warehouses full of unsold sentimental novels” (7:110), he insists, before finally admitting that in all likelihood no one will read her book anyway. “How trouble-some these women are! They never get through more than the first six pages” (7:111), he says, denigrating his customer base even as he reduces Martha and her book to “consumable commodities” (Cross, “Romantic Flies” 344). As Claire Brock points out, through Mr. Index, Robinson “dismantle[s] the mechanisms of literary celebrity” (101); Martha is not a star author in the making, but a woman dependent upon the whims of an uneducated, lazy, and easily bored populace.⁶

Robinson’s criticisms of the authorial marketplace culminate in the madhouse, where the unfairly imprisoned Martha learns the extent to which she has been fleeced. “Six editions for ten pounds” (7:141), she exclaims.⁷ Having elected to sell her copyright, Martha suddenly finds that her work has been marketable after all, and that it will enrich Mr. Index, not herself. Robinson here employs Gothic tropes—female imprisonment, false accusations of insanity, and physical and mental tortures—to underscore Martha’s plight. Her “arms were confined; her distress was taunted by menaces and grimaces. She was compelled to swallow the most nauseous medicines” (7:141). Later, “She was . . . bled, blistered, menaced, and tortured . . . her head . . . shaved, and her limbs bruised even to the privation of the powers of motion” (7:141-42). Nonetheless, for Martha, the greatest outrage is financial, and she goes temporarily mad when she realizes she has been duped. The true villain of the section is not the woman who imprisoned her, but an economic system that cares nothing for the authors it so casually exploits.

The Natural Daughter satirizes the publishing industry’s treatment of authors, but its depiction of the literary marketplace is only one facet of Robinson’s larger critique of her culture’s treatment

of authors. As Martha has little luck supporting herself via the open market, she tries instead to solicit subscriptions from wealthy patrons. According to Fergus and Thaddeus, “Subscription could be the most lucrative method” for seeking authorial compensation (193). Robinson herself used this method when publishing her 1791 *Poems*, for which she charged the hefty fee of one guinea per copy. Supported as they were by a number of prominent patrons including the Duchess of Devonshire and the Prince of Wales, Robinson’s efforts were relatively successful; with six hundred subscribers, she would have turned a respectable profit on the edition, although, as Hester Davenport points out, “there is no way of knowing how many of Mary’s 600 subscribers had defaulted” (166), leaving Robinson to foot the bill for their unclaimed copies. For authors without such illustrious friends, however, the subscription process could be “demeaning, especially for women, since it required direct solicitation for payment” (Fergus and Thaddeus 191). Thus Robinson foregrounds the humiliating aspects of the marketplace’s alternatives when Martha seeks out aristocratic support for her writing, only to discover that potential male patrons value women’s labor only when they are engaged in sex work.⁸ Martha arouses little interest in her writing, but she does receive an offer from a “wealthy libertine” who would make her his mistress: “two thousand pounds for her present exigencies, and three hundred pounds per annum were proffered as the price of her degradation” (7:121), a much better offer than she ever receives for her honest intellectual work. Another potential patron, a baronet, refuses her outright because “he felt no inclination to dignify his character by an act of generous patronage; or to bestow any portion of that wealth on an enlightened female, which he did not scruple publicly to lavish on the most ignorant, profligate, and mercenary of the sex” (7:127). Like the libertine, the baronet understands sex work as labor that must be compensated, but he cannot conceive of a woman doing work with the mind rather than the body. “The sufferings of a woman of talents,” Robinson says sarcastically of the baronet, “did not impress his mind” (7:127).

Authorial labor is both invisible and useless in an economy that affords women little intellectual worth, and most of the men Martha encounters assume she will sell her body along with her works (a stereotype that perhaps even more persistently followed actresses⁹). Yet even those patrons who make no presumptions about Martha’s sexual availability devalue her intellectual worth by equating her search for patronage with genteel panhandling. Another potential patron, “a wealthy Asiatic,” declines to subscribe, but offers her a guinea in charity, sending her a message “that if she was in distress she was welcome to it as a present” (7:127). Martha feels degraded by the offer; she has not come to plead her penury in a bid for charitable donations. Her work should stand on its own, and when it does not, she returns the offered guinea in disgust.

It is a potential female patron, however, that leaves Martha feeling the most devalued. Martha is invited to the home of Lady Eldercourt to present her work, only to learn that the estimable woman “never reads,” and that she “cannot endure” authors (7:128). When Martha finally meets the Lady in person, she finds that Lady Eldercourt is solely interested in hearing herself praised in dedicatory verse—“first let me hear the Dedication” (7:131), she commands—and that she believes quite firmly that authorship is not a real form of work. “Have you nothing but poetry to depend on?” she asks Martha, appalled (7:130). “Writing is very well as an amusement, but it very rarely pays the expences attending it. ’Tis an idle trade, child” (7:130). Only the wealthy can truly afford to write, Lady Eldercourt implies. The poor, by contrast, should find themselves real jobs, and not impose themselves upon the charity of their betters, an attitude articulated most explicitly by Lady Eldercourt’s maid, who tells Martha, “my lady is very good-natured; for she

knows that people come with their books as a genteel sort of begging, and she generally pays them handsomely for their trouble” (7:129). This is the final degradation for Martha; her “incessant labor” (7:109), her hard work bringing the book into the world has been reduced either to a calling card for prostitution or a plea for charity.

What emerges from *The Natural Daughter*, then, is a potent disgust at the subscription and patronage systems, which, by their very nature, place the untalented, the uneducated and the anti-intellectual in positions of power over the author.¹⁰ “Who will condescend to be taught by an obscure scribbler?” Lady Eldercourt complains, angry that an educated woman of lower rank might think herself worthy of speech (7:134). This unequal balance of power in turn has a detrimental effect on the writer’s work, as the author is forced to write ridiculously hyperbolic praise of an often unworthy financial backer. Mr. Index advises Martha to appeal to patrons as follows: “You must be careful to enumerate all the good qualities of your patron, and to skim lightly over all the bad ones. You must profess yourself his obedient and devoted servant; and before you conclude your tribute to his many inestimable virtues, you must not forget to declare that you abhor flattery, and that your mind is as independent as your writings” (7:111). Here, Robinson mocks the disingenuous flattery necessitated by patronage, a form of discourse that devalues literature and sullies intellectual work.

Set in this context, modern critics must wonder how Robinson felt about her own panegyric verse written in honor of her real-life patron, Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. Robinson first met Georgiana while confined to debtor’s prison with her husband, and the Duchess remained supportive of Robinson throughout her career. In response, Robinson dedicated multiple works to the Duchess, praising her beauty, kindness, and munificence.¹¹ Her 1791 poetry collection, for instance, included a poem entitled “Sonnet. Inscribed to Her Grace the Dutchess of Devonshire,” in which she enthuses over Georgiana’s “flowing hair of orient gold,” “bright eyes,” “cheek of blushing rose,” “breast of snow,” and “polish’d MIND” (1:145). As late as 1799, she wrote of Georgiana, “What can sooth the wounded breast, / And ev’ry aching sense beguile, / Ah! what can charm the soul to rest, / Like DEVON’s voice, or DEVON’s smile?” (2:1), and her 1800 *Present State of Manners* praises the Duchess as one of England’s few true “patronesses of literature and the arts” (8:210). Georgiana emerges from *The Natural Daughter*, too, as an example of patronage done right, an “idealized benevolent female patron” (Craciun, *Fatal Women* 92), who stands in contrast to Lady Eldercourt’s anti-intellectual arrogance. The so-called Duchess of Chatsworth is “not a being created in the common mold” (7:152), and she rescues Martha from the most desperate financial straits. Martha refers to her as a woman of “exemplary conduct” (7:153), “kind, liberal, and unprejudiced . . . with . . . undescribable and fascinating affability, and . . . the most graced sincerity” (7:154). Here, *The Natural Daughter* exists in a state of uneasy tension, torn between Robinson’s clear disgust for the patronage system and her need to praise her own benefactor. In describing the Duchess so fulsomely, Robinson does what Mr. Index advises; that is, she “enumerate[s] all the good qualities of [her] patron, and . . . skim[s] lightly over all the bad ones” (7:111). The Duchess’s personal qualities aside, she was certainly not famed for her “exemplary conduct”; her gambling debts and extramarital affairs were already quite public by the time Robinson published *The Natural Daughter*, so however grateful to the Duchess Robinson might have been, she must, like Martha, have compromised her artistic integrity in offering spurious praise of a woman more

known for her scandalous exploits than her modesty. The novel itself thereby acts as a testament to the consequences of patronage, a system driven by economic desperation.

According to Fergus and Thaddeus, writing offered women “the promise of decent wages without demanding a lengthy apprenticeship or even a remarkable genius—and a writer’s gentility might survive relatively undamaged” (191). In *The Natural Daughter*, however, Robinson suggests that when women become authors, the decks are stacked against them, in part due to the cultural denigration of female intellect, but also due to the widespread disinterest in recognizing any intellectual work, by men as well as women, as work. From the early pages of *The Natural Daughter*, then, Robinson flies in the face of those who would, like Lady Eldercourt, tell Martha to get a real job, insisting instead that writing is a legitimate form of employment. Martha and Mrs. Sedgley use the language of labor, of work, to discuss the travails of authorship. “There is no harder labour,” Martha tells Mrs. Sedgley “with a sigh. ‘Yet little do the dull and proud imagine how dearly the children of genius earn even the highest patronage which ostentation offers. The toils of intellect are more severe than even the miseries of adversity’ (7:30). Both Martha and Mrs. Sedgley view writing as “mental exertion” (7:30); even for the creative genius, writing is hard labor that can ruin physical health, as Martha comes to know only too well. Like Robinson herself, who complained in her letters of having “laboured at the hazard of my life” (cited in Setzer, “Original Letters” 322), Martha “employed her pen, till her health was visibly declining; she had denied herself the comforts of existence, till existence itself was scarcely to be valued” (7:121).¹² Writing can destroy the body every bit as much as more physical forms of employment.

In speaking of Mrs. Sedgley’s mental toil, Robinson draws directly on the language of her “Monody to the Memory of Chatterton,” connecting Mrs. Sedgley’s suffering, Martha’s suffering, directly with Chatterton’s.¹³ In the “Monody,” Chatterton forces himself “Each day to labour” (1:109), and Martha, too, produces her first book after “six weeks . . . confined . . . to incessant labour” (7:109). For male and female authors alike, writing is hard work. In Martha’s case, Robinson’s use of the word “labour” might suggest the common metaphor of authorship as childbirth,¹⁴ but given that she also uses the language of “labour” to describe Chatterton’s male acts of authorship, I want to suggest that Robinson is purposely undermining the comparison. Despite what Anne K. Mellor describes as Robinson’s tendency to represent “the female artist as both lover and mother” (252), Robinson seeks to divorce the mental work of the female author from the productions of her body, and thereby reject the contemporary tendency to link female bodily weakness with female intellectual weakness.¹⁵ By separating authorial labor from natural biological processes, she collapses the distinction between the genders and sets male and female artistic labor on an equal plane of value. Martha’s labor is not different from Chatterton’s, and while they have both labored, neither has given birth (a particularly fraught image in a book about a clandestine illegitimate pregnancy). To conflate the two processes is to obscure the actual work of writing and hence naturalize the failure to compensate the individual author.

Robinson would protest what Melissa Sodeman terms “Britain’s neglect of genius” (128) three more times before her death, in her 1800 poem “The Poet’s Garret,” in her *Sylphid* essays of 1799-1800, and in her *Present State of Manners, Society, &c. &c. of the Metropolis of England* (1800). “The Poet’s Garret” contrasts the poet’s beautiful inner world, “the airy throne / Of bold Imagination” (2:126), with his squalid lodgings; the poet dreams while “the wind / Whistles thro’

broken panes” (2:127), a real and unromanticized poverty. Similarly, in *Sylphid X*, the titular Sylphid visits the decrepit apartment of an impoverished poet, a scene reminiscent both of Chatterton and of *Walsingham*’s starving M‘Arthur: “I found myself on the icicled parapet of an obscure dwelling in the vicinity of Fleet-street . . . The inhabitant of this *attic* solitude was a poet; perhaps a *Savage* or a *Chatterton!* . . . the *being* on whom *nature* had set the stamp of *mental nobility*; but whom the vulgar rich, the ostentatious ignorant, had neglected and deserted” (7:183). Like Martha Morley, this poet finds patronage degrading—“he had disdained to flatter the unworthy” (8:183)—but he must prostrate himself before the undeserving to survive. He “pressed his hand upon his eyes to conceal the tears which regret and poverty extracted from his full heart! The paper which he held contained a Dedication—to whom? to a pride-pampered, lofty, and *illiterate Patron!* a man, as far *beneath* him, in the scale of intellect, as he was *above* him on the sunny altitudes of Fortune!” (8:183). Like Martha, this poet must go begging to unworthy aristocrats, and he is finally rewarded for his self-abasement with “*one solitary shilling*” (8:184). Talented men and women alike are discarded by the society that should reward them while wealth is concentrated in the hands of an undeserving few.

Similar imagery appears in Robinson’s *Present State*, written just prior to her death. *Present State* celebrates the centrality of literature—including female-authored literature—to British cultural superiority. “England may enumerate, at the present aera, a phalanx of enlightened women, such as no other nation ever boasted” (8:204), she points out, and yet these geniuses are sorely undervalued, excluded from financial and social circles of power. “Men as well as women of talents are shut out from the abodes of the high-born, and rather avoided than courted by the powerfully wealthy” (8:204). Even in France, she claims, writers have been better treated. “In France, even in the days of despotism, genius was deemed the ornament of courts; and men as well as women of letters were honoured with the most brilliant distinctions” (8:205).¹⁶ If French despots could reward their authors, Robinson implies in an appeal to English nationalism, surely Britain could treat its artists with more dignity.¹⁷ At the end of her life, Robinson calls for a reassessment of the value of authorial labor and for just compensation for artistic work.

To read Mary Robinson’s oeuvre today is to recognize how thoroughly she rejected the growing Romantic ethos of authorial genius and idealized suffering. There is nothing romantic (in either the capital or the lower-case sense of the word) in starving to death, and Robinson never lets her reader lose sight of the realities of authorial poverty. In a manifestation of her increasingly radical politics, she links authorial under-compensation with Revolutionary-era debates about the equitable distribution of wealth, placing the blame for the deaths of writers such as Chatterton (and implicitly, herself) squarely on the shoulders of a culture that enjoys the fruits of artistic creation while disrespecting the labor of the artist. Her works thus insist with mounting anger that writing is a legitimate career, one divorced both from natural biological processes and from the romanticized suffering of the creative genius. Writing on the eve of her death, Robinson demands that the public recognize authorship as real and legitimate employment. Only then, she implies, will authors be rewarded with the financial compensation she believed they so richly deserved.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Craciun, who analyzes Robinson's response to sexual double standards, or Fay and Pascoe, who discuss Robinson's desire to rehabilitate through writing her own reputation for unchastity.

² Coleridge revised the "Monody" throughout his career, making changes as late as 1834. For the purposes of this essay, I have elected to quote his original 1790 composition, the version with which Robinson would have been familiar.

³ For comparison of Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* with Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, see Cross, "From *Lyrical Ballads*." For discussion of Robinson as poet, see Curran, Labbe, Pascoe, and Robinson's *The Poetry of Mary Robinson*.

⁴ The novel also depicts unfavorably those who would dismiss female artistry. Sir Edward Clarendon yearns to sell his daughter in marriage to a nobleman, and his ignorance is linked with his disdain for female writing. "Women have no business either to write or to read, as I said before: the rank I designed my daughter to move in doesn't require either" (3:30)

⁵ Such beliefs can be found, for instance, in Coleridge's descriptions of the primary and secondary imaginations in his *Biographia Literaria*.

⁶ By exposing Martha's dependence on public taste, Robinson emphasizes what Katherine Watts calls "the devalued status of any female labor" (9). Watts provides a useful overview of Robinson's frustrations with her publishers as depicted in *The Natural Daughter*, but does not contextualize those frustrations amidst Robinson's broader concerns about authorial labor.

⁷ Davenport points out that Martha's bitterness aside, £10 was the going rate for a first book at the time. "Ten pounds... was a usual sum for an untried author, and 10 guineas was what Ann Radcliffe received for her first novel" (189). It is, however, this very attitude that Robinson was seeking to challenge. Just because £10 is the going rate does not mean the going rate is just.

⁸ In Julie Shaffer's words, Martha "learns that a woman's authorship has little meaning or desirability unless it is marked by bodily attractiveness, her sexuality" (307).

⁹ For discussion of Robinson as actress and target of sexualized satire, see Engel and Pascoe.

¹⁰ See also Robinson's *The False Friend* (1799), which likewise swipes at the patronage system. Robinson contrasts the poverty of an unnamed female artist with the opulence of Mrs. Orient, a hack writer who grows rich pandering to patrons.

¹¹ For further discussion of the relationship between Robinson and the Duchess of Devonshire, see Daniel Robinson.

¹² Maria Elizabeth Robinson uses similar language in her continuation of Robinson's *Memoirs*: "the toil of supplying the constant variety required by a daily print... pressed heavily upon her spirits, and weighed down her enfeebled frame" (7:288).

¹³ The narrator also refers directly to Chatterton who “had been spurned by unfeeling greatness,” Otway, who “perished in misery,” Collins, who “bowed to despondency,” and Savage who “had been urged on to crimes by the effects of indigence” (7:126). By contrasting Martha’s struggles with those of Chatterton, Otway, and Savage, Robinson suggests once again that disrespect for artistic toil is a problem that transcends gender.

¹⁴ She also later refers to Martha’s book as “her first-born” (7:109).

¹⁵ In Morgan Rooney’s words, she seeks “an end to conceptions of femininity that insist on identifying woman primarily in terms of the body” (371). Rooney’s essay examines the ways in which Robinson uses female authorship to challenge good woman/bad woman dichotomies, but her argument is also applicable to Robinson’s use of birth imagery.

¹⁶ Robinson makes a similar claim in her *Letter to the Women of England*; England has reached a golden age of artistic expression, yet artistic women, even more so than men, are diminished for their talents: “Here the arts and the sciences have exhibited their accomplished female votaries... I remember hearing a man of education, an orator, a legislator, and a superficial admirer of the persecuted sex, declare, that ‘the greatest plague which society could meet with, was a *literary woman!*’” (8:151).

¹⁷ Robinson was frequently torn between admiration for the principles driving the French Revolution and disgust at the Revolution’s violence. She was also an ardent admirer of Marie Antoinette, whom she had met. For discussion of Robinson’s attitude towards the French Revolution in *The Natural Daughter*, see Setzer, “Romancing.” For discussion of Robinson’s attitude toward the French Queen, see Russo and Cousins.

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