DARK WOMEN, DARK NATURE

DARK WOMEN, DARK NATURE: MARY ROBINSON'S GOTHIC WOMEN AND NATURE POETRY

By ALEX WAGSTAFFE, B.A., M.A.

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Lay Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the Gothic works of Mary Robinson, including poetry and one novel. The contributions of this dissertation to the field of eighteenth-century British Literature are focused on women-authored works about women. These narratives have, in the past, been underrepresented in current studies. This dissertation does the work of rediscovering the works of Mary Robinson and rethinking the role of her work in justice, resistance, and women's rights. The goal of this dissertation is to connect Robinson's work to modern problems of patriarchy, colonization, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and tyranny.

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the Gothic works of Mary Robinson and uses the lens of the Gothic, ecocriticism, and feminism, as they operate in conjunction, to examine patriarchal power structures at work in eighteenth-century Britain. The main argument is that Mary Robinson uses Gothic nature and the figure of the fatal woman in her poetry and novels to critique and resist patriarchal power and to advocate for women's rights and social justice. Central research questions include 1) How do these areas (the Gothic, ecocriticism, and feminism) within Romanticism create counter-points to the dominant patriarchal narrative of the eighteenth century?; 2) How do the above-cited areas serve to explore grey areas and what I call "squishy" definitions of morality, justice, and truth?; 3) How do these grey (or green) areas impact the ways in which readers see the world and how do these impacts affect resistance to oppressive power structures in eighteenth-century England? Robinson's work presents female characters who patriarchal forces would see as dangerous to their hoarding of power. The fatal woman character is dangerous in her seductive magnetism and violent tendencies. However, the fatal woman is often fatal to herself as well as others, dying at the end of the work. Robinson's heroines circumvent this fate in a number of ways, which lead us to the question – is she really contained, in the end? Not only is this research important in helping to revitalize the study of eighteenth-century women's writing, but the questions of Mary Robinson's time echo forward into our current global political and social turmoil.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Dark Women, Dark Nature: Mary Robinson's Gothic Women and Nature Poetry

Introduction

How does one introduce a woman like Mary Robinson? I can list off details of her history by saying that she was an actress, a lover of the Prince of Wales, and an author. While that much is obvious, however, these details do not truly capture all the facets of her splendour. I say "splendour" because she was a captivating individual who caught the imaginations of her audience no matter what she was doing. Charlotte Dacre declared her the "Most perfect among erring mortals (Dacre "Shade"), speaking for the many admirers of Robinson who put her on a pedestal of fame and desirability. Dacre's poem continues, "And bear, when I die, my frail spirit to thee" (Dacre "Shade"), suggesting that Dacre, at least, saw Robinson as part of a canon, or perhaps that Robinson's spirit would strengthen Dacre's own "frail spirit." Robinson caught the eye of the Prince of Wales when she was playing Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* and became his lover, her Perdita to his Florizel. And, of course, she was an author of note, someone who also caught the attention of more well-known poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. She was also a feminist, authoring *A Letter to the Women of England* in the same vein as, and with reference to, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

The real question is: what am I looking for in Mary Robinson's oeuvre? What my research is exploring is the intersection between three areas of Romanticism: Nature, the

Gothic, and Feminism. I argue that these three areas are part of an underlying structure which resists patriarchal and societal oppression in the eighteenth century. I do not necessarily mean that each of these Romantic sub-fields individually stages a political resistance, but through their combination, a powerful counter-structure to patriarchy, colonialism, and industrialism is formed. I call this structure "Gothic Green Romanticism." During my Master's research, I came to the conclusion that female characters of three different Gothic novels who were immersed in Gothic nature had enhanced forms of cultural agency. These three novels were *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Romance of the Forest* by Ann Radcliffe and *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen. I continue my search for the answer to several questions by examining Mary Robinson's Gothic nature poetry, with a particular focus on her female characters.

My central research questions are: 1) How do these areas of Romanticism create counter-points to the dominant patriarchal narrative of the eighteenth century?; 2) How do these areas explore grey areas and what I call "squishy" definitions of morality, justice, and truth?; 3) How do these grey (or green) areas impact the ways in which readers see the world and how do these impacts affect resistance to oppressive power structures in eighteenth-century England? All of these questions are meant to aid us as readers in delving into non-distinct areas of study and coming to the conclusion that the squishiness is the point. It is exactly this lack of definition that can be used to resist oppression.

I use the term "squishy" throughout this dissertation to describe an area of uncertainty or a defiance of containment. These areas, much like mud or ooze of a non-

distinct nature are difficult to define and when one attempts to grasp them, will squish between one's fingers and get absolutely everywhere. Though not a term commonly used in literary theory, I have found it helpful in this context because "squishy" has an organic connotation which evokes the fundamental materiality of life and death, repeatedly taken up in Gothic writing through its female characters. I think of squishiness as one of the deliberate aims of Mary Robinson's writings and argue that Robinson is using these grey areas to explore concepts of justice and morality as well as to resist patriarchal and oppressive systems.

Throughout this dissertation, I will examine several key points of Robinson's Gothic poetry and tie them into my main argument: that Robinson employs indistinct characteristics of women, the Gothic, and nature as a form of resistance to oppression. In Chapter 2, I argue that the function of dark or Gothic nature in Mary Robinson's poetry is to address forms of life and death and what is in between in order to establish standards of a good life which differ from those of Enlightenment-era thinkers of the previous century. Chapter 3 discusses the figure of the "fatal woman" and how Robinson uses it to rethink standards of love, pain, life, and death. I examine how solitude is connected to oblivion and how these two notions connect to female characters and their agency. In Chapter 4, I explore in more detail how gender muddies ideas of morality and justice. Lastly, in Chapter 5 I conclude by considering how Robinson's female characters mobilize forms of resistance within patriarchal society that can be used to inspire action in real-world communities.

Defining a Field

It is possible that the task set by this dissertation is more of a disruption of a field than a definition. When I think of the term "Gothic Green Romanticism" and how it fits into the broad field of Romanticism, the matter gets squishy almost immediately. That is what I will be attempting to wrangle: the general definition of a field that defies containment. "Gothic Green Romanticism" is the term that I came up with to explain and explore Gothic nature poetry authored by women in the Romantic period. Although other scholars have discussed the category "Green Romanticism," I have added "Gothic" to the mix. This category names a particular kind of Romantic writing that delves into the complex interplay of gender dynamics that are animated when female characters are situated in Gothic natural spaces. I focus these queries and explore their implication for gendered forms of identity and social agency, in relation to the poetry of Mary Robinson, the famous actress and infamous mistress of the Prince of Wales who turned to a literary career after this relationship ended. It all seems rather simple when put that way, but I will expand on the complexities contained (or uncontained) in Robinson's writing.

I will begin with Romanticism. To start, as a field of study, Romanticism is widely acknowledged to be traditionally male-author-centric. The so-called "Big Six" of Romanticism are all male: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Of course, many Romantic

scholars have been working for decades to disrupt this idea.[1] I contribute to this movement by focusing not only on a female author, but also on her female characters. My main question is whether or not the gender of the author impacts how she imagines and understands the agency of female characters in the worlds in which she places them. I rather suspect it does. The question of gender is something that I will explore in greater detail later, both in terms of the author and her characters.

Secondly, I must address the question of nature. Now, nature is squishy. Most scholars can agree that the question of nature is a much-examined topic in the Romantic era. However, there are no easy answers when it comes to the question "what is nature?" The word that I use in my title – "green" – does not adequately convey the meaning of all that it contains. Again, it sounds easy. Again, it is squishy. The field of Green Romanticism, the realm of ecocritics, is something of a battlefield. Many enjoy quoting Alan Liu's infamous line "There is no nature" (104) and then explaining why he is wrong. At least when I do, I will finish the quotation.

And then there is the Gothic. As a literary phenomenon, the Gothic is especially squishy, even among other squishy things. I draw in particular on the fields of Gothic Feminism and the Eco-Gothic to explore the intersections of Gothic imagination, gender, and nature. Scholars who discuss the Gothic in terms of genre, in order to place it in literary history, focus on defining it by identifying its standard themes and tropes. There is always a Gothic heroine and a Gothic hero and a Gothic villain and a Gothic castle with

[1] The Bigger 6 Collective found at https://www.bigger6.com/

Gothic passageways and Gothic emotions…you get the point. However, I want to discuss the Gothic in terms of function rather than genre. What does the Gothic do? How does it act? How does it change depending on certain conditions? The Gothic is more like the weather in the mountains than the title of a B-movie in a 90s video rental store, is what I want to say.

The way that I visualize the complexities of looking at the intersections of gender, nature, the Gothic, and Romanticism is as interconnecting matrices. These matrices that I am imagining do not have boundaries, and the ways that they intersect are complicated and varied. The scope of the field I am imagining is vast, and my goal with this particular chapter is to explain some of those intersections and why they are important to my specific project. However, there are almost limitless ways in which this field could be used to explore these various matrices, so the field itself, as I say, defies containment and therefore definition. My attempt here is not to define the field, but to find common threads throughout these matrices and to tie them together in ways that explore the lines of thought that animate Mary Robinson's work.

The Question of Nature

What is nature? In his introduction to *Natures in Translation*, Alan Bewell makes the point that while twenty-first century scholars recognize a variety of cultures, "we talk as if there were only one nature" (12). Bewell urges ecocritical scholars "to recognize a *plurality of natures*" (13). The idea that there are multiple natures and that each of these

natures affects cultural interactions and interconnections differently is important. A plurality of natures allows scholars to differentiate the nature they are discussing in conjunction with textual evidence in order to come to a variety of conclusions. Where in the world is this nature located and how do humans interact with it? Is British nature different from French nature and why does a human-created border affect it? What is the difference between literary nature and empirical nature? These questions are ones I seek to answer in this dissertation. One issue I want to address is the idea that nature can be something that people can see and touch as well as a construct that humans create.

For a long time, Romantic scholars have debated the relationship of nature versus culture. James C. McKusick notes that "the dichotomy between nature-as-ground and nature-as-construct is false when it is posed as an either/or alternative" (16). I agree that the idea that nature and culture are separate is a false binary. In Britain, Enlightenment philosophy in particular has encouraged human beings to think of themselves as outside of or even above nature in a hierarchy of being. However, many scholars now work to point out that humans and their cultures are part of a natural system from which they cannot necessarily distance themselves. McKusick goes on to explain that "The concept of Nature is capacious enough to contain both nature-as-ground and nature-as-construct" (16). And then there is Alan Liu's contention that "There is no nature, except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government" (104). Liu's argument here is that nature is *only* a construct, one that humans created—that culture is not contained by nature, but rather nature is contained by

human culture. Many scholars, such as McKusick, disagree. I would point out that many things are constructs that humans make, but that does not mean that they do not exist tangibly, and animately, as well. For example, our monetary system is a human construct, and yet it organizes and conditions our lives; we would find it very difficult to attempt to live outside this system. If (and I am not convinced this is so) nature is only a construct, it still affects people concretely and in ways beyond human control. One only has to look at current events such as floods and fires to note that truth.

One such construct is that of domestic nature versus foreign nature. In this case, I am thinking of domestic nature as seen by eighteenth-century British writers. Where is the boundary between foreign natures and domestic natures, and how is this line crossed by the processes of imperialism and colonization? There are very few Gothic works that actually take place in England from the Romantic period, and I want to discuss two in particular: *The Old English Baron* (1778) by Clara Reeve and *Northanger Abbey* (1817) by Jane Austen. Reeve's *The Old English Baron* is a story that takes place on English soil and features a young man named Edmund who is the true heir to a noble title which has been usurped by a murderer. Edmund was found by his adoptive parents alone in nature, and he is, by nature, nobility. In other words, others recognize him as being a noble person in spite of his initial station as a servant. For example, Edmund distinguishes himself in battle and is nearly knighted because he is mistaken for a noble for his actions (Reeve 25). Like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, nature is constructed as a source of noble morality. The fact that this Gothic novel takes place in England brings the

problem of illegitimate rank and usurped power close to the British reader.

While *Northanger Abbey* may not belong to the conventional Gothic genre, it is part of what one might call the "mundane Gothic," which explores how the Gothic functions as a critique of patriarchal power structures in place in eighteenth-century Britain. Austen, while parodying the Gothic, also points out the existence of these power structures that are so prominent within the Gothic. I call it the "mundane" because this type of Gothic writing points out the ordinariness of patriarchal villainy and the everydayness of evil. British nature is constructed in this novel as distinctly ordinary, but also as a space where women can resist patriarchy and empower other women. For example, Catherine Morland and Eleanor Tilney take a walk through some Scottish firs, which was Eleanor's mother's favourite walk (Austen 131). It is a space that General Tilney, a symbol of the patriarchal system, refuses to enter, but it entices Catherine, who, "struck by its gloomy aspect, and eager to enter it, could not, even by the General's disapprobation, be kept from stepping forward" (131). Further, it is a space which allows Eleanor's mother to be spectrally present and protective of her daughter—a form of maternal haunting that Robinson takes up as well. As the Gothic for British readers is generally constructed as being long ago and far away in order to distance Britain from the dangers the Gothic represents, domestic Gothic nature brings that danger close and into an intimate space. It is fitting that the two examples of domestic Gothic nature in eighteenth-century British novels I could find are authored by women. Women were very aware that the terrors and horrors of the Gothic could take place close to home.

One of the plethora of natures one might consider is that of the British colonies, which are both foreign and not-foreign, as colonies are constructed (laboriously) as part of the empire. However, colonial territories are consistently depicted as strange and sometimes scary places for British settlers. There is sustained tension in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing between the perception of colonized spaces as exotic and the ongoing effort to integrate them into what is considered British. As one scholar notes, "Because tropical plants as food (such as sugar, tea, chocolate) have been key in the construction of British identity, those who grew the plants in the tropical regions of the empire are therefore implicated in this identity formation" (Tobin 10). Tropical nature is much different than the more temperate nature of the British isles, and yet, the yields of tropical nature have had just as much of an impact on British life and identity as anything that has emerged from within the boundaries of Britain's borders. I draw on a further example of *Northanger Abbey* to make this point. Jane Austen depicts the estate of Northanger as having "a village of hothouses" and a pinery which yielded "only one hundred in the last year" (Austen 130). Of course, when he says "only" one hundred, General Tilney is boasting to Catherine Morland about the richness and luxury of his estate. In this case, the transplanting of pineapples from their native tropics to England demonstrates the industry and colonization of imperial efforts. General Tilney represents the patriarchal agency of the British Empire, and a key part of his identity, his "hobby horse," is the growing tropical plants.

The transplantation of tropical plants from the colonies to English soil and that of

domestic British plants to colonial soil creates a blurring of boundaries. Beth Fowkes Tobin points out that this contact point "was crucial to the formation of British cultural identity and sense of imperial mission" (11). I find it very interesting that this sense of colonization was so crucial to identity formation in British subjects, because not only did they create a system of blurred boundaries, they actively created and produced identity from it. The British brought foreign nature into the homeland and exported their own domestic nature into the colonies. Nature, when not bound by national borders, forms its own ecosystems with distinct, if not rigid, boundaries. However, colonization cultivates strange hybrid natural environments by putting beings from vastly different ecosystems into contact. When British citizens like General Tilney imported pineapples and other foreign goods, they were considered "products" which could be contained—conquered items from conquered lands that were transported for the betterment of British industry and trade. This attitude also reflects the logic of the North Atlantic slave trade. But, as we now know, such global traffic in natural goods has resulted in the environmental problem of "invasive species," a phrase that suggests it is the plants and animals who are the "invaders," and not the colonizers who moved them around. This colonial attitude of shifting the blame off their own shoulders onto those they colonized and enslaved, demonstrates another facet of patriarchal power structures and their upkeep.

I both agree and disagree with McKusick when he says that "nature-as-ground" and "nature-as-construct" are not an either/or dichotomy. When I talk about nature in fictional accounts such as a novel or a poem, I consider it as a literary construct. It is not

"nature-as-ground" in the sense that it is designed by human creativity—it acts and reacts as an author or writer wants it to. It is, in a sense, a character in the text. I say "character" here and not "setting," because rather than being depicted as flat and immovable, a backdrop for other actors, nature is endowed with palpable agency in eighteenth-century nature poems. For example, in the poem "The Poor Singing Dame" by Mary Robinson, nature haunts the patriarchal villain of the piece in response to the old woman's death. As the reader hears,

> The lord of the castle, from that fatal moment
>
> When poor singing Mary was laid in her grave,
>
> Each night was surrounded by screech-owls appalling,
>
> Which o'er the black turrets their pinions would wave! (Robinson "Dame")

Nature does not seem to have any reason to haunt the lord of the castle apart from the old woman's death, which suggests that it is acting in solidarity with her. As authors construct forms of nature in their texts for certain purposes, the same way they do plot development, character arcs, and various settings, they also attend to the ways that nature-as-ground reveals forms of agency beyond the human.

When McKusick says that there is no either/or between these two kinds of nature, he prompts us to think of nature-as-construct and nature-as-ground not as opposites but as interrelated phenomena. In my discussion of literary nature, as in written-on-the-page nature or painted-on-a-canvas nature, I try to pay attention to how it negotiates this relationship. As Jonathan Bate points out, many or most paintings that can be counted

among the picturesque are actually invented landscapes rather than a "true" image of the original (133). In that same vein, literary nature is invented for multiple artistic or narrative purposes beyond representing a true copy of the empirical natural world. In that sense, I am separating "nature-as-construct" or nature as an idea *and* perceivable nature or "nature-as-ground" from literary nature. As Bewell notes, there are a "plurality of natures" (13). There are many different types of nature, and nature is robust enough to contain all of these concepts.

All of these kinds of nature are animated by particular forms of agency, and I am especially interested in what literary nature is capable of doing. In Mary Robinson's writing, nature's nonhuman forms display agency of their own, and they also come into play to enhance female characters' agency as well. Robinson's Romantic nature acts in solidarity and allows female characters to act of their own accord in ways that patriarchal orders try to thwart. While I am not necessarily saying that empirical nature does not act in solidarity with humans ever, in the case of literary nature, the question of how nature participates in human lives is centered. Nature acts as a character, creating a world that functions as a mobile and movable force. The actions of literary nature are arguably part of the plot of every eighteenth-century Gothic novel; from Ann Radcliffe to Charlotte Dacre, literary nature is an active and even sentient participant in the narrative. Women's Romantic writing constructs literary nature as acting in solidarity with female characters. This recurrent theme promotes the idea that women have particular ties to nature within patriarchal cultural orders. What reason do eighteenth-century women authors have to

strengthen ideas of female ties to nature is something I explore in the next section.

Gender and Nature

To begin, I want to preface any further conversation by saying that concepts core to ecofeminism are a modern invention, and that when I discuss ecofeminism in this paper, I am talking about twentieth and twenty-first century discourse. It would be remiss of me not to cite ecofeminist texts such as Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and Caroline Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980). However, eighteenth-century authors had different concepts of both nature and women than we do today, and therefore, the authors' concepts of solidarity between nature and women are in many ways distinct from those argued in contemporary ecofeminism. In this section I will discuss gender and gender roles of women in eighteenth-century Britain and how nature was conceptualized. I will also discuss how these ideas cross over to create an eighteenth-century idea of proto-ecofeminism.

Val Plumwood describes ecofeminism in this way: "Women must be treated as just as fully human and as fully part of human culture as men. But both men and women must challenge the dualised conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature" (36). Plumwood's argument is that not only are women equal to men, but humans are not outside of nature. As a species, humans have long struggled with their place in nature, and often come to the conclusion that humans are above nature. For example, in Sir Francis

Bacon's work *The New Atlantis*, the utopia is described as follows: "The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and the secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon and Campanella 31). In other words, nature is something to be used only for the betterment of mankind – even if that betterment destroys nature. Bacon's *The New Atlantis* was written in 1626 and was an early influence in Enlightenment-era philosophy in Britain. The Romantic era inherited the worlds, both conceptual and material, established by the Enlightenment, and many of its authors grappled with the presumption that nature is fundamentally a product or a resource to be harvested for human endeavours. These foundations, of course, were the basis of settler colonialism, Indigenous genocide, and African enslavement.

An example of such grappling can be found in William Wordsworth's poem "Nutting" (1800). In this poem, the narrator tells of "sallying forth" (line 5) in warlike glee and "forcing my way" (line 16) among a "virgin scene" (Wordsworth "Nutting" line 21). The metaphor here is all too clearly spelled out, an assault that brings the narrator "a sense of pain" at having committed. The forest glade that the narrator invades is explicitly compared to a woman. The male narrator pillages female nature's resources, leaving behind "deformed, sullied... [and] mutilated" nature (Wordsworth "Nutting" line 47-50). Wordsworth clearly understands what the narrator has done, and names it as mutilation, as a moral crime. The narrator realizes that the damage to nature has already been done, and that there is no undoing it even though it causes him pain. Interestingly, Wordsworth also

notes at the end: “Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods” (“Nutting” lines 54-56). The maiden that the male narrator warns to be gentle with nature is someone Wordsworth compares to the bower the male narrator just destroyed. The two entities – the spirit in the woods and the maiden – are connected. Wordsworth knows that men perpetrate violence on both women and feminized nature, and he calls attention to this fact. It must be noted here that by Enlightenment-era logic, racialized women were considered closer to nature and therefore more animal. Therefore, the racialized woman was inherently more able to be raped, specifically by white men. Colonization is gendered violence. Wordsworth could also be making a comparison between this act of violence and that involved in colonization, although the “female spirit” mentioned is likely imagined as a white woman.

This poem suggests that Wordsworth 1) realizes the violence men commit against nature for the purpose of extracting resources; 2) condemns this violence; and 3) sees a redeeming connection between women and nature. I would even argue a fourth point, that Wordsworth sees a future in which women are the keepers or stewards of nature because of this connection. The significance of these points is that in the poem, Wordsworth posits that nature is not a mere resource to plunder and that white women should have a privileged role in its conservation. On a surface-level reading, the poem appears to follow some of the tenets of modern ecofeminism. I would be wary of thus declaring Wordsworth an ecofeminist, however, as there are plenty of his writings that present both

women and nature quite differently. For example, in the poem "The Thorn" (1798), the woman who visits the mountains every day seems to be haunting it and is suspected of a terrible crime.

"Nutting" is just one among countless examples I could draw on to show how Romantic writing associates women with nature in some deliberate way. In some of these examples, such as *Lamia* (1820) by John Keats, the woman is a monstrous creature that must be contained. In others, such as William Blake's "The Book of Thel" (1789), women are part of a holistic natural system. I would like to point out that all of these examples are authored by men. In order to accurately make a broad claim about how male authors write female characters, a much more extensive and sustained close reading would need to be done. However, the readings of male-authored works that feature female characters I have done thus far suggests a trend of imagining women as part of nature in a way that enhances the possibility that both might pose a threat to eighteenth-century patriarchal structures.

Keats's *Lamia*, for example, describes the character of Lamia this way:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd. (Keats "Lamia" lines 47-50)

The first thing I would like to note here is that Lamia is shaped like a gordian knot, a knot that is impossible to untie, suggesting that Lamia herself is in some ways impenetrable.

The second is that Keats describes her in a way that sounds wondrously beautiful. However, he offsets this beauty by adding that "Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet! / She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete" (Keats "Lamia"). This arresting description invokes an aspect of body horror alongside "dazzling" beauty. Lamia begs Apollo to turn her into a woman in exchange for information, a wish which Apollo grants. Lamia wants to marry Lycius, a human man, and as a human-bodied creature, is able to get to the marriage altar. However, her plan is thwarted by a friend of Lycius, a sophist who can see through her form's disguise. He says, "'shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?'" (Keats "Lamia"), suggesting that Lamia is a threat to Lycius, one that must be contained or destroyed.

While not all male authors depict women and nature with this level of suspicion, fascination, and fear, they recurrently posit women and nature alike, at best as mysterious problems to be solved at best, at worst as wild and dangerous and in need of being tamed. Women authors tend to have a different method of writing female characters and their relationship to nature. Some authors, such as Mary Robinson, choose to show the solidarity between women and nature, such as in "The Poor Singing Dame." Others such as Ann Radcliffe choose to demonstrate the connection between a female character's health and vitality and being close to nature. For example, Radcliffe's heroine Emily St. Aubert revivifies her health through a spiritual as well as physical connection with nature: "[Emily] raised her thoughts in prayer, which she felt always most disposed to do, when viewing the sublimity of nature, and her mind recovered its strength" (242). However, it

is not only her female characters who benefit from "the sublimity of nature"; Emily's father St. Aubert and her lover Valancourt also relate to her through their engagement with nature: "They had no words to express the sublime emotions they felt. A solemn expression characterized the feelings of St. Aubert; tears often came to his eyes…. Valancourt now and then spoke, to point to Emily's notice some feature of the scene" (43). Radcliffe depicts characters who are capable of relating to nature in this way, which is connected to the idea of sensibility, as free from the corruption of the city. This use of literary nature to denote the nature-culture divide reproduces the false dichotomy that frustrates scholars, at the same time imagining that relations among men and women might take different forms on different sides of that divide.

Literary nature in Romantic texts is not conceived as a politically neutral space, so scholars should not treat it that way. Eighteenth-century writers and aesthetic theorists such as William Gilpin and Edmund Burke gender nature according to various categories. Burke contends that "[I]n the female sex, [beauty] almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection" (203-4). Further, he suggests, "if beauty in our own species was annexed to use, men would be much more lovely than women; and strength and agility would be considered as the only beauties" (195). Burke argues that women are beautiful not for utility or formal perfection, deploying gender to depict the beautiful as a "weak" aesthetic. In contrast, he writes of the sublime, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source

of the sublime" (58). The sublime, the more interesting aesthetic to Burke, is the opposite of the beautiful and is gendered masculine. Gilpin weaves gender distinctions into nature a bit differently, arguing that "roughness" united with "beauty" creates the effect of the picturesque (6). The picturesque landscape is thus a mix of rugged, masculine features and beautiful, feminine ones. Authors writing literary nature were in conversation with contemporaneous aesthetic theories such as these, such that literary and artistic nature were being co-constructed in reference to each other as well as to nature-as-ground. As authors wrote categories like the sublime and the picturesque into literary nature, they brought constructions of gender into how readers imagined all forms of nature, from gardens to wilderness. While there is variation in how gender is depicted and attributed to nature, Romantic writing tends to present natural spaces as feminine.

Because of the way that authors gender literary nature, I argue that they use the presence and actions of nature as signposts in an ongoing attempt to understand human gendered experience and relations, in the same way a scholar signposts their work and arguments. The presence of nature in a certain scene indicates something about that scene's line of thought, building an argument in and of itself. For example, in the poem *Christabel* (1816) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, nature serves as a space where a woman can transgress traditional cultural boundaries. Christabel leaves the patriarchal space of the castle so that she can pray in a non-traditional or pagan way for her knight. This space is also where she meets Geraldine, the woman who uses Christabel to gain entrance to the castle. I find it very interesting that it is not until Christabel returns to the castle that she is

in any danger from Geraldine. In this poem, Coleridge writes nature as a space of freedom from the patriarchal boundaries of the castle, where Christabel has forms of agency and will unavailable to her within the castle. And, of course, this nature is Gothic nature, a space thick with transgressive energy.

The Gothic and Nature

What is Gothic or dark nature and how is it a separate category from nature in general? I use these phrases to identify a type of natural space that is uncomfortable or even frightening, frequently described as physically dark or obscured, and that has some kind of psychological as well as physical effect on the humans who encounter it. Gothic nature is mysterious and hides secrets, much like the Gothic edifice such as Radcliffe's iconic Castle Udolpho. This kind of nature is dangerous and must be intrepidly traversed. Often, it is associated with the sublime, the aesthetic Burke linked to feelings of both thrill and terror. And notably, in many cases, dark nature provides energy and agency to Gothic heroines.

I argue that dark nature provides a different type of sustenance to these characters than what we might call everyday nature. Everyday nature is pleasant and lovely in appearance, with more light and clarity than dark nature. It is cultivated to be hospitable to human beings rather than challenging. However, that is not to say that it is actually a safer space than dark nature, especially for women. Austen's Catherine Morland, for example, is in an everyday urban space when John Thorpe kidnaps her to go to Clifton.

Although Catherine does not seem to register the extent of her own danger in this instance, Austen presents it as a mundane Gothic event in which an ordinary girl in an ordinary space is literally carried off against her will in the manner of a Gothic heroine. When Romantic authors consider the dangers that lurk in seemingly unremarkable settings, they also invite us to consider whether more frightening spaces like dark nature might offer more than just threats.

I sometimes use the words "green space" in this study and I would like to clarify its meaning here before I go on. "Green space" is a space where natural elements are present, but it does not necessarily only mean wilderness or wild and untamed nature. It might refer to a Gothic forest, but it might also refer to pastoral spaces or even outdoor domestic spaces such as gardens or walks. In this dissertation, I argue that one element of literary green spaces is that they tend to be depicted as spaces in which women have enhanced agency and expanded possibilities for formative experience in comparison to more architecturally contained spaces. The walk through Scottish firs that nurtures Catherine and Eleanor's friendship in *Northanger Abbey* is one example. A quite different example is found in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), in which Victoria experiences liberty in a green space when she escapes the confines of her captivity through a garden: "Happy and joyous sight for the imprisoned Victoria! - she darted, like a wild bird newly escaped from its wiry tenement, into the beautiful and romantic wood that presented itself to her ravished view" (Dacre 56). Because in this case, Dacre's main character is a villainess and her actions in most cases are evil, she takes advantage of the enhanced

agency she finds in green space to torment others, such as using nature as a prison for her rival in love Lilla.

Zofloya offers me a good opportunity to nuance the distinction between "dark" and "evil" in the context of Gothic nature. In my readings of Gothic green spaces, I argue that literary nature of any kind is neither good nor evil. Rather, nature is depicted as having an innate energy that can be harnessed for good or evil means, similarly to how magic can be harnessed in fantasy novels. Even for authors like Radcliffe who use closeness to nature as a measure for human morality, nature is not itself inherently "good" the way she suggests people should be. To represent nature as "dark" is not to say that it is evil, but that it is not tame or benign. It is a form of green space that shows how nature is not passive or only present to be used for its resources. In my readings, I show how this kind of literary nature also demonstrates how women, too, can be dark without being evil – although there are many female characters, like Dacre's Victoria, who are both dark and evil. I argue that darkness constitutes a form of agency assigned to nature and women alike, that enables a type of resistance to patriarchal power structures in the eighteenth century.

Dark nature is closely related to the aesthetic category of the sublime. According to Burke, the sublime is the effect of "objects of terror" perceived at a safe distance: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (Burke 60). Thus, the sublime functions to register a subject's

distance from objects of terror such as craggy mountains or deep abysses. However, in Gothic novels, female characters often end up needing to traverse these terrifying landscapes, bringing them close to danger and terror. For example, Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert flees through the forest and the Apennines in order to reach the safety of France once more. Emily and her servants must even brave a storm and shipwreck before finding a safe haven with the de Villefort family. Indeed, there are not many ways to get closer to the world's objects of terror than being immersed in their murky depths. The distance of the sublime is not something the heroines of Gothic novels have access to; rather it is the reader who occupies that position. Yet while the reader of these novels is situated a safe distance from Gothic nature and all its dangers, and can therefore enjoy reading about terrifying things, this distance also allows the reader to witness and register the terrors and hardships experienced by characters immersed in dark landscapes.

My focus on Gothic nature overlaps in some ways with scholarship on the Ecogothic, which also focuses on dark nature and the agency of nature.[2] The main difference between Ecogothic criticism and my interest in what I call "Gothic Green Romanticism" is that the Ecogothic focuses on what we might learn about or from nature by attending to its darkest forms, while Gothic Green Romanticism focuses on solidarity between female characters and dark nature. Hence, the critical lens shifts from centring nature alone as an agential being to centring a partnership or linkage between women and

[2] Some works on the Ecogothic include *EcoGothic* (2003), an essay collection edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020) by Elizabeth Parker, and "Ecogothic," a book chapter found in *Twenty-first Century Gothic* (2019), authored by Sharae Deckard, et al. among others.

nature as agential beings in a meaningful relation.

My focus on how dark nature enhances the agency of female characters brings me into conversation with work not only on the Ecogothic but also on ecofeminism. What is the goal of ecofeminism? Plumwood asserts that "We do not have to accept a choice between treating 'nature' as our slave or treating it as our master" (37), arguing against the idea of a nature/culture dualism which would force this type of choice on women. Plumwood and other ecofeminists show how the cultural dichotomies that organize the world according to a nature/culture binary also sustain the social orders that organize human beings according to a gender binary. In eighteenth-century and Romantic writing, the logic of these binary systems was being generated, but because such binary thinking was relatively new, its appearance in literature was often messy—what I call squishy.

Ecofeminism points out how women and non-human beings, especially since the Enlightenment, have been subjected to systems of "scientific" classification and identification that claim to be objective and apolitical but that serve to uphold patriarchal imperial hierarchies of power. This can be seen, for example, in the field of botany. Eighteenth-century botanists were notably obsessed with classifying and naming all plant life in ways that would bring all of nature, anywhere in the world, under the authority of botany experts. Theresa M. Kelley points out how Romantic writing brings out the tensions of such a project in its early stages:

> Romantic era frictions between the ambition to name and classify all plants and a strong suspicion that plants might "confound" any system devised to accomplish

> this goal, together with its middle position among the kingdoms of nature, made botany an epistemic minefield in an era when collecting and identifying plants (or not identifying them) was a popular field of inquiry among amateur naturalists. (6)

While early botanists attempted to create this objective, hierarchical system for understanding plant life, they experienced how the system they were creating could not actually contain all that they had found. This resistance of nature to being epistemically contained—reduced to objects of human knowledge and use— suggests that human beings must find other ways of relating to nature, and that we must be able to inhabit the grey or dark areas of this relationship. Gothic Green Romanticism imagines some ways of doing that.

Dark Women and Dark Nature

As I explained earlier in my definition of "dark," this descriptor does not always denote evilness, although it does not exclude it either. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the genealogy of Romantic feminism, and specifically Gothic feminism, in order to show why this distinction is important for understanding Romantic depictions of women's relation to nature. To that end, I will examine the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Dianne Long Hoeveler, and E.J. Clery. I will also consider aspects of the femme fatale character by looking at female characters in Charlotte Dacre and Ann Bannerman's work as well as critical theory by Adrianna Craciun. Lastly, I will conduct a

close reading of Dacre's *Zofloya* and examine the characters of Victoria and Lilla.

The primary terms of Romantic era proto-feminism were introduced in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, specifically *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which influenced *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799) by Mary Robinson, who wrote this work under the pseudonym Anne Frances Randall. Wollstonecraft asserted that, in late eighteenth-century England, women were "enfeebled by false refinement" (n.p.), and that women are "like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil," whose "strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty" (n.p.). It is significant that Wollstonecraft uses a nature metaphor to make her point. She compares women to "hot house plants" and asks, "will [men] never cease to expect corn from tares, and figs from thistles?" (n.p.) when speaking of women's uneducated minds. Wollstonecraft uses plant metaphors to compare women's miseducation to newly fashionable forms of plant cultivation, which she evidently finds distasteful and frivolous.

Instead of showy hot house flowers, Wollstonecraft suggests at one point that wives might be thought of as "the graceful ivy" that thrives upon "the oak that supported it" (n.p.), their husbands. She uses this metaphor to argue with Rousseau's claims about marriage, stating that if men were as mature in mind as Rousseau suggests (which they are not), then perhaps they could support women as the oak does the ivy. What is significant to me is that she turns to a partnership of plants, the ivy that climbs the oak tree in a symbiotic relationship, to think about how women and men are partnered in British society. While this metaphor does put women in a subordinate position to men,

Wollstonecraft's point is that the two plants need each other to flourish. Wollstonecraft finishes her metaphor by saying that the ivy and the oak "would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous" (n.p.). Unlike the steady oak, men have failed to support women in this way, so that in order to grow as steadily as "graceful ivy," a woman needs the institutional support of a proper education. I should note here that the ivy and the oak are both domestic English plants, grounding Wollstonecraft's feminism in the soil of English nature.

Robinson also invokes nature in her argument for women's rights to education. She notes that women are "denied the power to assert the first of Nature's rights, self preservation" (9). She returns women to a more primal and instinctive form of knowledge, that of an animal's need to keep themselves alive above all else. She asks in another part of her text, "is it not repugnant to all the laws of nature, that her feelings, actions, and opinions should be controuled [sic], perverted, and debased, by such an help-mate" (3-4)? Robinson invokes the so-called "laws" of nature to support her claims. She implies that it is "natural" for women to be equal to men, and that by subjugating their sex, that men have wronged women in a way that goes deeper than human laws. While she does not figure nature through metaphor in the same way as Wollstonecraft, Robinson also appeals to nature to support her argument that women are entitled to equal rights.

The question is, whether or not Wollstonecraft's and Robinson's appeals to nature to support their arguments in favor of women is purely rhetorical, or whether their intention is to also support nature's rights as a related problem to women's rights.

Robinson wrote many poems and novels that invoke nature as a measure of morality and connect it to human development and education. For example, she places this connection in the title of her novel *Walsingham; or, the Pupil of Nature* (1797). I find this title very interesting, as the character of Walsingham Ainsforth is a man who blunders into many social mistakes during the course of the story. Is the story called "The Pupil of Nature" because he is so inept at navigating eighteenth-century society? Walsingham creates all sorts of trouble through these blunders, including a terrible situation in which he accidentally ruins the reputation of a young lady through a case of mistaken identity by carrying her away in his carriage and having sexual intercourse with her, like a Gothic villain. However, Walsingham's tutor during his younger years says,

> This established course of things it is not in our power to change; but it is in our power to assume such greatness of mind as becomes wise and virtuous men; as may enable us to encounter the accidents of life with fortitude, and to conform ourselves to the order of Nature, who governs the great kingdom, the world, by continual mutations. (*Walsingam* 95)

This quotation suggests that nature's role in Walsingham's education is meant to be taken more seriously, as a broader world order that human beings must adapt to instead of trying to control. In Robinson's work in general, women's education tends to defer to the "order of Nature" in this way, demonstrating an understanding of nature, societal laws, and education that deviates from the patriarchal norm.

With regard to Gothic representations of women's lives and educations, scholars

have been divided on the question of whether they have the capacity to make feminist arguments. Dianne Long Hoeveler argues in her book *Gothic Feminism* (1998) that Gothic feminism is actually "anti-feminist," stating,

> this potent ideology that persists even today and undergirds many of the assumptions of what now goes under the name of "victim feminism," the contemporary antifeminist notion that women earn their superior social and moral rights in society by positioning themselves as innocent victims of a corrupt tyrant and an oppressive patriarchal society. (2)

She goes on to say that female writers have "constructed themselves as victims in their own literature" (4). I contend that this claim, that female writers have constructed a world that positions female characters as victims who triumph morally over the villains who abuse them, is wrong—that it is based both on a misreading of eighteenth-century Gothic novels and on a questionable dismissal of critiques of structural oppression as "victim politics." I think that it is more accurate to say that the Gothic functions in novels as a lens to magnify already present acts of villainy which is a structural issue of patriarchal society. Authors such as Ann Radcliffe were writing about women in sometimes absurd situations, which are not sensational fabrications but rather representations of abuses of power that women writers witnessed in their own society. Maybe women were not really locked in attics or dungeons in real life – or maybe they were. It was no secret then or now that women deemed a risk to a family's reputation were often removed from society by means of imprisonment.

In any event, the women of Gothic novels are often trapped or somehow confined to prevent them from resisting patriarchal exploitation. For example, in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily and her aunt are confined in a castle away from all their relatives and homeland so that the evil Montoni can take away their lands and inheritance. Only by escaping from the castle and eventually reclaiming her estates is Emily able to reassert her social agency. Of course, some may argue that by marrying Valancourt she allows herself to be encapsulated by patriarchal authority once more. Even so, the fact that Emily continually refuses Valancourt's hand until an appropriate time indicates that Radcliffe is thinking seriously about what kinds and degrees of personal agency women like Emily might exert within patriarchal systems such as marriage and property.

Taking a different approach to the question of women's agency in the Gothic novel, E.J. Clery focuses not on the characters and plots but women authors' participation in a booming literary market. She writes that "Gothic literature sees women writers at their most pushy and argumentative" (3), and, further,

> While the [Gothic] texts are viewed as heightened representations of patriarchal society, passion appears merely as that which threatens the security and happiness of the conventionally passionless sentimental heroine (and by extension the author and her female readers). It is only when we bring into the picture the question of supply and demand – the dynamic nature of the texts as objects of exchange and as leisure commodities – that the investment of female writers and their public in passion becomes apparent. (14)

Clery argues that passion is important in the reception of Gothic texts and how female readers see them—although, in many cases, it seems like the female characters are passionless, the readers certainly are not. While I am not entirely convinced that female characters of Gothic novels *are* passionless, I see Clery's point. The passion of the reader brings about economic growth and market for Gothic novels, and that impact brings women writers to the forefront of eighteenth-century literature.

Because Gothic literature uses so many recurrent types and tropes, critics frequently make broad generalizations about their depictions of women—that they are all "innocent victims" or "passionless sentimental heroines." I complicate this generalization by attending to some of the overlooked complexities of the Gothic's female characters. One trope I am especially interested in is the character of the "fatal woman," who is a deliberate departure from the stereotype of the passive, passionless victim. Victoria from Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* in many ways epitomizes this figure. Victoria begins the story in the position of a helpless heroine, but she quickly escapes her captivity through her own intelligence and gains ascendency as the wife of a Venetian nobleman. Not satisfied with this new position, Victoria's excessive lust and greed drive her to serial murder with the aid of the eponymous Black servant Zofloya. During one of Victoria's schemes, she kidnaps and imprisons the sweet, meek Lilla, making Victoria the tyrannical villain who threatens the feminized heroine.

Yet Victoria's heavy-handed characterization as a fatal woman does not reduce her to an archetype of intrinsic evil. In the beginning of the novel, when all she wants is to

escape confinement, she uses her wits and combines forces with another female character to make her exit. Her nature, as Dacre describes it, is as follows:

> though at the age of fifteen, beautiful and as accomplished as an angel, [she] was proud, haughty, and self-sufficient – of a wild, ardent, and irrepressible spirit, indifferent to reproof, careless of censure – of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged. (4)

Victoria has been since the first page a character who is morally suspect, combining advantages such as beauty and quick-wittedness with less admirable qualities like self-centeredness and a fixation with overpowering everyone around her. These characteristics only manifest as "evil deeds," however, when she finds opportunities to advance herself by plotting against others. Darkness—the mark of a fatal woman, who is willing to act in ways that depart from conventional femininity—is written as part of Victoria's nature since the beginning, but the question of whether such dark tendencies always result in evil acts remains open.

In women's Gothic texts, the fatal woman always poses some kind of risk to those around her, but she is not always as straight-forward a villain as is Victoria. In many cases, authors turn to this figure to explore the complexities of women's desires and choices within the constraints of patriarchal structures. I turn to another fatal woman, the titular character in Ann Bannerman's "The Mermaid," to make my point. This character declares that "Mine was the choice, in this terrific form, / To brave the icy surge, to shiver in the storm" ("The Mermaid" lines 19-20). It was a matter of choice for this woman to

become a mermaid and lure sailors to their death. The mermaid continues, “Yes! I am chang'd.—My heart, my soul, / Retain no more their former glow” (“The Mermaid” lines 21-22). The words “former glow” suggest that her heart and soul have changed over time; the death of her lover has left her incapable of being animated by love, so she takes it upon herself to live a life animated by vengeance. Instead of suffering in this state, the poem implies that she chooses to become a sea monster because she is powerful in this form. Notably, Ann Radcliffe's heroine Emily similarly writes a poem titled “The Sea-Nymph,” which mentions that her “potent voice” is part of her form (Radcliffe 181). In cases like this, the fatal woman, though monstrous, is not necessarily a foil for the Gothic heroine but a prompt to consider what forms of power women might claim.

The Chapters

My aim with this introduction has been to bring together three different areas of Romanticism— Feminism, the Gothic, and Nature—in order to show that working together, they form a unique mode, that I call “Gothic Green Romanticism,” that writers like Mary Robinson use to think about the question of women’s agency in the world. Gothic nature in these works is shown to affect female characters’ agency in positive ways, enhancing their ability to claim power unavailable to them under imperial patriarchy.

This dissertation has five chapters, the first being this introduction. The second chapter discusses Gothic or dark nature and ideas of aliveness and networks of being in

Robinson's poems "The Haunted Beach" and "Golfre: A Swiss Tale." Both poems feature murderers who are immersed in natural spaces as punishment for their crimes. These punishments reveal how the fluidity of nature, life, and death can be used as a form of resistance to oppression. The third chapter focuses on the poems "Poor Marguerite," "Lewin and Gynneth," and "The Negro Girl" to consider the differences between oblivion and death in the context of Gothic nature, and how Robinson's female figures choose oblivion *and* death in response to being in pain and in separation from their lovers. The fourth chapter explores ideas of dark nature and gender in Robinson's novel *Walsingham*. This novel features a woman who lives her life as a man and falls in love with the male protagonist; I consider how the text thinks about the definition of womanhood and gender identity in eighteenth-century society. I argue that the novel posits the fluidity of gender and its degeneration of societal norms as a form of resistance to patriarchal oppression. Lastly, my fifth chapter discusses resistance and hybridity of form in "The Poor Singing Dame," in which dark nature and a female character named Mary combine into a Mary-nature creature in order to seek revenge. The chapter concludes the dissertation with a discussion of how Robinson's writings prompt us to think about justice, revenge, and resistance to oppression.

Overall, the conclusion that I reach is that Mary Robinson is writing for herself and for other women. She seeks solidarity between women and nature, acknowledging the similarities between the oppression faced by both in a patriarchal, colonial society. Robinson seeks justice in a world that systemically denies it to women and non-human

beings, and writes literary works that imagine unexpected possibilities for personal resistance and social transformation. As such, her work might continue to be an inspiration to readers of the twenty-first century, and a starting point for still-needed discussions of injustice and justice under patriarchal colonialism.

Chapter 2

"It's Alive!"[3] : Forms of Aliveness, Death, and Dark Nature

Introduction

Hauntings and ghosts, rage and misery, weather, wilderness, women – where do these elements come together in Gothic poetry? The twists and turns of Gothic nature and fatal women can tie us in knots trying to understand how to fit the puzzle to our liking. However, the Gothic defies containment, as do the beings we call "women." Under even slight analytic pressure, these cultural sites do not resist so much as go soft: when we want them to solidify, they instead become squishy. And a squishy problem cannot be resolved (it sounds like a particularly dire fortune cookie warning), though it can be plumbed. Mary Robinson writes of her Gothic nature in a way that acknowledges its indeterminacy and demonstrates how nature defies being defined.

This lack of definition is informed by a few different guiding principles. At the time that Robinson is writing, British philosophers such as John Locke had established frameworks for how to measure the quality of human life (*The Second Treatise of Government*, 1763). These theories of the human are relevant to what I call "aliveness"

[3] *Frankenstein* (1931)

because of how they focus on morality, labour, and practical intelligence as definitive of what one might call a "good life" in eighteenth-century Britain. However, when Mary Robinson comes to write of the "good life," these principles become a little squishy: she dissolves rather than reinforces the social structures that dictate eighteenth-century understanding of human moral, behavioural, and intellectual agency. Robinson enacts this dissolution through the representation of non-human elements in her poetry and her exploration of different forms of aliveness, which are shown to have a significant impact on the human characters in her stories. Through these elements, she introduces liminal dynamics into Enlightenment philosophy's more binary modes of expression, and in particular, she describes decay, cyclical versus progressive movement, active stagnation, and haunting—dynamics that animate matter and beings strangely, and that cause conventional temporal and spatial dimensions to break down. In their midst, theories of human experience such as Locke's ideologies of liberal individualism, which emphasize a self-contained and self-governing human subject in control of its relationship to the wider world, begin to fray at the edges.

John Locke, a prominent Enlightenment-era philosopher, influentially theorized the human relationship to nature in terms of property, discussing how a person can come to own something like the earth. His answer to this question, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), is through labour: "Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property" (Chapter 5 Section 27).

Locke's suggestion that labour—an embodied act of improving or of harvesting the earth—is what fixes it as a possession, a "property" of the labouring human being, posits the labourer as the only being with agency and autonomy in this interaction. In other words, it undermines the earth's agency and occludes its own right to live untouched by the labourer's efforts. This idea that the earth is only there for resource extraction is not unique to Locke; it can be found in multiple works of the early stages of British colonial expansion, such as Sir Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627). Locke's contribution is significant because of how it introduces a factor of hybridity into its argument for human superiority: a person's labour generates property because it is "mixed" with the earth in its natural state. This formulation suggests a breaking down of boundaries between man and nature, and that his capacity to possess land as property derives from this strikingly intimate exchange. Locke's possessiveness of the earth and nature comes directly from The Bible; he quotes this passage: "The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's: but the earth hath he given to the children of men" (King James Version, The Bible, Psalm 115.16 qtd. In Locke, Ch 5). This passage is meant to lend legitimacy to Locke's claim of the earth for humans, thus proclaiming that men have a right to the earth and its bounty.

As I show in this chapter, Mary Robinson's poetry directly contradicts these claims, and although in some ways she does advocate for a "mixing" of nature and human identity, she is also advocating for resistance against patriarchal ideology. To begin, I introduce two of Mary Robinson's poems – "The Haunted Beach" (1800) and "Golfre: A Swiss Tale" (1800) – as examples to draw upon for the purposes of this green and oozy

mess of a chapter. I chose these poems to explore concepts of nature and the Gothic for a few reasons: 1) there are moral lessons at play in these poems; 2) Gothic nature is alive and squishy and dark within these poems; and 3) emotion, particularly anger, is a critical part of the poems. Ultimately, what connects these concepts is Robinson's idea of justice and the fight against inequality under patriarchal power structures. Morality is linked to justice in that Robinson's main argument is that it is immoral for men and patriarchal structures to oppress both women and nature. Further, Gothic nature and Gothic women are not easily contained within a moral structure or within a societally defined box that assigns them specific qualities and values legible to patriarchy. Anger, in particular, is an animating feature of both women and nature that breaks them out of that box and allows them to fight back.

I build my argument by focusing on a few key points. I begin by delineating the ways which Mary Robinson writes on green space and nature, exploring in particular how she introduces the phenomena of squishiness, aliveness, and dark nature, in order to argue that nature is revealed in her poetry to be multi-faceted and not easily contained by Enlightenment discourses like Locke's theory of property. I then discuss the relationship between nature and gender in Robinson's work, highlighting how transgressions of boundaries can lead to resistance, and how the trauma of witnessing violence generates anger capable of spurring counterreactions by both women and nature itself. In my reading of Robinson's depictions of nature, I consider its role as a pedagogical force; the valences of Gothic weather and its role in expressing emotion and morality; and the role

of Gothic women who, like Gothic nature, manifest a murky mixture of badness and goodness in their character. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of the role of ghosts and death in thinking about the modes of justice Robinson highlights.

Throughout the chapter, I use the poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a comparative framework. I discuss this poem in terms of moral or didactic message, comparing it to Robinson's "The Haunted Beach." Robinson and Coleridge's connection began when both were contributors to *The Morning Post,* and they finally met in 1800. Many of Robinson's poems were direct responses to Coleridge's (Cross 26). The conceptual framework I create in this chapter ties together the function of female characters and the role of gender in discussions of Gothic nature. I argue that all of these elements defy containment in what I call a "squishy" way (as defined in the introduction). I do not aim to create an alternative theoretical framework that definitively "sorts out" the relationships among women, nature, and social order; the messiness of all these ideas is the point. And while that may make scholars uncomfortable, in many ways it is freeing to be able to muddle about in a grey space – or, rather, a green space.

Green Space

Green space is a term that many scholars seem to assume has a self-explanatory definition. Peter Clark and Jussi S. Jauhiainen discuss urban green spaces using words such as "zones of open country" and "green corridors" (1) to describe spaces within cities in which there is a mixing of urban and natural environments. In fact, much of the

scholarship on "green space" seems to be discussing urban development and the inclusion of so-called green space in that context (Clark et al. 2009, Holden 2008, Richards 2018). Aspects of the natural world are only discerned in this discourse when compared to or contrasted against the urban sprawl of vast cities. In this context, the green spaces are few and far between, and must struggle for survival much like weeds poking out between cracks in sidewalks.

However, my objective is not to understand green spaces as a whole, but to understand how Mary Robinson saw what we call green space. In fact, Robinson saw green space as the opposite of how Clark and Jauhiainen see green space: in Robinson's poetry, green space takes up the majority of space and urban development must fight to survive while surrounded by wild nature. The main text I will take as my example is "Golfre: A Swiss Tale," in which there are two different areas of what one might call urban development surrounded by wilderness. The first is Baron Golfre's castle, and the second is the hut or cottage in which the young woman Zorietto lives with her elderly father figure. This configuration of buildings is similar to that of "The Poor Singing Dame" (1800), in which the lord lives in a castle and the dame lives in a modest cottage, both surrounded by wilderness.

Robinson's depiction of green space, or sites where humans encounter nature without altering or destroying it, is consistent with Romantic conceptions of "the wild." Cassandra Falke and Markus Poetzsch, in their book *Wild Romanticism*, examine "wildness as a trait that Romantic authors yearned towards and directed attention to, a

trait that they attributed to spaces we would still be likely to call ‘wilderness,’ but that they also found close to home” (2). I find this explanation interesting because it posits that being “close to home” is important in Romantic depictions of wilderness. In Robinson’s poem “Golfre: A Swiss Tale,” both of the domesticated locations are embowered in wild nature, and thus the wilderness is not only “close to home,” but literally engulfing the home. Robinson describes the landscape thus:

> Where freezing wastes of dazzl’ing Snow
> O’er LEMAN’S Lake rose, tow’ring;
> The BARON GOLFRE’S Castle strong
> Was seen, the silv’ry peaks among,
> With ramparts, darkly low’ring
> Tall Battlements of flint, uprose,
> Long shadowing down the valley,
> A grove of sombre Pine, antique,
> Amid the white expanse would break,
> In many a gloomy alley. (“Golfre,” lines 1-10)

In these lines, the castle competes with the landscape for attention and space. The towers and battlements are tall and mimic the mountain peaks as they loom over the lake. The natural elements such as the snow and freezing wastes are “dazzl’ing” and “silv’ry,” suggesting brilliance or brightness, whereas Baron Golfre’s castle is “darkly low’ring” and “shadowing.” The patch of pine trees and the valleys also contrast with the white of

the snow in a way that is comparable with the castle towers. This echoing contrast—between the snow and the castle on one hand, and the snow and the trees on the other—posits a direct comparison between dark nature and Baron Golfre's oppressive presence, suggesting a similarity or kinship between the two. Although, as I show elsewhere in this dissertation, women are frequently associated with dark nature in texts from this period, here Robinson imagines a continuity between the patriarch's edifice and its natural surroundings.

I argue that this comparison calls attention to the potential dangers of "wildness," as reflected both in the lands surrounding the castle and in the Baron himself, whose emotions and actions are depicted as frighteningly animalistic and bestial. This reflection constitutes a mixing of nature and the Baron's moral state which muddles the line between non-human nature and human beings—but not, as Locke would have it, to affirm the dominance of the human. The location of the castle suggests solitude and starkness; the mountain peaks, which one can safely assume are the Swiss Alps, surround the castle and isolate it from any other sites of human civilization. The mountains and frozen wastes are wild places, undomesticated by human hands. The danger and even hostility of these natural surroundings have consumed the castle, claiming it for the wilderness rather than submitting to it as a man-made "property improvement." Robinson's use of Gothic tropes to subsume the character of the Baron into a sprawling sense of wildness troubles any notion that man inherently controls any lands he has claimed as property.

Much as Montoni is famously reflected in Ann Radcliffe's description of the

Castle Udolpho, the Baron Golfre is also reflected in his castle. In particular, the Gothic location of the castle and its isolation speak to the mental state of its owner. Robinson describes the castle in these terms:

> A strong portcullis entrance show'd
> With ivy brown hung over;
> And stagnate the green moat was found,
> Whene'er the Trav'ller wander'd round,
> Or moon-enamour'd Lover ("Golfre," lines 11-15)

The details described here are not elements of beautiful nature, but of gross nature. Browning ivy, which suggests death and decay, alongside algae and pond scum do not a pretty picture make. In fact, the moat water is "stagnate," suggesting that the castle's main inhabitant is also somehow stagnate or suspended in time and place. The baron himself is described thus:

> The BARON GOLFRE long had been
> To solitude devoted;
> And oft, in prayer would pass the night
> 'Till day's vermillion stream of light
> Among the blue hills floated.
> And yet, his prayer was little mark'd
> With pure and calm devotion;
> For oft, upon the pavement bare,

He'd dash his limbs and rend his hair

With terrible emotion! ("Golfre," lines 21-30)

The poem does not give a complete timeline of this period of isolation and emotional upheaval but does describe the time as being "long" here. Again, the natural landscape is mentioned – the light, the hills – still making its presence known, even within the castle walls. The poem also uses the word "devotion" or "devoted" twice: once in relation to solitude, and the other when it comes to prayer. The Baron, it seems, is more devoted to his own inner turmoil than to "pure and calm" prayer. Prayer may or may not be able to absolve the Baron of whatever dreadful sin he contemplates. The stagnation of the water, and the way that the water has become clogged with algae, suggest that Baron Golfre has also stagnated, reflecting his stilted moral state.

The little hut where the main female character lives is likewise located in a lonely and dismal area. Robinson writes,

Her dwelling was a Goatherds poor;

Yet she his heart delighted;

Their little hovel open stood,

Beside a lonesome frowning wood.

Yet oft, at midnight when the Moon

Its dappled course was steering,

The Castle bell would break their sleep

And ZORIETTO slow would creep –

To bar the wicket – fearing! (“Golfre,” lines 51-60)

The woods here are described as frowning and lonesome, but Zorietto does not fear the surrounding landscape. Instead, she fears the sound of the Castle bell, which interrupts her sleep in the depth of the night. The poem explicitly identifies the hovel as a poor dwelling, but in spite of their poverty, the goatherd and Zorietto are content with each other’s company, unlike the lonesome Baron. The poem thus explains Zorietto’s fear:

What did she fear? O! dreadful thought!
The Moon’s wan lustre, streaming;
The dim grey lamps, the crashing sound,
The lonely Bittern – shrieking round
The roof, – with pale light gleaming.
And often, when the wintry wind
Loud whistled o’er their dwelling;
They sat beside their faggot fire
While ZORIETTO’S aged Sire
A dismal Tale was telling. (“Golfre” lines 61-70)

The first thing that Zorietto is afraid of is her own dreadful thoughts brought on by the horrific tale that her guardian tells her. The natural elements such as the moon, the bittern, and the wind add to the atmospheric feeling of the tale: they are transformed from external natural elements to accoutrements to the story. The story itself seems to be a confession of how Zorietto came to be born and exchanged for a peasant’s child in place

of the peasant woman's own deceased child. Baron Golfre's wife also perishes, leaving Zorietto as the peasant couple's child. This story also means that when Baron Golfre attempts to force Zorietto to marry him, it is an incestuous desire. All of these elements – the weather reflecting the dismal nature of the tale as well as the imprisonment and death of Lady Golfre – demonstrate the evil and sinister nature of Baron Golfre—or, rather, his unnatural actions towards his familial relations provoke a reaction in nature. Thus, nature upholds a moral standard that can be tainted by darkness in humans. This idea suggests that nature has moral agency and is a willing and thinking entity in its own right. Nature as a character, then, has similar rights and responsibilities to a human one.

The evil of the Baron Golfre is reflected in his surroundings, poisoning both the natural world and the domesticated areas of the castle. Yet nature also affects the Baron, drawing out his bestial form in the manner of a werewolf. There is a proliferation of wolfish imagery throughout the poem, all associated with Baron Golfre – he even explicitly compares himself to a wolf in the last scene of the poem:

> "Oh! shield me Holy Mary! shield
>
> "A tortur'd wretch!" he mutter'd.
>
> "A murd'rous WOLF! O GOD! I crave
>
> "A dark unhallow'd silent grave– ." ("Golfre" lines 511-14)

He describes himself as a "tortur'd wretch" at the same time as a "murd'rous wolf," suggesting that the two ideas are linked. Nature did not necessarily corrupt the Baron, but the Baron's evil influences nature and nature in turn starts drawing out his more beast-like

form. Dangerous and wild nature emerges, as if nature itself is an animal prodded and cornered until its own claws come out.

In Robinson's vision, nature is not evil in and of itself; even in its "dark" manifestation, what is revealed is its inability to be tamed or conquered – its dangerous qualities rather than any moral status. The relationship Robinson poses between the Baron and his natural surroundings is dynamic but still holds the human being morally accountable—in other words, even if the Baron Golfre became evil or mad through nature's influence, the darkness of nature cannot itself be charged with evil or malignant intent. It just *is*. Green space, for Robinson, is neither categorically good or bad, either morally or aesthetically. It is certainly not always beautiful – it can be ugly or dangerous, or both. What is clear is that green space, in its dynamic relationship with the human, can be interpreted as a gauge of human capacities, including emotional and moral ones. In *Golfre: A Swiss Tale*, Robinson uses green space to denote the morality of the villain as well as to offer a space for Zorietto to experience a range of emotions, from fear to joy. Although Zorietto lives in a hovel at the beginning, she is content with her life, and at the end, when she is safe from the Baron's mechanizations, she is also content. I spoke earlier of Robinson's ideas of what constitutes a "good life" in response to Locke's ideas. Green space can be contaminated or corrupted by immorality, but it can also be influenced by goodness, such as that of Zorietto.

<u>A Matter of Being Squishy</u>

Dark nature, as I see it, is neither benevolent nor tame. It is wild and dangerous, and in this capacity, it has agency, to act, think, and feel. There is something lurking in the depths of dark nature, like in the horror film *Lake Placid*, where the lake's calm surface hides giant monster alligators beneath. Perilous nature creates a place where man is not the dominant species, or even welcome at all. I argue above that this darkness does not denote evil or badness, rather, it just *is*; yet representations of human encounters with dark nature, from Robinson's poems to contemporary eco-horror films, show how difficult it is to imagine such darkness without relying on moral grammars that associate darkness with evil. For the critic, this tendency makes the problem of teasing out the human relationship to nature rather squishy. Squishiness, or, the state of being difficult or impossible to contain, comes from the idea that the more tightly or narrowly one tries to define something, the more it squishes out of clutching fingers and gets everywhere. One might also note the proliferation of gothic symbols throughout the poem such as wolves, crosses, and lamps, which "get everywhere" in an excess of poetical devices. Nature in Mary Robinson's poetry is both dark and squishy, and also alive in a way that can be extremely unsettling.

When I say nature is squishy in Mary Robinson's poetry, I am thinking of nature's material tendency to evoke boundaries and make transgressions, often in the same gesture. One of these transgressions is of the line between life and death – what is alive and what is not? The cycle of life and death can be imagined abstractly as a "natural process," but Robinson confronts us with the spectacle of squishiness in images like the

rotting bodies in “The Haunted Beach,” which are simultaneously dead and, although Robinson does not mention it, presumably full of life in the form of maggots and other lifeforms that feed off of dead matter. Ghosts, though less viscerally imagined, are formally squishy in relation to the life-death cycle by being both an expression of it and outside of it. Further, the place in “The Haunted Beach” where the poem takes place is both outside the cycle of time and also still a part of the life-death cycle. These various kinds of formal squishiness will be explored in this section.

I will start with a discussion of “The Haunted Beach,” where I consider what happens when a person is imprisoned in dark nature. In the poem, a fisherman has murdered a sailor, and is consequently trapped in nature forever, carrying out an unspoken loathsome task. The poem opens by describing this prison in great detail before explaining the story behind the Murderer’s imprisonment:

> Upon a lonely desart Beach
> Where the white foam was scatter’d
> A little shed uprear’d its head
> Though lofty Barks were shatter’d.
> The Sea-weeds gath’ring near the door,
> A sombre path display’d;
> And, all around, the deaf’ning roar,
> Re-echo’d on the chalky shore,
> By the green billows made. (“Beach” lines 1-9)

Robinson describes this place as a "desart" in the very first line, but then belies that descriptor with the long and loving detail of a beach teeming with natural life. Of course, real deserts are also teeming with natural life, but "loneliness" describes the sensation of being by oneself, clarifying the desert's signification of desolation. If the Murderer could count the nature around him as living and being alive, then he is not and will never be alone. Possibly, this sensation of being alone comes from an irreverence for nature, much like the Mariner in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* when he shoots the albatross (*Rime* line 82), a transgression against both heaven and nature. The Mariner, it might be noted, did not begin his journey to redemption until he blessed the water snakes.[4] The Murderer in "The Haunted Beach" has yet to begin that journey and so "toil'd and toil'd in vain" ("Beach" line 65) for the remainder of the poem. It is unclear whether the Murderer is doomed forever or whether redemption is possible. Squishiness includes present uncertainty and the possibility or potential for indeterminate future actions.

Robinson thus creates a question in the very first stanza: what counts as alive? Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Belville describe the living Gothic as "a means to envisioning the many ways in which the Gothic functions as a living culture in its own right, through its intersections with the everyday, and with the communication and expression of shared experience" (1). Piatti-Farnell and Belville go on to describe a working definition of living Gothic which grants agency to the Gothic as well as allows scholars to explore concepts of death and mutability (2). This definition is interesting in

[4] "A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware" (Coleridge lines 284-85).

that is describes an everydayness of the Gothic that allows frequent and familiar interactions. Possibly, one can even perform the Gothic by repeating it over and over, every day, becoming the Gothic with every repetition. Although Robinson's Gothic is often extraordinary and not necessarily mundane, I want to consider performativity as an aspect of the Gothic with regard to the repetitiveness of the Murderer's motions in "The Haunted Beach." Is the Murderer performing the Gothic through his repetition, and by experiencing the Gothic over and over again? Is he becoming more of or less of a monster through his toil? Again, uncertainty over the state of the Mariner's morality adds to the squishiness of the matter at hand.

Consider the kind of stasis that this Murderer exists in for a moment. While the Murderer devotes himself to performing the Gothic, is he alive? What is aliveness? It is clear that in the poem, the Murder, who is bound by a "strong and mystic chain" ("Beach" line 77) must perform his dreary task forever, or possibly until he is forgiven. But is this repetitive task truly "living" as we see it, or is he only animated by a Gothic compulsion, like a zombie? Is he undead, because he lives out of time and place, in a liminal space that is never interrupted by any other intrusion? These questions are relevant because Gothic nature is very much alive, as appears in these lines:

> Above, a jutting cliff was seen
> Where Sea Birds hover'd, craving;
> And all around, the craggs were bound
> With weeds—for ever waving.

And here and there, a cavern wide
  Its shad'wy jaws display'd;
And near the sands, at ebb of tide,
A shiver'd mast was seen to ride
  Where the green billows stray'd. ("Haunted Beach" lines 10-18)

It is living actively, and although Robinson anthropomorphizes nature in order for readers to understand its aliveness, the purpose of this depiction is to contrast the aliveness of nature with the lifelessness of the Murderer.

The animacy of nature crystalizes in Robinson's weeds that are "for ever waving." These restless plants resonate with some of Romantic poetry's most iconic visions of nature, including William Wordsworth's "I Wander'd Lonely as a Cloud" (1804) and Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* (entry from 1802), the two works that immortalized the Lake District's daffodils. In Wordsworth's poem, the daffodils are described thus:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. ("Lonely as a Cloud" lines 1-6)

The "host" of daffodils are akin to a literal crowd of people or beings which appear along the lakeshore. The word "crowd" also suggests that the daffodils are congregating in a gathering, perhaps even communicating with each other. In the *Grasmere Journal*, Dorothy Wordsworth describes the daffodils:

> When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the sea had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and above them; some rested their heads upon these stones, as on a pillow, for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway. (Wordsworth, D 414)

In both of these texts, the daffodils are personified as human-like beings with agency and energy, capable of sensation and joy. Dorothy Wordsworth uses wording such as "reeling" and "dancing," as if the daffodils are people who can dance together, giving the impression of liveliness and vivacity—even a capacity for being in community through

coordinated if "ever changing" movement. Robinson arguably prefigures the Wordsworths' "crowds" of daffodils in the waving weeds of "The Haunted Beach," whose ceaseless movement implies their aliveness, perhaps even that they are capable of feeling.

Yet it is impossible to speak of life on a "haunted beach" without also speaking of death. Where does death end and life begin? Like Robinson's Murderer, we, too, arguably live in a Gothic world, full of death and decay that nurtures us and therefore gives us life. Every day, this ecosystem of cyclical living and dying sustains us. How might this situation frame our approach to "The Haunted Beach?" In the poem, death is present in the form of the murdered Mariner who survived a shipwreck only to be murdered on the shore of the beach as he struggled to land. It is also present in the ghosts or spectres that haunt the beach, the remains of the Mariner's shipmates who all perished aboard the wreck. The body of the murdered Mariner is still present in the environment of the poem and is part of the landscape now:

> For in the Fisherman's lone shed
> A MURDER'D MAN was laid,
> With ten wide gashes in his head
> And deep was made his sandy bed
> Where the green billows play'd. ("Beach" lines 41-45)

Note here that the body is buried in nature and that the "green billows" or waves of the ocean are mixing with it. Whether or not it will decompose is another question, in this

static pocket of time and place.

By suspending this character in time and place, Robinson foregrounds the tension between the aliveness of the natural world and the phenomenon of the human "lifeline." The natural environment is alive and acting, "for ever waving"; the murderer is similarly animate, yet by the standards of a typical human life, oddly static. This tension is heightened by the image of the incoming tide. The repetition of the line "where the green billows play'd" ("Beach" line 45) suggests that the tide is endlessly coming in and out, in ceaseless motion like the weeds. In a truly static world, the turning of the tides would no longer function. A static character in a natural world that moves on without him, the Murderer embodies a paradox unique to a particular conception of *human* life: that simply being alive is not the same thing as living.

Robinson's depiction of how natural beings like the weeds and the sea inhabit the fluidity and fluctuations of time contrasts with the human experience of this same world as a kind of "desert." The beach that houses such different lifeforms thus functions as a liminal space, where different modes of aliveness come into contact. Victor Turner describes liminal entities as "neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arraigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (359). This definition of liminality, it should be noted, is incumbent on culture and human laws and customs in order to function, whereas the liminal space of Robinson's haunted beach relies on laws of nature and non-human entities for coherence. The Murderer in "The Haunted Beach," however, really is neither here nor there. He is trapped in a universe of

nature's making, unable to return to what humans might term "civilization," instead living as nature's beings do, perpetually animate yet unchanging. He is uninterrupted by any human presence at all besides the murdered mariner, who is himself probably becoming an environment for countless natural beings. The liminality of the beach, for Robinson, poses the question of how the human relates to nature in terms of how we determine where life itself begins and ends.

Many scholars before me have turned their attention to the beach as a particularly significant liminal space in Western cultures. According to Rebecca Solnit, "The seashore is an edge, perhaps the only true edge in the world whose borders are otherwise mostly political fictions, and it defies the usual idea of borders by being unfixed, fluctuant, and infinitely permeable" (92). This space in "The Haunted Beach" is both alive and dead, static and not static, and given the structural permeability of its boundaries, it is a site where definition of any kind might get a bit leaky. The turning of the tide, the green billows, both tell the reader that this is an alive space, but also reflect the endless monotony of the Murderer's days. The beach, where the water meets the land, is also a space haunted by both ghosts and corpses:

> The moonlight scene, was all serene,
> The waters scarce in motion:
> Then, while the smoothly slanting sand
> The tall cliffs wrapp'd in shade,
> The Fisherman beheld a band

Of Spectres gliding hand in hand

Where the green billows play'd. ("Beach" lines 21-27)

The ocean is not the only mention of in-betweenness; the play between the light of the moon and the shade of the cliffs is also an indication of liminality. This space is where the Murderer (the mentioned Fisherman) toils alongside the ghosts of the victim's dead crew-mates. Robinson's depiction of this space as "all serene," marked by the soft movements of "smoothly slanting sand" and "Spectres gliding hand in hand," suggest that despite the beach's uncanniness, nature is calm. Nature here is not angry or wild – it almost seems satisfied or content with what is happening.

What happens when we push on this idea of nature in all its squishiness and its contentedness with its fluidity? Death is leaky, in more sense than one. I mentioned before that the dead body is likely becoming an environment for the living, and the decomposing body becomes one with the ocean tide. Eventually, once the flesh rots away, the bones will become part of the landscape. The line between life and death washes away in the tide. Nature is content with being inconsistent, where humans might struggle or be uncomfortable with inconsistency. I attempt to define aliveness here, but in many ways, as Robinson's poem shows, aliveness is also death and death is also aliveness. The example of the decomposing body is one example of this idea, but one might also consider the Fisherman himself:

He has not pow'r to stray;

But, destin'd mis'ry to sustain,

He wastes, in Solitude and Pain—

A loathsome life away. (“Beach” lines 78-81)

The misery is what is sustaining the murderer – not food, water, or even sleep. His solitude is wasting him, and yet he does not die. Neither can he be said to be “living,” per se, because he is outside of time and place. Life and death are ultimately shown not to be opposites but intertwined modes of animacy; the Murderer is miserable because he cannot be at peace with their strange, ceaseless movements.

The matter of aliveness and death and the cyclical nature of both suggests that nature is not only alive but acting. It is a place of both stasis and continual motion, creating a squishy problem: how do we make sense of this space? Possibly the answer is that we don't. We have to accept that there are areas that will not and will never “make sense” and learn to be comfortable with our uncertainty. The liminal space Robinson explores in “The Haunted Beach” opens up the conversation to include new and perhaps uncomfortable ideas. Nature is a vast, multifaceted, and unknown entity. We, as human beings, might find it easier to make a box labelled “nature” and attempt to fit everything that nature encompasses into this confined space. However, this conversation on liminality demonstrates the blurriness of borders and boundaries. The same type of conversation includes women and the question of gender.

Non-binary Nature

While male writers have traditionally feminized nature – notably in the Early Modern era

works such as Sir Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626) – it is not necessarily feminized in Robinson's works. As a critical object, feminized nature is different from "female" nature because it acknowledges that gender is a categorical system that humans have invented for the purposes of "making sense" of things and then used to interpret nature, for example, as being feminine, in contrast to other phenomena coded masculine. Val Plumwood writes in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that "the association of women with nature and men with culture or reason can still be seen as providing much of the basis of the cultural elaboration of women's oppression in the west, of the particular form that it takes in the western context, and that is still of considerable explanatory value" (11). Plumwood explains that women can and do oppress nature and that the connection between women and nature is man-made (4). As such, patriarchal power structures at work in both twenty-first and eighteenth-century society exploit this supposed connection to oppress both women and nature. Some ecofeminists have also pointed out that women have exploited this connection in problematic ways which feed into this oppression[5] (Biehl, Merchant). Robinson does suggest a connection between women and nature, such as in "The Poor Singing Dame," where the characters of the Dame and nature form what I argue later is a hybrid form in order to seek revenge. However, in the poem "The Haunted Beach," there is no suggestion that nature is either female or feminized, unless one considers being wild and dangerous an inherently female

[5] Janet Biehl mentions in her monograph *Finding our Way* (1991) that first-wave ecofeminism embraces irrationalism, particularly in its Gaia-worship and "glorification of the early Neolithic" (2). Carolyn Merchant further mentions in *Earthcare* (1995) that the idea of a homeostatic system like Gaia removes the onus on humans to live sustainably (4).

trait. In fact, many of the traits displayed in "The Haunted Beach" are animal-like rather than human. The "deaf'ning roar" of the tide and the "shad'wy jaws" of ocean caverns bring to mind a lion rather than a human woman. As for the "tall cliff wrapp'd in shade," that description seems almost masculine rather than feminine. Further, there are no women named in "The Haunted Beach," as both the murderer and his victim are male. If one is really reaching, one might assume the wrecked ship to be feminized, as ships conventionally are; however, there is no mention of the ship besides mention of the "shiver'd mast," which is a phallic rather than a yonic symbol.

In this poem, and in many of Robinson's poems, I would argue that nature remains non-gendered. Why would Robinson depict nature as having no gender, when many Romantic poets feminize nature? Kathryn S. Freeman suggests that "[Robinson] holds in tension the seemingly impermeable lines that constitute a range of binaries including good and evil; redemption and guilt; and perhaps most complicated, between the heteronormative masculinity of the tale-teller and the nonbinary gendering of the recreated world he inhabits" (1-2). I find the suggestion interesting that Robinson's nature has no gender, or, as Freeman contends, a non-binary gender. Nonbinary is a western term describing people who fall outside the socially constructed gender norms of male and female. The Oxford English Dictionary defines non-binary as "not identifying as male or female; having a gender identity that does not conform to traditional binary notions of gender (according to which all individuals are exclusively either male or female)" (*OED*). Of course, one must specifically define non-binary as a western gender identity, as the

concept of gender identity outside of western thinking might be different. For example, among many Indigenous nations, the term Two-Spirit is often used to refer to an Indigenous person who

> possesses some balance of masculinity and femininity or male and female energy. As a self-identifier, two-spirit acknowledges and affirms our identity as Indigenous peoples, our connection to the land, and values in our traditional cultures that recognize and accept gender and sexual diversity. (Wilson 2)

The term, according to Margaret Robinson, "originated in Canada in 1990 among Indigenous attendees at the Third Annual Intertribal Native American/First Nations Gay And Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg" (1675). This term can only be used by an Indigenous person to describe their gender.

However, Robinson and her contemporaries would also not necessarily have the same concept of gender as we do in the twenty-first century. Anne K. Mellor explores concepts of what she calls "masculine and feminine" Romanticism, wherein men and women do not necessarily ascribe their own writings to their assumed genders, but that men can write "feminine" Romantic works, and women can write "masculine" works (3). She argues that "the relationship between 'masculine' and 'feminine' Romanticism is finally not one of structural opposition but rather of intersection along a fluid continuum" (4). This continuum is one that many gender scholars might call the gender spectrum, although I would argue that gender is more like an atom or a matrix – a three-dimensional structure – rather than a flat spectrum. Thus, Mellor recognizes that the binary system of

male versus female is more complex than one might think. According to the gender spectrum model, non-binary lies around the middle part and woman and man are at the ends. Did Mary Robinson conceptualize gender in this way and how did she apply it to nature?

I turn to "Golfre, Gothic Swiss Tale" to discover the answer. First, I will discuss how Robinson approaches gender in human characters and then think about nature and gender. In this poem, there are two named human characters (the Baron Golfre and Zorietto) and three unnamed characters (the goatherd, Zorietto's lover, and Baron Golfre's late wife). Of these five characters, three are deceased by the end of the poem. The Baron's wife does not appear except as a spectre. Of the characters, the most active characters are the Baron and Lady Golfre, the Baron through oppression of the surrounding lands and people, and Lady Golfre through her haunting and subsequent revenge. Zorietto has a thwarted relationship with a lover whom the Baron Golfre murders. Interestingly, he at first blames the wolves for killing Zorietto's lover, and Zorietto in turn rails against the wolves, causing the Baron to confess his crimes. This bestial-seeming crime zoomorphizes the Baron.

At first, the issue seems simple: the Baron stands in for masculine, oppressive cultured and domestic spaces and the Lady Golfre stands in for wild feminized nature. However, in Robinson's treatment of these archetypes, not all is as it first seems. I first consider the Lady Golfre, for although she is something of an unnamed character apart from her married title, she is a monstrous female character. By agitating the objects

around him, she haunts the Baron and continuously reminds him of her death:

> And sometimes he, at midnight hour
> Would howl, like wolves, wide-prowling;
> And pale, the lamps would glimmer round –
> And deep, the self-mov'd bell would sound
> A knell prophetic, tolling!
> For in the Hall, three lamps were seen,
> That quiver'd dim – and near them
> A bell rope hung, that from the Tow'r
> Three knells would toll, at midnight's hour,
> Startl'ing the soul to hear them! ("Golfre" lines 31-40)

Again, Robinson compares the Baron and the wolves, reminding the reader of his animalistic fury. This bestiality of the Baron is gendered masculine, and this idea fits into a larger schema in which the landscape reacts to and interacts with the Baron. The number of lamps and the bell tolls are both three, a Gothic trope suggesting intentional design that implies these occurrences are manifestations of a haunting. These hauntings are attributed to Lady Golfre in how deeply they affect the Baron: "He'd dash his limbs and rend his hair / with terrible emotion!" (lines 29-30). As such, both the Lady Golfre and the Baron are active and have agency to afflict one another – although the Lady did not become active in this capacity until after her death. Zorietto, too, takes action to save her adopted father, the goatherd, as well as in attempting to meet her lover. Agency and active

willfulness are not defined along gender lines, and neither are deep connections to nature.

However, Robinson is clearly writing within a tradition in which nature is routinely gendered, particularly in the realm of aesthetics. This Romantic tradition is saturated with idioms derived from Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime and the beautiful, which he genders masculine and feminine respectively (Burke 66-67). I suggest that Robinson takes up this cultural tradition of gendering nature feminine, but that she does so in order to subject nature as a gendered object to a series of shifts and changes, pushing it toward a newly imagined site of non-binary gender. Take, for example, how she figures the iconic figure of the moon. The first description of the moon includes this familiar gendering : "The air was still, the Moon was seen, / Sporting her starry train between" ("Golfre" lines 103-4). Robinson compares the moon to a lady wearing a dress and explicitly uses the gendered term "her." Indeed, if we break down the stillness of the air and the grammatical passive construction of "was seen" then we can see that Robinson constructs the moon as a beautiful object to be admired. Even the description of the moon as an ethereal woman focuses on her appearance. A bit later, the moon reappears quite differently, in the lines, "The waning Moon, with livid glare, / Was down the dark sky stealing" (lines 158-60). This description demonstrates a dynamic, angry[6], even threatening moon. This shift between the feminine (passive, beautiful, pleasing) and masculine (active, angry, threatening) corresponds to the Burkean gendered aesthetic

[6] Although I could not find scholarship on anger and masculinity in the eighteenth century, I suggest that anger is seen as a masculine emotion. For example, General Tilney of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* reacts in rage often throughout the novel, the main example being when he sends Catherine Morland from the Abbey without explanation (Austen 164-65).

categories (Burke 65). Andrew M. Stauffer writes in *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism*: "For Romantic-period writers, anger was a vexed locus of rational justice and irrational savagery, and determining its place in society and in their own work as a tool or weapon confronted them as an urgent task: how did rage fit, and what relation did fits of rage have to 'fyttes' of poetry?" (2). Although Stauffer does not discuss gender specifically or address masculine anger, the majority of his examples are from male writers or about male characters. Thus, the "livid glare" of the moon might reasonably be seen by Romantic-era readers as an eruption of masculine energy from the previously placid body. Finally, Robinson also includes a description of the moon as genderless: "Yet oft, at midnight when the Moon / Its dappled course was steering" (56-7). This description uses the gender-neutral "its" to describe the moon which Robinson later genders "her." This inconsistency may well be an accident, but it could just as likely deliberately mark the constant shifting of non-binary nature[7].

Allowing the moon to shape-shift in this way through different modes of non-binary nature allows Mary Robinson to question the formal boundaries that have conventionally defined the beings that populate Romantic poetry. The moon, here, transgresses each assigned gender by manifesting elsewhere in another. If Robinson's

[7] What then, does it mean for nature to be gendered as neutral or non-binary? To be clear, I argue that Robinson genders her created literary nature as non-binary—I am not making any claims about real, tangible nature. A non-binary identity is one that is usually applied to human subjects, and it is usually up to the subject to decide whether to identify as non-binary or not. As such, it is a little strange for a non-binary identity to be used for a subject that cannot speak for itself in a language that humans understand. On the other hand, when one does not know the gender of a stranger, one will often use a neutral gender expression such as "they" in order to discuss them. Further, is it appropriate to apply gender to a non-human entity? Gender is a human construction. But, in this case, as gender is applied to created literary nature, possibly that is acceptable.

evocation of a non-binary form of nature neutralizes the Burkean aesthetic binary, it does so to enhance the dynamic potential of nature, not to lessen it. Robinson's exploration of non-binary nature, I argue, is richer and more complex than patriarchal Romanticism's endless binary tensions.

Witness to Murder

In Robinson's "The Haunted Beach," nature is witness to the murder of the sea-wrecked mariner. In a strange turn of events, nature then imprisons the murderer in a nature-made "pocket" world in which the murderer is trapped as a punishment for the murder. As mentioned above, this liminal space is uninterrupted by human intervention. Nature, in this sense, acts as both witness to violence and arbiter of consequential justice. Writing about the witnessing of violence or violent events and subsequent testimonies of these events, Shoshana Felman writes, "As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). Felman is, of course, referring to the experience of humans who witness violence enacted by other humans, identifying this experience as psychologically overwhelming in terms that are reminiscent of Burke's theory of the sublime as that which overwhelms the understanding. For Felman, as for Burke, there is a connection between the human subject's struggle to make sense of what they have seen and a realization of cognitive "excess" that makes the limits of the understanding immediately

apparent. When the processing centers in the brain are overwhelmed in this way, the subject's ability to represent their own experience is disorganized into fragmented testimony. Gothic literature specializes in such fragments – bits and pieces of memory, of people – and in the relationship between fractured understanding and excess of feeling.

While Felman is speaking of witnessing as a form of trauma that happens to humans, her account invites us to consider how uniquely human such an experience is. What happens if we turn this idea on its head and think of nature as something that can witness and testify to the violence and trauma of human actions? In the poem, Robinson writes that the murdered mariner is buried in the sand in the Murderer's hut "where the green billows play'd" ("Beach" line 45). In this instance, nature acts as a depository for the dead body of the murdered mariner. I have established already that nature, as Robinson writes it, has agency to act in its own interests; nature is not necessarily a benevolent force in "The Haunted Beach" that acts on behalf of humans in accordance with human morality. But to what extent does she enable us to read nature's own intentions and inclinations in this context? Does Robinson's literary nature have a conscience that reacts in horror, similarly to how humans would be expected to do? While Robinson's figure of nature does not necessarily have a human-like consciousness, it does have its own sentient consciousness that can react in something akin to human horror. When nature's horror reflects the reader's horror at immoral acts, it may be less an effect of anthropomorphism than an exploration of sites of subjective "excess" and overlap.

Witnessing violence is a traumatic experience, not only visceral but also intimate.

Recalling the infamous scene in the film *The Godfather* where a man wakes up with a horse's head in his bed,[8] one might understand the horror of having a dead body dumped in one's intimate space. But again, it is difficult to relate human experiences and non-human experiences, ethically as well as imaginatively. In this section, I argue that Robinson risks projecting human experience onto nature in order to make non-human sentience discernable and to consider how nature might respond as a witness to human actions. Throughout the poem, Robinson anthropomorphizes nature, such as in the line "The Sea-weeds gath'ring near the door" (line 5), suggesting that the seaweed is congregating, not unlike the Wordsworths' daffodils, like a crowd of people. This line also suggests that the seaweed is gathering for a reason, and that reason is the corpse of the mariner inside. Thus, the "Sea-weeds gath'ring" makes it clear that nature is mobilizing as a witness to this murder and its aftermath. Onno Oerlemans says this of anthropomorphism: "To begin to allow animals expression ... even to raise the issue of anthropomorphizing, is also to begin to entertain the possibility that animals can be considered to exist as individuals, to possess some kind of consciousness and self-consciousness, or, more simply, to be subjects" ("'The Meanest Thing that Feels"' n.p.). This interpretation suggests that while anthropomorphism risks projecting human qualities inappropriately onto nonhuman entities, it can also be used strategically to counter structures of human superiority in our assumptions about cognition, will, agency, and consciousness. Oerlemans finds evidence in Romantic literature of

[8] Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather*, starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino, Paramount, 1972.

anthropomorphism put to this purpose, of understanding non-human animals as subjects rather than objects of human actions and understanding. He continues, "In seeing signs of subjectivity in animals, we are not necessarily projecting human qualities onto them, but recognizing in them natural attributes which we share with them" (n.p.). Making a distinction between different modes of anthropomorphism is important, because straying into territory where one attributes human feeling to non-human nature and "discovers" in non-human nature a recognizably human conscience, recentres humans as the most important living being and reinforces the supremacy of humans on this planet. While this type of depiction may allow human readers to identify with nature and feel empathy with its beings, it may still be harmful to nature to centre humans as superior to nature. Robinson experiments at this delicate edge of imagining nonhuman experience in terms her readers will understand.

By presenting them as a gathering at the door, Robinson assigns the task of witnessing the death of the mariner to the weeds that represent nature as a whole. In the absence of human crowds, the weeds mark the occasion of the mariner's passing ritualistically, as people would at a funeral. Yet before the human figures of the murderer and the mariner appear in the fifth stanza, the poem first describes the natural environment in detail. The layout of the environment is clearly important. One might argue that the environment is important because it is the place where the mariner is imprisoned; in this case, the poem would simply be setting the scene of the human drama. However, in the poem that inspired this one – *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by

Samuel Taylor Coleridge – the narrator immediately introduces the titular Mariner before the scene is set. This comparison suggests that Robinson is deliberately rearranging how the narrative unfolds. Opening with descriptions of nature compels the reader to recognize the presence of nature first before realizing that there are human beings present.

Foregrounding the non-human beings on the beach, the poem then authorizes their ability to bear formal witness to human violence and death. The description of the seaweed being "for ever waving" ("Beach" line 13) suggests the permanency of the scene of witnessing: much like the cyclical nature of the tides coming in and out, the weeds will remain to witness for eternity. This record of nature acting as witness in perpetuity immortalizes the scene in a way that human witnessing cannot. J.M. Bernstein argues that even survivors of horrific events are not true witnesses and offers the conundrum that the real witnesses are the dead – who, being dead, are no longer witnesses (3). Imagining the possibility of non-human, non-individual witnesses may change the dynamics of witnessing. Nature, as an entity, is constantly in a birth-life-death cycle, meaning that it is neither alive nor dead at any particular point. Witnessing death as part of its all-encompassing corpus means that it is both outside and within the act of murder that the Fisherman carries out. So, in theory, nature is both witness and not-witness, survivor and not-survivor, alive and undead and dead all at once. Because it is, in this perpetual cycle, immortal, nature will remember the violence it witnessed forever, and be always impacted by it.

What does the impact of violence do to nature? Of course, readers can see that the

response of nature is to punish the offender with lifelong service to some unknown end. Further, the reader can see that nature as witness to violence has a negative impact on the environment. However, that is not the only purpose of nature enacting its punishment. I argue that nature also acts as a teacher of sorts, and that it teaches the reader an important lesson.

Nature as Teacher

To begin, I have to bring in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* once again. The poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge was also written with an educational theme in mind. Some scholars have noted the similarity of meter between Mary Robinson's poem "The Haunted Beach" and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*[9] (Byrne 380). In fact, Coleridge's poem outright states the lesson that the Ancient Mariner learned and what he meant to impress upon his audience:

> He prayeth best, who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all. (Coleridge 464)

The Ancient Mariner learns to respect and love all beings on this planet, recognizing that all are equal in God's eyes. Of course, we must take this message with a grain of salt, as the excess of the Mariner's punishment suggests that the message is not as simple as

[9] "'The Haunted Beach' does indeed have a powerful and original meter, not dissimilar to that of Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner'" (Bryne 380).

learning the lesson as Coleridge lays it out. By shooting the albatross for no indicated reason beyond irreverence for a fellow "Christian soul" (450), the Mariner incited the rage of nature and of God, who then punished him. As mentioned, this rage nature feels is excessive and inexplicable, which creates something of a squishy problem. Throughout the poem, the Mariner must atone for his crime. And he must atone again, and again, and again. The lack of resolution in this situation is in tension with the apparently tidy conclusion of the "lesson learned."

"The Haunted Beach" has a similarly didactic aim, in which the murder of the Mariner starts the educational journey of the Fisherman who killed him. Like Coleridge's Mariner, the moral lesson that the Fisherman is meant to learn concerns the sanctity of life; his punishment is meant to impress upon him that life is more valuable than material objects such as gold. However, while the Mariner in *Rime* learns the lesson provided through blessing the water snakes, the Fisherman does not learn. No, the Fisherman "has toil'd and toil'd in vain" ("Beach" line 65) for years and may yet toil forevermore. So the person or people meant to learn the lesson provided is the reader, the audience, of the poem. The inability of the Fisherman to learn the lesson here is one of the main points of this poem. What, then, is nature an educator for? And to what end?

The educator here is actually Mary Robinson, writing through nature as a means to teach a lesson, and demonstrating the consequence of refusing to learn. So the question is, why is she using nature as a tool, and what lesson is she imparting here? Robinson is linking nature and morality, as many other authors – such as Ann Radcliffe – do in other

eighteenth-century novels.[10] According to Laurence S. Lockridge, "the Romantic imagination is unabashedly moral" (17). His argument links the Romantic imagination to lessons in ethics, and further suggests that works of literature are concerned with morality in response to Enlightenment values and the "waning of faith" in the Romantic era. He continues, "Imagination creates our sense of integral identity and attempts mentally to shape the world as conforming to our desire of it" (17). According to Lockridge, the Romantics were aware of morality as being reliant on religion and pushed back against this idea, instead insisting that "Morality might be built up on its own foundation" (21). Thus, Robinson wrote a poem that reflects her own moral ideas and values, drawing on sources independent of traditional religious authorities.

Consider the balladic form. During the eighteenth century there was something of a craze for poetic ballads (McLane 424). Both William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were masters of the ballad with works such as *The Lyrical Ballads* (1799), *The Thorn* (1798), *Christabel* (1816), and *Lucy Gray* (1799) among others. As Maureen McLane has argued, during the eighteenth century, ballads were seen as upholding national, historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions and were seen as "relics" of the past (424). Further, ballads were seen as drawing on the past and somewhat obsolete oral tradition of times long ago (426). While Robinson does in some of her own ballads suggest a historical theme, such as in "The Poor Singing Dame" and "Lewin and

[10] Ann Radcliffe's heroine Adeline from *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) has a connection to nature that indicates her moral character is pure. In her novel *Pride and* Prejudice (1813), Jane Austen also indicates through the landscape at Pemberley and Elizabeth Bennet's subsequent reaction that Mr. Darcy is more moral than Elizabeth first thought.

Gynneth," which seem to be medieval in nature, she also preserves a sense of futurity. Of course, the Gothic – as a mode as defined by Horace Walpole – is meant to be a mixture of the historical and the modern[11] (9). However, Mary Robinson is engaging in a different kind of experiment from Walpole. Her concerns are not primarily aesthetic, but resonant with emergent feminist concerns such as those theorized by Mary Wollstonecraft. In fact, Robinson was something of a visionary when it comes to women's rights and the future education of women as a form of justice.

Robinson's morals and values can be discerned through a reading of "The Haunted Beach" and "Golfre: a Swiss Tale." Robinson suggests that one can learn morality through an immersion in nature, but only on the condition that one be willing to learn. I have come to this conclusion for two reasons. One – the Fisherman who murdered the Mariner is submerged in nature as a sort of penance: "For Heav'n design'd, his guilty mind / Should dwell on prospects dreary" ("Beach" line 75-6). Nature has carried out heaven's design by situating the Fisherman such that he has nothing but his crime to think about; nature, in other words, actively moves his mind in this direction and keeps it there. Robinson further says that the Fisherman is "destin'd mis'ry to sustain" (line 79). While he is sustained in misery, the line "toil'd and toil'd in vain" suggests that he is also supposed to be *doing* something – nature has positioned him to think actively on his crime and arrive as repentance. It is his own action that should lead to his forgiveness.

[11] "It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success" (Walpole 9).

Much like the Mariner in *Rime*, he must do something in order to reach absolution. For the Mariner, it was blessing the water snakes. The task of the Fisherman is left unfinished because he refuses to comply; thus, he toils in vain.

While Robinson suggests that the Fisherman's natural prison is a site in which he might reach forgiveness, she also dramatizes his failure to meet these ends. While the Fisherman dwells on his crime without progressing toward repentance, his moral inertia begins to inflect his natural surroundings. The ghosts of the crew haunt him, and therefore the beach as well: "sullenly they wander'd: / And to the skies with hollow eyes / They look'd as though they ponder'd" (lines 29-31). Why are the ghosts wandering sullenly? Why, and what, are they pondering? Their non-progressive movements and immaterial thoughts mirror the Fisherman himself, suggesting that it is the Fisherman, not nature, responsible for keeping them in this state. He too is thinking, but his mind, much like the landscape, is going around in endless and pointless circles. Notably, the poem remarks that the moon "mark'd" the crowd of ghosts, witnessing their distress. In this image, nature is acknowledging that the ghosts are trapped and unable to move on, but nature either can do nothing or chooses to do nothing in response. As part of her didactic tale, Robinson shows that nature, having created the prison for the Fisherman, leaves him to make his own decisions—even if that is simply to make the same mistake over and over. His agency in this scenario is what is at stake: he must take action in order to be freed and has not.

While the landscape cannot influence the Fisherman toward redemption, the

arrested morality of the Fisherman does have an effect on the landscape. Much like humans impact nature in real life, in the world of the poem, the Fisherman's thoughts and actions cause nature to darken. This is not a simple case of creeping evil, whereby the Fisherman's moral corruption infects nature; rather, the poem dramatizes nature's response to how the Fisherman proceeds—or, rather, does not proceed—toward repentance. The mood is dark, but what stands out to me is how carefully Robinson depicts the dynamics of this darkness to clarify how the Fisherman and nature are interacting. The lines "And, all around, the deaf'ning roar, / Re-echo'd on the chalky shore" ("Beach" lines 7-8) introduce a roar—connoting a combination of anger, fear, and pain—as the echo of an echo. Robinson could have written "echo'd" rather than "re-echo'd" and the lines would have still made sense to the reader. The convolution of "re-echoing" suggests that this roar is not a simple expression of nature's feelings, but an atmosphere established by cycles of anguish shared through call and response between the Fisherman and his surroundings. It is ultimately the Fisherman's mood and moral stasis that cause the scenery around him to react in such a way; if he could progress beyond this misery, the echoes would cease.

It is significant that in the poem, nature reacts to the Fisherman's moral state, as it suggests an active and alive nature that has the ability to understand and feel, if not to control human actions. When comparing "The Haunted Beach" with *Rime* by Coleridge, the difference in the nature of the crime makes one wonder how they are related. The Ancient Mariner of *Rime* killed a defenceless and innocent animal – the albatross. An

albatross, symbolism aside, is an animal, and therefore definitively a part of non-human nature. In contrast, the murdered Mariner of "The Haunted Beach" is a human being. Why does nature react in such a way when it comes to the Fisherman's murder of the mariner? Returning to the idea of morality and the Romantics' exploration of ethics, Mary Robinson posits that it does not matter who the object of such violence is; that gratuitous killing of any kind is a breach of moral law that resonates through the interior world of human subjects and the surrounding world of natural beings alike. The consequences of murder are felt by the entire world.

This is not Robinson's only instance of showing that human's morality has an impact on the environment. In "Golfre," the landscape reflects the morality of the castle's owner – Baron Golfre. The Baron's castle is described thus:

> Tall Battlements of flint, uprose,
> Long shadowing down the valley,
> A grove of sombre Pine, antique,
> Amid the white expanse would break,
> In many a gloomy alley. ("Golfre" lines 6-10)

The word "usage" here suggests that the castle is overshadowing the landscape around it and affecting nature by its presence. The pine trees are also compared to alleys here, like those of a city. Nature is becoming more and more like Baron Golfre as time continues, as captured by the word "antique" (line 12), which applies to the Baron as well as the pines. As the poem elaborates how nature interacts with the Baron's castle over time, it leans

heavily on images of decay. While the occasional visitor expects to find a Romantic ruin, perhaps an instance of the Burkean sublime, they find something quite different: "brown" vines, "stagnate" water. The nature described here is not just dark nature—it is gross nature. What I mean by "gross" is that this nature is not aesthetically pleasing. It is icky. Stagnate green water overgrown with algae and dead, browning ivy suggest a lack of care taken for the upkeep of the castle, which results not in an impressive ruin but something more likely to provoke disgust. Given the poem's connection of the Baron to his surroundings, the decay of the natural elements interacting with the castle suggest that Baron Golfre's morality is also decaying.

The poem does not merely imply the Baron's moral decrepitude, but names his many crimes: murdering his wife, attempting an incestuous relationship with his own daughter, setting up the old goatherd as a criminal in order to manipulate Zorietto, and murdering Zorietto's lover. He has much to atone for, and he knows it. In the last few stanzas, the Baron confesses some of his crimes:

> "T'was I, beneath the GOATHERD'S bed
> "The golden sword did cover;
> "T'was I who tore the quiv'ring wound,
> "Pluck'd forth the heart, and scatter'd round
> "The life-stream of thy Lover." ("Golfre" lines 516-520)

While he lists in his confession many of his crimes, he does not list all of them, implying that his atonement is incomplete at best. Much like the Fisherman in "The Haunted

Beach," he suffers for his crimes but fails to learn from his suffering. Unlike the Fisherman, he is shown to die in this state of spiritual suspense, his distorted morals manifesting in physical contortions of his body:

> And now he writh'd in ev'ry limb,
> And big his heart was swelling,
> Fresh peals of thunder echoed strong,
> With famish'd WOLVES the peaks among
> Their dismal chorus yelling!
> "O JESU Sav me!" GOLFRE shriek'd –
> But GOLFRE shriek'd no more! ("Golfre" lines 521-527)

Not only is Golfre contorting his limbs as if he is in some sort of invisible torture contraption, but he is joined by external elements: the wolves echoing his screams, the thundering storm. Baron Golfre's end comes in a riot of commotion and is the opposite of peaceful. His body is not given holy rights but hung on a gibbet near the woods to display its physical decay:

> High on a gibbet, near the wood –
> His mangled limbs were hung
> The rosy dawn's returning light
> Display'd his corse,—a dreadful sight,
> Black, wither'd, smear'd with gore! ("Golfre" lines 528-532)

This visceral spectacle shows the Baron's body, as a result of his moral stagnation,

becoming one with the gross nature encompassing his castle.

The poem does not end with this horrifying image but returns to the question of how a human life might turn out differently. Unlike many of Robinson's other poems, in this poem the female character Zorietto survives to the end, embodying the qualities the Baron never developed. The last stanza concludes with a moral lesson:

> For CHARITY and PITY kind,
> To gentle souls are given;
> And MERCY is the sainted pow'r
> Which beams tho' mis'ry's darkest hour,
> And lights the way, – TO HEAVEN! ("Golfre" lines 540-545)

Zorietto continues to function to the end as a living example of what the Baron fails to be: a moral actor. Her morality is explicitly related to religious faith and practice: "Yet ZORIETTO oft was seen / Prostrate the Chapel aisles between – / When holy mass was sung" (Robinson lines 533-35). Zorietto's piety is put in sharp contrast to the Baron Golfre's mode of praying earlier in the poem: "And yet, his pray'r was little mark'd / With pure and calm devotion" (lines 26-27). These two passages suggest that religious rites may or may not indicate moral integrity, and that heaven can tell the difference between true piety and false.

Robinson's take on morality is that nature, too, can discern between the moral and the immoral, and that it is capable of providing human beings the time and space to find their own way toward improvement. The lesson that she imparts in these poems is that

being a creature in a state of formation and transition—a squishy entity—a complex organism with thoughts, emotions, and messy actions —is fine, even necessary as part of a meaningful education. But one must also be aware that nature can tell the difference between justice and injustice and use the force of its witnessing to move oneself toward moral betterment.

Gothic Weather

Up to this point, I have focused mainly on earth-bound beings—particularly plants and animals—as Robinson's metonyms for nature. Yet, like other Romantic writers, she also makes use of the weather and seasons to stage her characters' moral predicaments, particularly the element of the cold, or freezing and frigid weather. This phenomenon is particularly true in "Golfre: A Swiss Tale," which places us in emotionally fraught scenes marked by wind and snow:

> And O! how dimly shone the Moon,
> Upon the snowy mountain!
> And fiercely did the wild blast blow,
> And now her tears began to flow,
> Fast, as a falling fountain. ("Golfre" lines 121-25)

In this scene, Zorietto is crying in fear because of the clashing sound of fighting. The weather heralds the appearance of Baron Golfre himself, who appears within the next few stanzas. Her fear and the emotions of Baron Golfre are both reflected in relentless and

frigid weather.

Several scholars have argued that Romantic writing makes particular use of weather imagery to consider the complex relationship between humans and their natural environments. In "Living with the Weather," Jonathan Bate argues that in Romantic poetry, "The weather is the primary sign of the inextricability of culture and nature" (439). As the site where nature meets culture, weather muddies the water, so to speak, acting as another liminal category that softens the categorical distinctions upheld by neoclassical order. Furthermore, weather potentially levels political and social differences; on some level, it affects all earth-bound beings, regardless of station or location. Bate concludes that "human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature" (440). The muddy line between human and environment, culture and nature, is not a problem to be resolved but the place where we must attend to these reciprocal relations. This tenet of ecocriticism is one that has become well known since Bate's publication of *Romantic Ecology* (1991), which initiated much of the discourse known today as Romantic ecocriticsm.

The affective complexity of Gothic weather is taken up by Jayne Elizabeth Lewis in *Air's Appearance*, in which she explores Ann Radcliffe's atmospheric moods. In Radcliffe's novels, Lewis argues, "[air] comes freighted with emotion" (193). She continues: "For this reason, it also, and again distinctively, attracts emotion: ambivalence, anxiety, trepidation, melancholy — in essence, the very feelings that it is also charged with drawing in a different sense, which is to say with expressing" (193-4). Similarly to

how Radcliffe uses air and atmosphere to depict the movement of feeling across and through human characters' inner and outer worlds, Robinson also relies on literal winds to unsettle her characters and readers:

> And often when the wintry wind
> Loud whistled o'er their dwelling;
> They sat beside their faggot fire
> While ZORIETTO'S aged Sire
> A dismal Tale was telling. ("Golfre" lines 66-70)

The wind is practically a character in its own right, frigidly cold and creating noise that blends like a second voice into the terrible story that Zorietto is hearing. This story, which has to do with Zorietto's own dreadful past, hints at morality and ethics as well as feeling. The wind, as a physical presence in Zorietto's real world, adds to the unsettling narrative that the goatherd is telling her, one which indicates that the manner of Zorietto's birth and subsequent rearing are secret and mysterious. The goatherd telling this narrative as a story rather than outright telling Zorietto that she is Baron Golfre's child indicates a looming threat which the roaring wind adds to. This experience is one that the reader, who is reading a story within a story, can almost feel somatically.

Robinson's version of Gothic weather makes particular use of snow. Snow is an interesting element as it falls from the sky and then stays on top of the terrain as a layer. It does not dissipate right away like rain; rather, it stays and becomes part of the landscape, while remaining recognizable as that which came through the air. There are a few places

in the poem where snow is mentioned. The first scene I want to look it is the morning of Zorietto's wedding to Baron Golfre:

> The snow fell fast, with mingling hail,
>
> The dawn was late, and louring;
>
> Poor ZORIETTO rose aghast!
>
> Unmindful of the Northern blast
>
> And prowling Wolves, devouring. (Robinson lines 341-45)

This profusion of snow during the wedding is a physical indication of the wrongness of the impending nuptials – not only because Zorietto is being forced to marry Baron Golfre, but also, that he is her father. The word "mingling" here shows that the snow and hail are a type of hybrid weather and reflecting the complexity of the problem and the mixing of different types of feeling such as sorrow and anger. The snow, in particular, is indicative of grief, as Zorietto prepares to marry one man when she loves another. It also indicates sacrifice, as she marries Baron Golfre to save her adoptive father from Baron Golfre's wrath.

Zorietto goes to seek her lover the morning of the wedding but finds him already dead when she arrives: "His heart lay frozen on the snow / And here and there a purple glow / Speckled the pathless way" (lines 358-360). Again, the snow mingles with the blood of the fallen and unnamed lover, and there is a colour contrast between the white of the snow and the red (purple) of the blood. The imagery of red on white is powerful and visceral here, again demonstrating the somatic characteristics of the weather in the poem.

The contrasting colours suggests that there is something there to see, that stands out against the backdrop of snowy narrative. The blood and violence of the act demonstrates Baron Golfre's rage and lack of control over his emotions.

The last "snow" imagery that I want to discuss is Zorietto's pale skin which contrasts with a ruby cross:

> On ZORIETTO'S snowy breast
>
> A ruby cross was heaving;
>
> So the pale snow-drop faintly glows,
>
> When shelter'd by the damask rose,
>
> Their beauties interweaving! (lines 365-370)

Again, reminiscent of the blood on the snow, there is a stark contrast between the white and the red. I want to pay particular attention to the line "beauties interweaving" as it is another reference to "mingling" or mixing as I describe above. This mixing, I argue, is an indication of the squishiness of the narrative, the characters, and the moral question at play in the poem.

Gothic Women

While, as I have shown above, "Golfre: A Swiss Tale" does use female characters in some ways as foils to the highlight the Baron's moral failures, it is also possible to read the figures of Zorietto and Lady Golfre by taking the Baron out of the frame and focusing on the relationship between nature and these two women. What kind of story, if any, is

Robinson trying to tell about them?

First, I would like to discuss the maiden Zorietto. Upon her first introduction, Robinson describes her as "dove-eyed" (line 47). Likened to a bird associated with peace, she is also described as "timid" (line 107) and is depicted as afraid of the Gothic weather outside of her lowly dwelling. However, this fear does not characterize all of her interactions with nature. In another scene,

> While ZORIETTO, near the wood,
>
> Where long a little cross had stood,
>
> Was singing Vespers holy.
>
> ...
>
> She knelt upon the brown moss, cold,
>
> She knelt, with eyes, mild beaming!
>
> The day had clos'd, she heard a sigh!
>
> She mark'd the dear and frosty sky
>
> With starry lustre gleaming. ("Golfre" 198-200; 206-10)

To Zorietto, the sky, though "frosty," is also "dear." This striking and unlikely pairing of terms points to the complexity of Zorietto's relationship to the natural world. Why does Zorietto value the cold sky, when it is not only physically uncomfortable, but also associated with the weather's Gothic reaction to Golfre's immorality? In this scene, the weather is calm, but in the next, the wind picks up, becoming stronger and stronger until it is a "fierce and Northern blast" ("Golfre" line 233). The appearance of the wind and its

increasing strength are a warning of the Baron's impending appearance. In a reading of the poem centered on the Baron, Zorietto's affection for the chilly atmosphere that seems to gather around him would be baffling. Yet before the wind's appearance, the sky is clear and calm—the Baron's influence is arguably absent for the moment. Zorietto is unbothered by the sensation of the cold: she kneels in the cold moss and admires the "gleaming" of the cold sky. Zorietto values, even loves, the sky in spite of its inhospitable nature. Her affection implies a kind of fearless relationship to the wild natural world: she does not need it to accommodate her in order for her to appreciate it.

It is true that, for the most part, Zorietto is portrayed as a somewhat clichéd Gothic heroine. She is gentle and kind, even to the Baron Golfre, who frightens her. She is also the object of lust to the Gothic villain, who manipulates her into agreeing to marry him. By this description, one would assume that she is a typically passive Gothic heroine who needs to be rescued by a typical Gothic hero. However, her lover, who should fulfill that role, is murdered. Instead, Robinson sends Zorietto aid in the form of the ghost of her own mother, who, as discussed above, haunts the castle in revenge for her own death at her husband's hands, by agitating the lamps and the bell of the castle. But is punishing the Baron the only point of Lady Golfre haunting? Her spirit remains after the death of Baron Golfre, suggesting that his death is not the event that releases her:

> And there, three lamps now dimly burn, –
>
> Twelve Monks their masses saying;
>
> And there, the midnight bell doth toll

For quiet to the murd'rer's soul –

While all around are praying. ("Golfre" lines 536-40)

Echoing the earlier self-animated objects, the three lamps and the bell that tolls at midnight are both signs of Lady Golfre's continued presence after the Baron's death. However, here the lamps are only "dimly" burning whereas in previous stanzas they are described as "pale" and "glimmer[ing]"; similarly, the bell which was previously described as "deep" and "prophetic" is now "quiet," suggesting that the Lady Golfre is calm as well.

The sustained and quieted presence of Lady Golfre's spirit implies that her purpose, as a ghost, is not merely to torment her murderer. As scholars of the Gothic have argued, ghosts in Romantic writing are called upon to mark the liminal space not only where life meets death, but also where material existence meets abstract representation, and even where literal meaning meets figurative. They are therefore another squishy matter—formally, if not materially. According to Jerrold E. Hogle, ghosts are "explicitly figures of artificial figures, not spectres of actual bodies" (284), arguing that "Sheer and fragmentary simulacra, seemingly struck off from a mold that is already an imitation, are what haunt the neo-Gothic most of all" (284). Thus, ghosts are not necessarily meant to represent that which they *seem* to represent in their respective literary works, but instead the phenomenon of disembodied representation itself. In this framework, the ghosts in "The Haunted Beach," for example, are not the specters of the Mariner's "mess-mates brave" ("Beach" line 55) per se, but a stand in for something else, an idea or possibility,

that the sailors' death makes present.

Hogle's theory suggests that ghosts could be a signifier of futurity rather than a specter of the past. They show up not to lay matters to rest, but to call attention to what remains, and will remain, unresolved going forward—and to pressure living humans to move into these speculative futures despite this uncertainty. Orrin Wang writes that "The tangible intangibility of a ghost cuts across one key binary of both philosophy and political writing, a dichotomy historically linked to one of romanticism's own numerous *récits*[12], the material versus the ideal" (Wang 204). The ghost frustrates philosophical binaries because it both does and does not exist, in the same way a political or aesthetic ideal both does and does not exist. It is a possibility, imaginable but not concrete. Jacques Derrida links ghosts to the affect of imminence: "As in Hamlet, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely, by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ('this thing') will end up coming. The revenant is going to come" (4). A ghost is a form of anticipation. The possibility of its appearance may heighten feelings of fear and anxiety, but it also indicates that something more than what presently exists is possible.

Revisiting these lines from Robinson's "The Haunted Beach" in this context, perhaps we might imagine that the ghosts are doing more than mimicking the Fisherman's empty gestures:

And pale their faces were, as snow,

[12] A sub-genre of French novel in which the narrative draws attention to itself.

And sullenly they wander'd:

And to the skies with hollow eyes

They look'd as though they ponder'd. ("Beach" lines 28-31)

The ghosts are waiting for the Murderer to do something in response to their appearance. Ideally, the murderer would repent for his crime and somehow atone for it. As in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, these ghosts expect something of the humans they haunt. By failing or refusing to comply with their expectations, the Fisherman prevents all of them, himself included, from moving into a future distinct from the present or past. The ghosts are left to haunt the shores of the beach in a space of liminality forevermore, pondering what could have been.

But what does the ghost of Lady Golfre want? I argue that, like the spectres of "The Haunted Beach," what she wants is justice—not just that a single instance of a crime (such as her own murder) be punished, but a broader possibility that women may be less vulnerable to the kinds of harm that they face in the world of the poem. Mary Robinson recognized the patriarchal power structures at work in eighteenth-century Britain, and how the structural inequality between men and women exposed women to the kinds of violence immoral men like the Baron are capable of. Lady Golfre, I argue, does not appear only to punish the Baron and save Zorietto, but instead to trouble the constructions of femininity that limit women's ability to participate actively in structural change.

As a ghost, Lady Golfre is able to embody a seemingly impossible position according to the Gothic tropes that Robinson employs. As an angry spectre, she is a

version of the dark, vengeful feminine that Adriana Craciun calls a fatal woman; yet she manifests differently in a scene where she might be expected to appear at her most terrifying. In the fourth canto, a vision comes to those at Baron Golfre's and Zorietto's wedding:

> And now, beneath the grove of Pine,
> Two lovely Forms were gliding;
> A Lady, with a beauteous face!
> A Youth with stern, but manly, grace
> Smil'd, – as in scorn deriding.
> ...
> And now they look'd to Heav'n, and smil'd,
> Three pale lamps descended!
> And now their shoulders seem'd to bear
> Expanding pinions broad and fair... ("Golfre" lines 416-20; 436-39)

These two figures represent those that Baron Golfre has murdered—Lady Golfre and Zorrieto's lover—but they also represent angelicism, a heavenly counterpart to the angry haunting of embittered ghosts. Lady Golfre's character vacillates between these states, one vengeful and wild and the other pure and holy. Possibly, Robinson wants us to see that a woman *can* be both, and that Lady Golfre can gain justice for herself and Zorietto's lover—gruesomely, as warranted—at the same time as going to heaven. Like the mutable natural forms that move fluidly through states of being that patriarchal culture seeks to

distinguish, as a spectre, Lady Golfre is a woman capable of being wild, angry, and dangerous even as she upholds standard of morality and justice.

In life, Lady Golfre is helpless to prevent her own death, but in death, she finds power to prevent her daughter from enduring a similar fate. Zorietto, in contrast, does not do anything remarkable to prevent her own terrible situation except pray. Yet it is worth considering the nuances of Zorietto's choices, which, though less spectacular than those of her ghostly mother, still contribute to the tale's outcome. She concedes to the Baron's threats in order to save the life of her adoptive father, placing her in a situation in which prayer is her only recourse: "The Bride, her dove-like eyes to Heav'n / Rais'd, calling Christ to save her!" ("Golfre" lines 391-2). And, without spelling out the mechanics, the poem shows that she *is* saved. What does this seemingly passive resistance to Baron Golfre's tyranny mean for women? It seems to suggest that anything a woman can do under these circumstances is both not enough and still significant. Zorietto's mode of resistance does lead, narratively if not causally, to her escape from the Baron's tyranny, and her mother's refusal to dissipate even after death holds open the possibility of justice for the castle and its community.

Conclusion

In the end, the main point of this chapter was to point out inequality and injustice in eighteenth-century society. Patriarchal power structures work to confine both women and

nature in ways which one might consider similar. Thus, if one considers that nature and women are oppressed in comparable ways, then they can also resist these structures in similar ways. They can learn from one another. I want to point out that women and nature are both squishy – they are neither good nor evil, they do not act or react in nice, neat ways which we can explain – and that is fine. Neither are meant to be confined in a nice little parcel, because *niceness* is very much not the point. Not only that, but the role of men in these pieces is of equal importance. Men are given a chance to learn a lesson and to change – which they fail to do. This failure demonstrates not that men are inherently fallible, but that there are consequences to failing. But the potential for change and for transformation is also always readily available.

Oblivion and Death: Forms of Resistance in "Poor Marguerite", "Lewin and Gynneth", and "The Negro Girl"

Introduction:

As readers, we have all encountered the concept of star-crossed lovers. Perhaps the most famous example is that of Shakespeare's characters Romeo and Juliet. Mary Robinson's poetry includes a significant number of works with thwarted or frustrated love as one of the main themes. We already encountered one instance of thwarted love in "Golfre: A Swiss Tale," when Zorietto's unnamed lover dies by the Baron Golfre's hand. In this chapter, I focus on poems that center frustrated lovers to examine how thwarted love relates to the Gothic problems of death and oblivion. In the poems "The Negro Girl," "Lewin and Gynneth," and "Poor Marguerite," thwarted love is the reason behind the misery of the main female character. I have several questions about this reoccurring theme in Mary Robinson's work: What is the significance of thwarted love in the context of Robinson's female characters' interactions with dark nature? What is the function of love in conjunction with dark nature? Why do these female characters first seek solace, and then eventually oblivion and/or death in green spaces? As I argued in the previous chapter, Mary Robinson imagines forms of freedom for women, and access to forms of antipatriarchal power, by sending her female characters on journeys into various kinds of dark nature. In this chapter, I show how in her poems, nature forms a bond with these women that resembles the bonds of doomed love which the protagonists share with their lovers.

Thwarted love separates two lovers who, we are assured, would be in a happy and fulfilling relationship with one another if not for some external force or obstacle that undermines and separates them. The poems I have chosen for this chapter share several attributes. In each case, the poem begins *in medias res* with the separation having already occurred and the female character in apparent mourning. The reason behind the separation is different from poem to poem, but each character is doing something or carrying out a mission of some kind; none of them is frozen with indecision or otherwise incapacitated by the separation. In the case of the main character in "The Negro Girl," (1800) the enslaved woman Zelma is on the shore of the sea while a ship carrying her lover Draco is foundering. In "Lewin and Gynneth," (1791) Gynneth seeks her lover Lewin who was captured by enemy soldiers and has been killed. In "Poor Marguerite," (1800) Marguerite wanders the wilderness in search of her lover Henry, an exile of her native land. In each case, their lovers die or are revealed to be already dead, and the female protagonist then follows their lover in death.

While this arc appears to be, like Romeo and Juliet's, a purely tragic one, I will show that for Robinson, it is important that these instances of romantic love are frustrated or unfulfilled. In these poems, the love story is not only about the woman's relationship to her lover but is also about her relation to dark nature. Green space appears as a source of solace for the female protagonist in a significant amount of pain; in particular, it provides a pathway to understanding oblivion and death as sites of potential growth rather than as a simple marker of tragedy.

These poems set up a formal problem, treating women as actors or representative of women as a community rather than treating them as individuals. Their journeys through the landscapes of wild and Gothic nature are metaphorical, demonstrating the struggle of women in patriarchal society to experience freedom. Women and nature are set up as having a reciprocal relationship, and while these characters struggle against the confines of society, nature provides glimpses of freedom in unexpected forms. In all of the cases I examine, thwarted love acts as a source of pain which is a site of potential unprecedented action. And in each case, thwarted love ends in oblivion and death, demonstrating that in certain situations, death is the only way forward.

Thwarted Love and Pain

Each of the poems I am examining opens on a scene of love disappointed or disrupted between the protagonist and her love interest. Each poem, that is, begins with a separation rather than a vision of fulfillment. Yet that fulfillment *must* have existed at some point in the past, as evidenced by the severe amount of emotional pain these protagonists are in. Unlike Shakespeare, Robinson does not start with the joy that is subsequently lost; she starts with characters who hurt. This pain is manifested in physical wounds in the cases of "Poor Marguerite" and "Lewin and Gynneth." Robinson writes of Marguerite,

> Her garments were by briars torn,
>
> And on them hung full many a thorn;
>
> ...

And here, and there, her arm was seen

Bleeding the tatter'd folds between. ("Marguerite" lines 21-26)

Marguerite's wounds were not caused by other humans—she was not injured by man, at least, not physically. Rather, Marguerite's injuries are caused by the thorns that she encounters in the wilderness as she makes her way through. It is implied here that Marguerite is in such a wild state that such physical wounds express something of her state of mind: physical pain does not impede her progress across the land but combines with internal pain to spur her on to action.

There is a similar meeting of internal pain and external wounds in "Lewin and Gynneth," when Lewin is searching for Gynneth beyond the safe walls of her father's castle:

Those tender limbs unus'd to stray

Beyond a father's door;

Full many a mile have journey'd forth,

Each footstep mark'd with gore.

No costly sandals deck those feet,

By thorns and briars torn;

The cold rain chills my rosy cheek,

Whose freshness sham'd the morn! ("Lewin" lines 25-32)

These lines suggest that Lewin is used to wearing "costly sandals" which are now lost, leaving her feet as vulnerable as she is beyond her "father's door." Her feet are literally

bleeding from making her way through thorns and briars. Like Marguerite, Lewin appears to be in so much emotional pain from the separation that she does not care that her feet are torn to shreds. Her immersion in the green space of the wilderness seems to write the frenzy of her feelings on her body in the form of physical marks of pain.

In these depictions of pain both internal and external, Robinson evokes something like sublimity: a perception of something so great and awful that it overwhelms all other senses. In Edmund Burke's treatise on the sublime and the beautiful, he states that "the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labor, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime" (Burke 14). As I discussed in the previous chapter, Burke's theory of the sublime focuses on the subject's distance from actual pain, which turns it into an aesthetic experience, but Robinson's Gothic poetry puts her heroines in the thick of the wilderness, a site of danger that presses close. The closeness and the intimacy of this pain generates another kind of sublimity, one that expands the subject's suffering into forms of agency. Instead of incapacitating these characters, Robinson's dual agonies animate them to do something in response, to act. For Lewin, for example, the most threatening manifestations of nature move her forward rather than impeding her progress:

> The vivid lightning's transient rays
> Around my temples play;
> ' Tis all the light my fate affords,
> To mark my thorny way. ("Lewin" lines 13-16)

The danger of the lightning "plays" around Lewin's head, her brain. The storm, which resonates with her emotional anguish, is literally the only light she has to illuminate her path. Robinson plays with a form of pain which is tangible and terribly real, and also marks an experience of seeing and feeling one's difficult way forward. This pain occupies the space left by the absent lover, and it is through this intimacy that a new concept of agency emerges.

Scholars (Craciun 2003; Hoeveler 1998; Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Ty 1998) often discuss agency among female characters, with parallels to Robinson's heroines, in terms of whether they are able to act of their own free will towards a goal the heroine herself determines. However, it may be argued that when it comes to social boundaries and forces acting upon bodies, free will is actually a rather fraught term. Agency as a form of power should then be considered on a spectrum rather than a dichotomy (Goldman 19). One does not either have agency or not—it is a question of to what extent one does have agency, and to do what, within a particular set of structural and material conditions. Robinson evokes green spaces to think about the societal containers that shape her heroines; she focuses on the visceral challenges of resistance instead of on whether they actually achieve "freedom" or not. Her poems suggest that even the most powerful people in society are still caught up in a giant web of normalcies and constructed boundaries which they cannot entirely escape.

Robinson's construction of the social in her poems broadly emphasizes the challenges of resistance but differentiates between modes of resistance in her characters'

various social and political contexts. The pain of resistance, and one might even say the injustice that this pain represents, spurs these characters on to seek their own forms of power in unpromising circumstances. The intimacy of the pain these characters experience is a reflection of the way societal structures worm their way deep into every facet of a person's life. In "Lewin and Gynneth," we are asked to consider Lewin's grief in the context of war. Lewin pleads to her lover's captor:

> Then, BRANWORTH, Lion of the field!
> O, hear a maiden plead;
> Sheath not thy sword in GYNNETH'S breast,
> Or too, let LEWIN'S bleed? ("Lewin" lines 53-56)

Lewin's pain is born not just of separation but of separation brought on by political turmoil. Of Branworth, her country's enemy, she pleads for either mercy for her lover or death for them both. The pain experienced here is a demonstration, a sign to the reader that there is something rotten at the heart of societal workings that put her in such an impossible position—Lewin's tragedy is a national tragedy. Patriarchal power dictates the violence between these two nations; it furthers its own interests at the expense of love and of life.

Robinson turns to a different kind of societal injustice in the poem "The Negro Girl," which focuses on the Black female character Zelma. The pain that Zelma experiences from being separated from her lover Draco while the slave ship he is on

founders is expressed in words spoken aloud. Zelma rails against the enslavement of her people while her lover drowns:

> "Could the proud rulers of the land
>
> "Our Sable race behold;
>
> "Some bow'd by torture's Giant hand
>
> "And others, basely sold!
>
> "Then would they pity Slaves, and cry, with shame,
>
> "Whate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still the same! ("Negro Girl" lines 49-54)

Zelma comments on the pain her entire "sable race" endures at the hands of their captors, naming torture as well as the slave trade as the source of this pain. Zelma makes an impassioned argument against slavery as she watches Draco's death helplessly from the shore. Zelma does not mention physical wounds, old or new, in her monologue, focusing instead on the collective traumas of racial capitalism.

The differences between Zelma's pain and Lewin and Marguerite's pain are significant. All are tormented by thwarted love, but while Lewin and Marguerite seek their missing lovers out and are physically tormented in the process, Zelma is unable to make any attempt to close the distance between herself and her lover, as her movements are more restricted than theirs. Instead of physically going to his side, Zelma instead speaks out in protest against her and Draco's enslavement. Lewin and Marguerite are allowed to be relatively selfish in their love and take action only on their own behalf,

while Zelma's personal grief makes her a mouthpiece for all those enslaved and imprisoned through colonial violence. She becomes a spokesperson for abolition and argues in a long monologue, explaining her (Robinson's) view of the evils of slavery. This entire argument is made while her lover drowns. Robinson's voicing of Zelma might well be viewed as problematic, an example of how many white British women writers of the late eighteenth century blurred the lines between their social struggles and those of enslaved Black people in order to advance political arguments that, as Deirdre Coleman and others have argued, did not actually address the problem of white supremacy (Coleman 341–42). While all of her characters are tools that Robinson uses to make her arguments, her voicing of a Black enslaved woman participates in racial appropriation in a way that her other poems do not.

Yet it is still worth thinking about how the character of Zelma moves the pain of thwarted love into a critique of collective oppression. This idea of selfish love versus Zelma's more encompassing selfless love for her entire race suggests that there is also selfish pain and selfless pain. I have suggested that this pain spurs the heroines on to action, but what is the difference between motivational factors in these two instances? In the cases of selfish love, Marguerite and Lewin resist societal powers on behalf of themselves and their lovers, in the name of their personal desires, whereas Zelma is made a figure of resistance for a whole community. One may ask whether this transformation from lover to figurehead is fair to Zelma—why does she alone have to bear the burdens of resistance for a whole community when her selfish counterparts are allowed to bear their

pain just for themselves? Although this point is relevant if one approaches the characters here as representatives of real individual women, it is not as relevant if we consider all of these imaginary women as parts of an integrated argument. Robinson finds the energy of potential resistance of social oppression in both selfish and selfless love but uses Zelma's particular form of love and pain—already politicized in the public discourse around the slave trade and its abolition—to connect women's suffering to organized resistance and structural change.

It is not often that one questions the idea of pain. We know what pain is. In fact, Burke describes both pain and pleasure as being "incapable of definition" (4). However, according to Jeffrey Davies,

> Many pain scholars appear to have taken "pain" as their starting-point, leading them to find that it is impossible subsequently to separate pain's effect on the body from pain's effect on the mind. "Bodily pain" and "mental pain" are not, however, two subsets of a general category 'pain'... They are instead two closely related and fuzzily defined but distinct phenomena, each of which has somatic, sensory, affective, and cognitive content, and is subject to cultural mediation. (11)

Davies notes a divide among scholars on whether pain of body and pain of mind are one and the same thing. I describe the pains explored by Robinson as "dual" because these pains are, as Davies describes, related, yet distinct. One could, theoretically, experience one type of pain without experiencing the other. Perhaps if Marguerite or Lewin had

stepped on thorns while out on a leisurely stroll, it would not bother their minds at all, just their bodies. But when mental and bodily pain interact, as Davies argues, they complicate and amplify one another—in the case of Robinson's characters, to a state of frenzy. While these characters might be compared to the numerous examples of "madwomen" that appear in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, I argue that Robinson is not using these representations to suggest that women in this state of heightened pain have lost mental agency.[13] Instead, she is connecting the Romantic interest in physical pain to the question of how women perceive the causes of their pain. Steven Bruhm's *Gothic Bodies* (2011) locates "physicality and physical pain as a source of concern for the Romantics" (xvii), continuing, "I treat pain here as a culturally mediated experience through which authors and characters come to 'know,' in some sense, their own bodies" (xx). Thus, the body and bodily experiences are important to the Romantics as an epistemological issue. Robinson is no exception.

Romantic love is a lens that Robinson uses to explore how different kinds of pain interact—for example, how heightened emotional pain can dull physical pain. Her characters experience these sensations in isolation from their lovers, but in proximity to nature. For example, when Marguerite is overwhelmed by physical pain, the only feeling

[13] There are quite a few literary ballads and other works that speak of women's madness stemming from thwarted love – for example, William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Matthew Lewis' "Crazy Jane". In "The Thorn", a woman called Martha Ray seeks out the solitude of the mountains in order to visit the grave of what many observers assume to be her child born out of wedlock (lines 207-208). Martha is also mad from thwarted love, although in this case, her would-be husband married another woman even though Martha was pregnant. Martha also wanders in the wilderness: "'And she is known to every star, / And every wind that blows'" (lines 69-70). The wording "is known" suggests that nature knows and recognizes Martha as a sentient creature would. Martha is mad because of a lover's betrayal whereas Marguerite and Lewin's poems demonstrate no such sense of betrayal.

she can identify is the touch of sunlight: “For though her senses were astray, / She felt the burning beams of day” (“Marguerite” lines 29-30). She also makes reference to emotional pain through the figure of weather: “And the shivering sail shall the fierce tempest meet, / Like the storm, in the bosom of POOR MARGUERITE!” (lines 107-08). Yet, early in the poem, Marguerite identifies the woods with a source of medicine for these pains, when she says: ‘“Ah! Where lies hid the balsam sweet / To heal the wounds of MARGUERITE?’” (line 9-10). Nature provides Marguerite with language to describe the dynamics of her sensations, whether it promises to soothe them or it mirrors her torments. Robinson places nature here with Marguerite on her journey, causing then healing her pain in turn. It speaks to a changeable and cyclical nature which can turn from soothing to dangerous in an instant.

Thwarted love in Robinson’s poetry thus frames an exploration of concepts of pain that connect women’s sensations to natural phenomena. Yet it also frames a potential for action. All three poems discussed here place their female protagonists in an in-between space for most of the poem, in the pain of separation—a space that follows separation from her lover but precedes knowledge of her lover’s death. The pain of separation is what drives these characters onward, in pursuit of relief; when they realize they cannot be reunited with their lovers, they choose to die rather than endure the separation. As Lewin says in the following passage,

> “This panting heart," at length she cried
>
> “A sharper pang doth feel,

Than thine, brave youth, when rent in twain

By BRANWORTH'S poison'd steel." ("Lewin" lines 125-29)

Remarkably, Lewin insists that the emotional pain of beholding her dead lover's corpse is stronger than the physical pain that Gynneth endured at the hands of his murderers. Starting with the image of her torn and injured feet, her pain has intensified throughout the poem, peaking at the discovery that her lover is dead. This arc suggests that these poems are not really about the romantic relationships at all but about the female protagonist's relationship to her own pain and capacity for feeling—a relationship initiated by unjust social and political structures and mediated by nature.

All of these romances, in the end, are thwarted by systemic violence: the institution of slavery, government sanctioned exile, and war. And, in each case, Robinson sets her protagonist's exploration of the resulting pain in a green space. The green spaces are varied: Zelma crosses a desert and ends her journey on a beach, Marguerite crosses various wild landscapes, and Lewin traverses a forest. Each of these sites is wild and untamed, yet nature seems to be in conversation with the protagonist's sensations. According to ecofeminist tenets, women and nature can act in solidarity with one another, as the systemically linked oppression of both women and nature under patriarchal colonialism creates similar forms of struggle and resistance (Merchant xix, Plumwood 1). Therefore, if there is any potential for resistance and agency in the pain evoked in these poems, it should be understood as a collaboration between women and nature.

Because we enter the story only after the lovers are out of the picture, we as readers do not know much about the romantic relationship that is the premise of each poem. Robinson sets up these characters as structural placeholders rather than representations of actual people, because she is less interested in the happiness of heteronormative romance than she is in the energies created by its disruption—by the state of *being separated from a lover*—and in what those energies enable women to know, feel, and do in the world. The further apart she is from her lover, the greater the energy of the protagonist's aliveness, as I discussed in the preceding chapter. Unable to restabilize themselves by reconnecting with their lovers, these protagonists instead augment their capacity for meaningful feeling and action through a connection with nature as they traverse wild and sublime landscapes.

In these examples, Robinson evokes nature as beyond the reach of man. In this case, I am specifically using the gendered term "man" to mean that the patriarchal structures in place in society cannot reach women here. Women, Robinson suggests, are more able to act in their own interest when immersed in nature because there is more freedom for them in these spaces—as unpredictable or dangerous as they are—than in the so-called "shelters" of patriarchal social orders. From this perspective, can we still consider these "love poems"? In order to consider this question, in the next sections we will discuss love itself and Robinson connects love to dark nature.

Gothic Love and Dark Nature

What is love?[14] Stephen Paul and Divine Charura, scholars in psychiatry – specifically psychotherapy, discuss love and relationships in this way: '"Being in relationship' is a process and not an endpoint. Love, as an adjective, therefore becomes a verb, 'loving' which acknowledges the changing and fluid nature of the therapeutic relational process over time" (11). Their study suggests that love can be therapeutic and has a positive effect on mental health and, further, that it changes over time. However, in these poems as well as in many cases throughout the English literary tradition, the opposite is true: love is harmful in some way. How much love is too much? Is there a limit on how much one can love? At what point does love become excessive and morph into a darker, more dangerous form of attachment? There are many examples of lovers bound by a mysterious, dangerous, or otherwise forbidden desire, such as Cathy and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play, and Edward and Bella in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

While forbidden love is one of the most enduring literary tropes, the reasoning behind the forbidding of love varies. *Wuthering Heights* implies that Cathy and Heathcliff are infernally cursed, a state of having the forces of heaven and hell involved in one's interpersonal relationship. In contrast, Romeo and Juliet's love is not spiritually transgressive but socially unsanctioned. Edward and Bella's relationship combines elements of both. When we consider the force of love in Robinson's poetry, is the love

[14] Baby don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more.

dangerous because it is socially unacceptable or because of metaphysical orders? I argue that it is neither—that, for Robinson, love is both dangerous and compelling because of the dark energy it engenders in her female characters, evident in how far they will go in response to being separated from their lovers and in the complexity of the pain it generates. The other examples above are all cases of external forces at work on smitten couples, whereas the lovers in Robinson's poetry have an internal energy, like a magnetic field.

In Mary Robinson's poems, love is depicted as wholly consuming to the extent that the female characters neglect their own health and life in pursuit of their love. Do these characters love others too much? Is there, in fact, a limit on what constitutes a happy and healthy amount of love? Arguably, romance and the Gothic are not interested in matters of happiness and health. By posing these questions, Robinson participates in the tradition of Gothic romance that explores overwhelming, devouring, and other forms of excessive and antisocial love. One prominent type of Gothic love is that which involves the "dangerous lover" theorized by Deborah Lutz. Lutz defines the dangerous lover as "the one whose eroticism lies in his dark past, his restless inquietude, his remorseful and rebellious exile from comfortable everyday living" (ix). The dangerous lover is, by now, a familiar trope still very much in circulation: the unhealthy lover who pushes boundaries, the darkly erotic Byronic hero. Yet Robinson does not seem to draw on this figure in these poems. The "dangerous lover" is defined by his charismatic presence; the male lovers in these poems are not present at all. And apart from two of

them appearing as ghosts, there is no indication that the men themselves are in any way dangerous characters. I say "apart from appearing as ghosts" because the lovers themselves are not portrayed as dangerous in spite of their spectral appearance. In fact, we as readers know very little about the personalities of the characters whom the protagonists love. Their flatness is very interesting, and although we know they are brave and gallant, there is very little else to ascribe to them. I suggest that their flatness is due to Robinson's purpose: the female protagonist needs to love *someone* in order to be in pain, but for the purpose of Robinson's poetry, they do not need to be concrete. In fact, their spectral nature further points out their lack of definition. Thus, it does not matter whom the characters love, it is the state of love itself and of being separated from the object of love that matters. It is to the female character's pain and the strange form of agency it mobilizes that we should be paying our attention.

What makes these relationships so unhealthy if it is not the male lover who is dangerous? It is the female character who is dangerous in her love rather than the male character. She is, as Adriana Craciun describes, a "fatal woman" or femme fatale character. Craciun's discussion of fatal women addresses the idea that male writers and female writers use femme fatales or fatal women differently in the Romantic period (16). She goes on to say that scholars tend to dichotomize fatal women as hyperfeminine and violent women as masculine, whereas her argument points out this is "a false dichotomy that does not adequately account for the complexity of women's uses of seductiveness and violence in the Romantic period" (16). The fatal woman is, therefore, a woman who

is both seductive and violent, but also a woman who both kills and is killed (15). Mary Robinson's female characters are not necessarily seductive or violent in the same way that Ann Bannerman or Charlotte Dacre's femme fatales are dangerous. They are dangerous in their excessive forms of love, but also in the fact that they are wandering the world alone in search of their missing lovers, even to the point of death. They are depicted as moving beyond the control of the patriarchal power structures in place in society during the eighteenth century and beyond. These female figures bring social and legal boundaries into view by pushing against and transgressing them.

As suggested before, nature is a reflection of these characters' inner turmoil and emotional upheaval. For example, in the poem "Lewin and Gynneth," the nature surrounding Lewin is described thus:

> The vivid lightning's transient rays
> Around my temples play;
> 'Tis all the light my fate affords,
> To mark my thorny way. ("Lewin and Gynneth" lines 13-16)

Lewin's angsty turmoil is reflected in lightning strikes which shine on Lewin's temple, very much giving a sense that it is her mind that is in turmoil. The violence of the lightning strike, and the thorns which tear Lewin's feet demonstrate the danger Lewin represents. She is willing to go beyond the boundaries of acceptable female society to get to her lover.

Of course, at the time of Robinson's writing, the British Empire was very much concerned with boundaries; colonial expansion and pushing boundaries ever further outward was a cultural as well as political preoccupation of the empire. Siobhan Carroll describes the literary preoccupation with imagining areas of colonial expansion as atopias, or "blank spaces on maps"; she notes,

> To voyage too far or stay too long in an atopia is considered hazardous, a perception reinforced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by explorers' descriptions of the bodily disintegrations they experienced in such regions: blackouts, snow-blindness, scurvy, madness, suffocation, and poisonings. (6)

At the same time that the imperial imagination figured the world as a Lockean blank slate waiting to be discovered and developed, it also worried that by pushing too far into those supposed blank spaces on the map, one invites destruction. Carroll's atopias show a reversal of power in the contact zone between the physical bodies of colonial explorers and the geographical areas they attempt to claim for empire. This disintegration of body not only demonstrates the fallibility of the infiltrating, colonial body, but also shows its vulnerability to being invaded and transformed in turn, revealing the imperial anxiety about being the object instead of the subject of colonization.

We find similar imagery in Robinson's poetry—consider, for example, her heroines' bloody feet as a contact zone where the physical boundary between women and nature is disintegrating. The feet of these heroines, where skin is torn and blood mixes with dirt and other natural elements, present a strange organic structure that forms as

woman and nature slowly dissolve into each other. Yet, in contrast to the fear Carroll notes in depictions of colonial atopias, Robinson's women respond differently to the prospect of dissolving into wilderness. The following passage from "Poor Marguerite" demonstrates this breakdown:

"The setting Sun, with golden ray,
"Shall warm my breast, and make me gay.
"The clamours of the roaring Sea
"My midnight serenade shall be!
"The Cliff that like a Tyrant stands
"Exulting o'er the wave lash'd sands,
"With its weedy crown, and its flinty crest,
"Shall, on its hard bosom, rock me to rest;
"And I'll watch for the Eagle's unfledg'd brood,
"And I'll scatter their nest, and I'll drink their blood;
"And under the crag I will kneel and pray
"And silver my robe, with the moony ray:
"And who shall scorn the lone retreat
"Which Heaven has chose, for MARGUERITE? ("Marguerite" lines 109-122)

Marguerite not only wanders the wastes as described above; she starts seeing it as her home rather than an alien wilderness. She does so not by domesticating it and making it accommodate her, but by acclimating herself to its clamours and hard edges. Robinson

describes in her poem both “burning plains and wastes of snow” (line 82), harsh landscapes which Marguerite traverses. Her feet and “garments were by briars torn, / And on them hung full many a thorn” (lines 21-22), showing that the wilds are, indeed, tearing her to pieces. Yet although the wilderness wounds her, it also soothes her: in the passage above, she is being lulled to sleep by the ocean tide on the “hard bosom” of the fearsome cliff. Rather than transform the landscape to suit her needs, she transforms herself into a creature at home in such a landscape. Her fantasy of raiding the eagle’s nest and feasting messily on the blood of the nestlings is more repulsive than Romantic, almost demonic in its savagery. In the next line, however, she is kneeling and praying, an image of piety. Nature and Marguerite are both shown as multi-faceted in this poem, having an unresolved yet balanced dual nature. Nature can both wound and soothe, and Marguerite is both wild and gentle. Robinson is weaving together these dual organic bodies – Marguerite and nature – throughout her poem, demonstrating the connection between women and nature.

This Gothic love that women in the analyzed poems feel causes the breakdown of boundaries, which in turn is something dangerous, as demonstrated above. Henry’s death breaks open the boundaries, and Marguerite becomes one with nature:

> And now he beckon’d her along
> The curling moonlight waves among;
> No footsteps mark’d the slanting sand
> Where she had seen her HENRY stand!

She saw him o'er the billows go—
She heard the rising breezes blow;
She shriek'd aloud! The echoing steep
Frown'd darkness on the troubled deep;
The moon in cloudy veil was seen,
And louder howl'd the night blast keen!—
And when the morn, in splendour dress'd,
Blush'd radiance on the Eagle's nest,
That radiant blush was doom'd to greet—
The lifeless form —of MARGUERITE! (lines 151-164)

In the passage above, Marguerite screams and the wind from the storm echoes her. In the morning, when the storm has passed on, so too has Marguerite. Her body, much like the Mariner's body in "The Haunted Beach," will break down and become part of nature— a process that had already begun as her wounds opened up boundaries between herself and nature. If women's love can cause a breakdown of boundaries, where does that breakdown stop? Love, depicted in Robinson's poetry as Gothic, can be a powerful force, one that breaks down barriers and infiltrates boundaries. Marguerite, in this way, shares a similar fate to that of the Mariner, but she approaches this fate differently, accepting – even embracing – the connection. The Mariner is passive, having been murdered, and did not choose this fate. Marguerite's willingness to become one with nature demonstrates that there is a collaborative way to engage with nature, and that this method resists

patriarchal power structures. However, the way to do this melding is also messy, chaotic, and painful. Love is what makes this melding bearable.

Gothic love is a form of excess, a love beyond and above domestic limits. When Lewin reaches out to her lover with this love in her heart, she imagines it as a force capable of transgressing boundaries of body, space, and time:

> Slow steals the life-stream at my heart;
> Dark clouds o'ershade my eyes;
> Foreboding sorrow tells my soul,
> My captive Lover dies.
> Yet if one gentle ray of hope
> Can sooth the soul to rest;
> Oh! may it pierce yon flinty tow'r,
> And warm my GYNNETH's breast ("Lewin" lines 33-40)

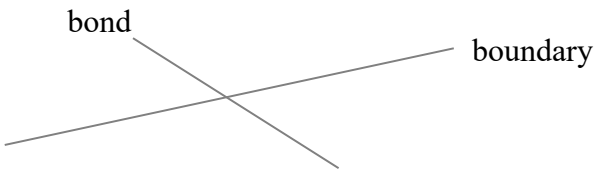
This love that can move through space and reach beyond Lewin's physical presence is not just Romantic but supernatural; it can actually summon Gynneth's ghost, so deep and strong is her feeling. Love that has the ability to summon ghosts from beyond the boundary of life and death is powerful and demonstrates that women and their emotions have the power to change their own fate. She speaks of a "gentle ray of hope" which is the love that drives her beyond the physical pain and allows her to act. This "gentle" feeling shows that not all Gothic emotions – like anger and hate – are violent, and that love, even as a gentle, feminine emotion can drive forward powerful actions.

The same type of bond is present in “Poor Marguerite” as she views her lover Henry as a ghost as well:

Thus, wild she sung! when on the sand
She saw her long lost HENRY, stand:
Pale was his cheek, and on his breast
His icy hand he, silent, prest;
And now the Twilight shadows spread
Around the tall cliff's weedy head;
Far o’er the main the moon shone bright,
She mark’d the quiv'ring stream of light—
It danc’d upon the murm’ring wave
It danc’d upon—her HENRY’S Grave! (“Poor Marguerite” lines 137-146)

Such is the power of Gothic love, which can raise the dead from their eternal sleep and reach across physical space. In each of these poems, the female character is able to reach the remains of her lover, even though she had no prior knowledge of the body’s location. In the case of Marguerite, Henry does not give her directions to his grave; rather, she stumbles upon it and his ghost. The bond I spoke of before is the type of tie that allows the female character to know how to reach her lover’s remains without knowing where they are beforehand. Thus, the bond functions as a sort of “tie” or “string” to tether the two lovers together, albeit an invisible one.

Strong romantic bonds are a familiar trope in the tradition of romance literature, and the "soul bond" is a trope in the genre of fantasy, wherein two characters share a magical bond that fates them to be lovers. The kinds of love felt by Lewin and Marguerite are a version of these bonds, but they go well beyond a precious and rare connection to another person—they literally raise the dead. This type of bond is seen a lot in traditional ballads, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Ballad of the Dark Ladié" (written in 1798; published 1834). The supernatural powers endowed by the bonds of Gothic love point to Robinson's interest in how her protagonists' feelings are not just personal emotions but forces in the world. They do not just connect women to their lovers but allow them to redraw the boundaries of what is possible in the natural world in the course of their passionate pursuit. Bonds and boundaries are part of the same problem for Robinson. A bond, one might say, is a connection between two separate entities, whereas a boundary is the line that separates entities. In this sense, they are opposites. But Robinson is interested in how they intersect—how the force of a bond can cross the threshold of a boundary. Below, I create a very basic drawing of what I mean:



The idea that Gothic love creates a bond so strong that it begins dissolving the boundaries of natural and social order demonstrates that the concept of a boundary is just that—conceptual. The squishy fact of the matter is that no matter how strong one makes a

boundary, there is always a way to cross it. In “The Negro Girl”, Zelma narrates her journey to reach her lover Draco:

“Swift, o’er the plain of burning Sand
“My course I bent to thee;
“And soon I reach’d the billowy strand
“Which bounds the stormy Sea.—
“DRACO! my Love! Oh yet, thy ZELMA’S soul
“Springs ardently to thee,—impatient of controul. (lines 85-90)

Zelma crosses the inhospitable natural boundary of distance across a desert and now stands on a beach, the ocean still separating her from Draco. She says out loud that her soul “springs ardently to thee, —impatient of control” (line 90). She realizes and names the outside forces which are attempting to control her and Draco, to separate them. All these boundaries – natural, national, legal – are ones she passes through, so strong is her love bond to Draco. She does not stop, even in death.

What then, is the significance behind thwarted love and the pain that these female characters all endure? Love interrupted through force resulting in death and oblivion creates a place of potential energy. There is some form of energy in love, and further, pain. There is a gravitational pull between the lovers that releases energy as the two are separated. The question then is what does Robinson do with the energy that is created through tormented love? In order to answer that question, first I must take us through the very same thorns that pierced the feet of the female protagonists.

Nature as Solace

What part does nature play in the kind of love Robinson evokes, and why do the female protagonists choose to seek oblivion within nature's confines? What about nature makes it a site of combined solace and destruction for these characters? In all three poems, the main character either traverses or is immersed in nature: in "The Negro Girl," the poem takes place on the shoreline of the ocean, and in "Poor Marguerite" and "Lewin and Gynneth" in the forest. All of these places might be considered Gothic nature, as the nature here is wild and untamed.

Nature, as earlier discussed, contains multitudes, and it is not evil or good as humans understand these categories. Nature is a space where boundaries break down and disintegrate, or rather, it is a space where an oozy sort of integration happens through bonds of love. However, it is also a space of turmoil and chaos. In Robinson's poem "The Negro Girl," nature is a space where Zelma expresses ideas of Black resistance, freedom, and justice. These concepts which augment Zelma's agency and her power happen because she is in a space that is already liminal. This liminal space – a natural boundary, on the shore which marks the end of land and the beginning of ocean – also marks the end of control of man over nature. It is a contested space, which is what makes female characters seeking solace within its confines so interesting.

To discuss these female characters seeking solace in nature, I will first discuss "The Negro Girl" as a poem which demonstrates Black resistance, freedom, and justice in

the context that nature augments or accompanies these concepts. The opening of the poem describes the setting as such:

Dark was the dawn, and o'er the deep
  The boist'rous whirlwinds blew;
The Sea-bird wheel'd its circling sweep,
  And all was drear to view—
When on the beach that binds the western shore
The love-lorn ZELMA stood, list'ning the tempest's roar. ("Negro Girl" lines 1-6)

The main descriptors used are "dark" and "drear," suggesting that the mood of the poem is meant to create a setting which is gloomy, sad, and foreboding. Even the fact that the dawn is "dark" demonstrates that it is an unnatural darkness. Dawn is not supposed to be dark—most descriptions of dawn focus on the returning light; a figure associated with hope. However, the poem "The Negro Girl" departs from this trope. The anthropomorphic description of the wind as "boist'rous" depicts it as very active, chaotic, and unruly, in the unpredictable manner of a child or a youth. This description of chaos and darkness sets the stage and mood for the rest of the poem and reflects Zelma's emotional turmoil.

Nature here is presented as a reflection of Zelma's mood. Zelma is enraged that her lover is to be separated from her—a personal injustice linked to the systemic injustice of enslavement. Nature reacts to Zelma's anger, but it does not grant her wishes:

"Be still!" she cried, "loud tempest cease!
  "O! spare the gallant souls:

"The thunder rolls—the winds increase—

"The Sea, like mountains, rolls!

"While, from the deck, the storm worn victims leap,

"And o'er their struggling limbs, the furious billows sweep. (lines 19-24)

Zelma begs for the ocean to spare her lover and the other slaves aboard the ship, but the ocean does not heed her words. In fact, the wind increases, and thunder begins, suggesting that the storm is getting worse rather than abating. Zelma describes the victims of the ocean, saying that some of them choose the ocean's embrace rather than stay on the ship. The ocean is presented here as another adversary, one which not only carries countless numbers of her brethren across the ocean to slavery, but which is also actively drowning them in this moment in the poem. Why is the ocean mirroring Zelma's rage and pain, but in a way that actively puts barriers in Zelma's way? This seems like a contradiction in the main argument, which is that nature helps or augments women's agency.

It should be noted here that Zelma is Black. If we consider Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality model, we know that Zelma faces additional facets of oppression because of her ethnicity and class as well as her womanhood (140). Zelma is angry here, and it might also be noted that when angry, Black women are often blamed and villainized for their anger, particularly in comparison to white women (Motro, et al. 143). If we look at the situation as a metaphor, it seems like Zelma is being punished for her anger, even as it is reflected back at her. I must also remind us that literary nature is created nature, not real

nature. The ocean and its reactions to Zelma are significant in their structured oppression which Zelma then defies.

The politics of "living" and "dying" in the context of the transatlantic slave trade are complicated and have been discussed by many scholars of Black studies. To name just a few examples, Orlando Patterson analyzes the effect of enslavement on subjectivity in terms of "social death"; David Marriott has examined activist Huey Newton's concept of "revolutionary suicide"; and Christina Sharpe discusses "the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness, in the wake of slavery" (7–8). One specific historical event that has been mythologized as an example of death as a form of Black resistance to enslavement is the Igbo Landing Revolt of 1803. As scholars such as Rebecca Schneider note, there are varying accounts of what happened, including films, novels, and popular music, but the basic narrative is that that the Igbo and other Western African captives rebelled aboard the ship *Wanderer* and drowned their captors (Schneider 203). One popular conclusion to this story is that the Igbo, in a grounded ship far from their own homes, marched, singing, into the ocean in an act of mass suicide (Momodu n.p.). While the historical details of this event remain uncertain, the proliferation of stories that continues to this day shows the power of this event as a way of imagining Black resistance and the possibility of freedom.

Without overstating Mary Robinson's involvement in the movement for Black freedom, I would argue that there is evidence in "The Negro Girl"—written not long before the Igbo Landing Revolt—that this poem is one which celebrates Black resistance.

The first point is that Zelma is the one who is speaking. Yes, this voice is actually one that speaks Mary Robinson's words and thoughts. But Robinson deliberately locates the poem's speaker in a Black character, animating her as someone who does speak her mind and act of her own accord. In making this choice, Robinson avoids creating what is now commonly known as a "white saviour": a white person who appears as an actual character in a narrative who creates the necessary parameters in the story for the Black character (or other POC character) to succeed in their endeavours. Some well-known recent examples of this kind of storytelling are *The Blind Side* (2009), a celebrated film directed by John Lee Hancock about a Black football player who only succeeds once he is taken in by a white family, and *Avatar* (2009), directed by James Cameron, in which a native alien population is rallied by a (white) human protagonist against their subjugation. In white saviour narratives, it is apparent that the non-white protagonist or population is helpless without a white person or community generously willing to bring out their potential. While the non-white person or people's success seems to be the focus, the prominence of their saviours in the narrative recentres whiteness.

At the time Robinson was writing, Black characters were not a new phenomenon in British literature, appearing in many places including Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *Othello* (1622). In fact, according to Matthieu A. Chapman, no fewer than seventy plays between 1587 and 1642 have roles for Black (or moorish, as described here) characters (86). Black characters also appear throughout the long eighteenth century in works including *Zofloya* (1806) by Charlotte Dacre and *Oroonoko* (1688) by Aphra

Behn. This period also saw several Black writers rise to fame, including Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, who were both celebrated voices in the British abolition movement that coincided with Robinson's career. Written in the context of anti-slavery discourses, "The Negro Girl" is Robinson's contribution to a body of poetry written by white British women including Hannah More and Anna Laetitia Barbauld intended to evince sympathy for the enslaved.

On one hand, abolitionist poems that British women wrote often followed a certain script, one which Moira Ferguson describes as "a kind of abolitionist shorthand that can be copied, expanded, or abbreviated at will" (4). On the other hand, the will Ferguson describes here belongs to white women, whose voices overwrote, erased, and sanitized Black voices. Ferguson emphasizes,

> Gone are the fictional and real-life voiced, named, and resistant Africans of earlier texts, inhabiting specific islands, towns, and continents. Now slaves are constructions of a different sort, unproblematized, unvoiced, unthinking, and unnamed, victims at the mercy of unchristian British cutthroats. (4)

This critique of white, middle-class women's writing, which "claimed agency for themselves and the ungranted right to speak on behalf of slaves" (21), is entirely justified. Mary Robinson, a middle-class white woman, seems to fall into this category, and is certainly responding to this literary movement. However, I argue that in the case of "The Negro Girl," Mary Robinson makes creative choices which perform an act of solidarity to the Black community. A Black female character is allowed to speak for herself and to

defend her own freedom. Robinson does not make herself a prominent voice in the narrative, or any other white person. The only character who speaks in this poem is Zelma, a Black woman. Shelley A.J. Jones explains that there were once two versions of the poem – one in which the characters are white British citizens, and one in which Black enslaved characters Zelma and Draco are the main characters. She writes: "Both versions offer an indictment of imperialism based on the disastrous effects of the slave trade. Reading the two versions together underscores the commonality of experience between the colonizer and the colonized: that the slave trade is fatal for Britain as well as Africa" (37). "The Negro Girl" replaces white character Nancy with Zelma, and the message remains remarkably similar (37). Robinson presumably changed the earlier draft because she recognized that a Black character would be a better mouthpiece for her message. Robinson's message is not just informed by voice, but also by the space Zelma occupies.

So then, the space Zelma is in, the shoreline of the ocean, is a place of potential for radical change and energy for protest against tyrannical power structures. The ocean's shoreline is a liminal space. The "betwixt and between" ness (Turner 465), or the way the shoreline constantly shifts between land and ocean, of the shore allows Zelma to act in a rebellious way. Jimmy Packham explains that the shoreline is both land and ocean and that these spaces shift back and forth between the two. The shoreline is fluid (205). This fluidity may even extend to Zelma herself, as she is part of this liminal space. At the beginning of the story, Zelma was imprisoned, but she says that '"ZELMA, and Love

contriv'd, to break the Tyrant's chain"' ("Negro Girl" line 84). According to Tiffany Lethabo King,

> the shoal functions as a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other. I offer the space of the shoal as simultaneously land and sea to fracture this notion that Black diaspora studies is overdetermined by rootlessness and only metaphorized by water and to disrupt the idea that Indigenous studies is solely rooted and fixed in imaginaries of land as territory. (4)

King discusses the idea that two different frameworks of thought can rub up against each other and cause friction, or a breakdown of boundaries, just like the shoreline, or shoal. This breakdown demonstrates that the metaphorical shoreline in Zelma's poem also resonate with Robinson's message of abolition and freedom. Empire becomes leaky.

The poem further demonstrates this leakiness through Zelma's soliloquy, which directly names empire as the main oppressor of justice. Zelma asks nature, rather, she demands to know why she and her fellows are enslaved:

> "O! barb'rous Pow'r! relentless Fate!
> "Does Heav'n's high will decree
> "That some should sleep on beds of state,—
> "Some, in the roaring Sea?
> "Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,
> "While worth and DRACO pine—in Slavery and woe!

"Yon Vessel oft has plough'd the main

"With human traffic fraught;

"Its cargo,—our dark Sons of pain—

"For worldly treasure bought!

"What had they done?—O Nature tell me why—

"Is taunting scorn the lot, of thy dark progeny? ("Negro Girl" lines 25-36)

In these stanzas, Zelma demands to know if heaven sympathizes with the enslaved or if nature and heaven support the slave trade. She explicitly calls out those in power for sleeping comfortably in their "beds of state" while her lover and his fellows are doomed to die in the sinking ship. I would not necessarily say that this righteous rage of Zelma's is a type of solace. Rather, she finds an echo of her own anger in the storm that drags at the ship.

Zelma suggests that nature is actually angry on behalf of her enslaved brethren. She says this of nature:

"Behold! the angry waves conspire

"To check the barb'rous toil!

"While wounded Nature's vengeful ire—

"Roars, round this trembling Isle!

"And hark! her voice re-echoes in the wind—

"Man was not form'd by Heav'n, to trample on his kind! ("Negro Girl" lines 61-66)

In this section of the poem, Zelma insists that nature is taking vengeance on behalf of those who have been enslaved. Again, as I argued in the previous chapter, Robinson writes nature as having the will and agency to punish wrongdoers. The waves, "angry" and "vengeful," "conspire" to stop the ship from leaving, as if the ocean is on Zelma's side. Zelma's shifting mood makes sense when taken in the context of the fluidity of the liminal space she occupies. The ocean has the capacity both to harm her fellow slaves and to keep them from being taken away by white slavers. The ocean brings both harm and help; it is both enemy and friend. Zelma recognizes the multi-faceted personalities of the ocean and how it resonates with her anger even as it drowns her lover.

While Zelma experiences pain in both her separation from Draco and the storm which dooms him, she also finds a kind of freedom there. She says:

"Torn from my Mother's aching breast,
"My Tyrant sought my love—
"But, in the Grave shall ZELMA rest,
"E'er she will faithless prove—
"No DRACO!—Thy companion I will be
"To that celestial realm, where Negros shall be free! (lines 67-72)

The line I want to focus on is the last, in which Zelma proclaims that Black slaves will be free once they go to heaven – in which case they must first die. In fact, Zelma says that she would rather die than prove herself unfaithful to her lover. Once again, this line hearkens back to the idea of Gothic love and to the bond that ties her to Draco. The

boundaries of love and pain, oblivion and death are as blurry as the border between the ocean and the land. Further, the blurriness of this liminal space speak to the blurriness of the poem's porous and unresolved political message. Robinson fails to imagine Black futurity beyond freedom through death. The fact that the poem gives Zelma such limited options, as her only real choice is death, demonstrates the limits of white-voiced abolitionist messages.

In the end, both Draco and Zelma perish in the waves of the ocean. Zelma is an active agent in her own death and her return to Draco's side. Robinson writes here:

> Long, on the swelling surge sustain'd
>
> Brave DRACO sought the shore,
>
> Watch'd the dark Maid, but ne'er complain'd,
>
> Then sunk, to gaze no more!
>
> Poor ZELMA saw him buried by the wave—
>
> And, with her heart's true Love, plung'd in a wat'ry grave. (lines 121-26)

Zelma sees her lover dragged underneath the ocean's surface and joins him in death; by Zelma's logic, both are now free from tyranny's shackles. Is there solace in death? Zelma would obviously prefer that both she and Draco were able to live in freedom, but with that door closed to her, she chooses death alongside her lover. Significantly, Zelma actively and deliberately "plung'd" to her death in the ocean, in contrast to Lewin and Marguerite, who simply die as if the life leaves their bodies. Zelma's active struggle to die in this moment reflects the struggle to live as a Black woman in eighteenth-century

society which enslaved her people; the poem emphasizes the active role she must take in order to enact change and act with intention. In this context, the relative ease of death for Robinson's white protagonists—the way *it* finds *them*—reflects their ability to be selfish in death as well as in love. For all their suffering, they have to work less hard than Zelma to fulfil the terms of the romantic tragedy.

In the journeys of all these protagonists, it is nature itself rather than their lovers who matches the energy of their struggle. Portrayed as an active agent in these poems, nature is shown to have willpower akin to humans. Robinson is not the only Romantic poet to use nature's agency to claim solidarity between humans, and specifically women, and the environment. According to ecocritic Jonathan Bate, William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, drawing on pre-industrial pastoral traditions, reimagine human beings and natural environments in active, reciprocal relationships that are key to allowing nature and humans alike to live into futurity (Bate 56). This type of relationship is also one which resonates with Indigenous knowledge – for example, in the Hamilton, Ontario region, the Dish with One Spoon wampum treaty that represents an agreement between the Haudenosaunee, the Missisaugas, and the Nishnaabeg peoples to care for and respect their shared territories, including the understanding that ecological ethics, dictates only taking what one needs (Simpson 37). Reciprocal relationships between human beings and non-human nature dictate that humans respect nature as having intrinsic value rather than the value we can extract from it. As such, when we read Robinson's poetry, we

must think of nature as not only an active agent, but one that is multi-faceted and irreducible to simple, useful tropes.

In this section, I use the term "solace" to describe what nature offers Robinson's heroines, but maybe what nature is feeling or doing is more akin to understanding or empathy.[15] Nature reflects the otherwise unimaginable inner turmoil of the female protagonist in each of these poems, but particularly in "The Negro Girl." In this poem, Zelma addresses nature and asks for pity or mercy. However, her rage at the state of her people under colonial capture is what drives her, and what nature responds to in kind. Why do these heroines seek out nature in response to emotional and political pain? I suggest that we consider the concept of kinship when we read Robinson's depictions of the relational response that nature offers to these women. The depictions of nature here are not just a method of telling the reader, through metaphors or analogies, how the protagonist is feeling. Robinson imagines Romantic agency as something that comes out of the reflections and exchanges of feeling between women and the natural world. When nature recognizes the rage that Zelma feels and responds in kind, the implication is that nature feels a connection to the female protagonist along the same lines as she herself feels for her lover. There is a bond there, the poems suggest, of love and of understanding and perhaps of solidarity. This solidarity, love, and understanding are, perhaps, the

[15] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, pathetic fallacy is described as "the attribution of human feelings and responses to inanimate things or animals, especially in art and literature" (n.p.). Clearly, this definition could be used as a way to simplify what is happening in Robinson's poetry. Pathetic fallacy is used to describe how authors or poets might attribute human feelings such as anger to the landscape. However, pathetic fallacy does not necessarily explain *why* that happens.

reasons that the female heroines in Robinson's poems respond through what I term oblivion, followed by death.

Oblivion and Death

Oblivion and death are two separate, if related, concepts. Scholars of the Gothic have discussed the significance of both. Emily Jane Cohen, for example, writes of memory and the Gothic: "The fear of insensibility, staged in the Gothic novel as a confrontation with the sublime object that terrifies the subject into momentary speechlessness or loss of consciousness, can also be seen as the fear of memory loss" (Cohen 884). Cohen connects the idea of the sublime to insensibility as well as a loss of memory, or cognitive oblivion. If we consider pain as a source of the sublime in Gothic writing, then we might expect pain to trigger this fear of both insensibility and oblivion. Yet, in Robinson's poems, pain doesn't deter the heroine but instead spurs her into action. Rather than fearing forgetfulness on the order of oblivion, the heroines of these poems seek it. As I show in this section, this pursuit of the loss and disintegration of the self places Robinson's heroines within a tradition of Romantic "madness" that poses important questions about women's social agency.

The first poem that I will discuss in this context is "Poor Marguerite." I argue that, of the characters analyzed in this chapter, Marguerite is closest to oblivion for a few reasons. First, Marguerite is shown to ignore not only the physical wounds that should cause her pain, but also her other bodily needs for survival. Second, the poem connects

her physical exhaustion and torment to a mental state akin to delirium. Third, Marguerite refers to herself in the third person, suggesting a form of dissociation from her physical body that we do not find, at least to this extent, in the examples of Lewin and Zelma.

By calling attention to Marguerite's physical need of food, water and shelter, the poem emphasizes the effects of her not seeking it. Marguerite does not for a second forget her lover and what she seeks, but she does forget herself and her own bodily needs:

> And, many a night, her bosom warm,
> Had throbb'd, beneath the pelting storm,
> And still she cried, "the rain falls sweet,
> "It bathes the wounds of MARGUERITE." ("Marguerite" lines 17-20)

In this section of the poem, Marguerite does not seek shelter from the storm which pours down around her, nor does she drink from the water the rain provides. Instead, she tells the reader that the rain is cleaning her injuries. Note here that Marguerite does not attempt to clean the wounds herself or even bandage them. Instead, she allows the rain the fall on her. This lack of care for her body is a state that signifies a particular kind of oblivion: while her body continues to have material needs, she as a subject seems to inhabit her body less and less. As a living being, Marguerite is becoming less and less herself as time goes on, completely consumed by her mission to find Henry.

In addition, Marguerite becomes more and more delirious as time goes on, presumably from lack of food and water among other pressures. Wandering out in the elements without any shelter, she appears to drift into a dream or fantasy state. Robinson

describes her actions this way: “A thistle crown, she mutt’ring twin’d, / Now darted on,—now look’d behind—” (“Marguerite” lines 23-24). Her actions, reminiscent of *Hamlet*'s Ophelia when she twines a flower crown around her head before her death by drowning (Shakespeare 4.7.143-47), suggest that she is living out a fantasy somewhere between the material world and her own imagination. Her actions do not make logical sense, and her movements suggest paranoia. Robinson states outright, “For though her senses were astray, / She felt the burning beams of day” (lines 29-30). Her faculties are not as they should be and, presumably, previously were. The loss of her lover has created such pain that she has split, internally: her conscience seems to be working on a different plane than her body. Her mind and body suffer separately, seemingly fractured by pain.

Lastly, Marguerite refers to herself in the third person—for example, when she says that the rain “bathes the wounds of Marguerite” (lines 20). Not only does she refer to herself from an outside perspective, but she also uses the distancing “of” construction rather than saying “Marguerite’s wounds.” While Robinson may make such choices for the formal benefit of line and rhyme, the construction nevertheless separates Marguerite from her wounds syntactically. Marguerite’s mode of self-reference is unusual, and further suggests disassociation between Marguerite’s mind and body, as if she is witnessing herself on her journey from an outside viewpoint. This dissociative state is what allows Marguerite to continue her journey to reach Henry’s grave. Without it, Marguerite would likely be in too much pain, both physically and emotionally, to continue.

What does this mental state say about agency and Marguerite's ability to choose her own fate? The state of disassociation is one eighteenth-century writers attributed to madness, an aberrant psychological state. According to Jasna Russell, activism and political organizing of people with psychiatric experience are central to Mad Studies. She calls those who are part of this movement "psychiatric survivors" (20). However, as we know, none of Robinson's protagonists do survive the experience of madness – and many people who experience mental health problems do not survive, even nowadays. Peter Campbell, one such survivor, discusses his experiences and notes that he "emphasised the importance of self-advocacy – individuals and groups speaking and acting for change on their own terms" (58). The movement to push back against power structures which oppress survivors has been known as "Mad Studies" since 2008, when Richard A. Ingram introduced the term at a conference at Syracuse University, although he also made it clear it is a movement that also exists outside of academia (93). Although Mad Studies did not exist in the eighteenth century, many female writers used madness or alleged madness in female characters to critique patriarchal power structures (Weiss 41). For example, in *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), the titular character starts her story imprisoned unjustly by her husband in an insane asylum. Mary Robinson's mad characters – such as Marguerite – are also pointing out injustice in the patriarchal power structures at work in eighteenth-century Britain.

The poem figures Marguerite's irrationality as a kind of sensory disorganization: her "senses were astray" (line 29). In the eighteenth century, madness was usually treated

through containment in a mental asylum, suggesting that it was a condition that required external control and incarceration. It is therefore significant that Marguerite here is free to roam across the land uncontained, implicitly dangerous – not necessarily physically, but socially. The idea that a "mad" woman could wander across the land without restraint was commonly framed as alarming to eighteenth-century readers. This particular poem reminds me of another poem: "Upon Being Cautioned Against Walking on an Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It Was Frequented By A Lunatic" (1797) by Charlotte Smith. Smith's narrator, a woman who somewhat wistfully discusses a madman who is able to freely wander the world while she must stay within society's social bounds. Smith's narrator reports that "*He* has no *nice felicities* that shrink" (line 11), discussing the idea that a woman is constrained against walking outside in a green space due to the danger of it, but the madman is free to wander. A female vagrant is certainly outside of the normal parameters of socially acceptable behaviour. The female narrator "see[s] him more with envy than with fear" (line 10), suggesting she knows that as a woman, she has less rights to walk about freely outside than a madman. Robinson's female characters, in contrast, do wander across the landscape unencumbered by "nice felicities."

What is disassociation? In twenty-first century terms, we know that sometimes a person who has undergone a traumatic experience will be said to experience disassociation, described as "a temporary state of disconnection from conscious awareness of the usual sensory (vision, hearing, bodily sensation, etc.) or internal (thought, feeling, memory, etc.) input" (Biever and Karinch 13). Of course, this definition

is from a modern psychological study; Mary Robinson, at the time she wrote "Poor Marguerite," would have had a different framework for understanding the relationship between mental states and emotional and physical pain. In eighteenth-century terms, madness or depression was "described... in different ways to our modern conception – sometimes as spleen, melancholy or the vapours" (Ingram and Sim 3). Further, these terms were often connected with the idea that madness was a particular affliction of creative minds (5).

Depictions of madness in the eighteenth century were often linked to sentimentalism, emphasizing the connection between heightened feeling and disorganized perception and understanding. Helen Small argues that the nineteenth-century linking of women's suicide to madness is "the product of a set of uncertainties concerning [a woman's] status in the Church, in law, in medicine, and in the eyes of her society" (5). The diagnosis of madness in these cases is a response to the uncertainty of women's social and political status: it provides a posthumous cultural container for an otherwise unaccountable death. Sentimentalism is part of this reaction to uncertainty. Although the term implies a response of sympathy or compassion, eighteenth-century literature was often ambivalent in its depictions of sentimental feelings, and wary of their social effects. For example, in *The Man of Feeling* (1771) by Henry Mackenzie, a group of people tours a madhouse as if madness is a tourist attraction to view (23). This act of voyeurism into the lives of people confined in the madhouse is meant to be viewed by the eighteenth-century society in the novel as sentimental and a reflection of the morality of the voyeur.

A person who is able to visit a madhouse and feel sympathy for those inside demonstrates a sense of "proper" morality – which is ultimately a performance of sentimentality for the sake of the voyeur's social standing. As the "proper" reaction to a mad woman's suicide or death, sentimentalism is therefore also a method of containment. "Poor Marguerite" invites us to consider our own reactions to Marguerite's madness from our voyeuristic position as readers.

In her study of the "love-mad" woman in nineteenth-century British literature, Small discusses lovesickness or "love melancholy" as a recognized illness at the time (6), citing Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) which describes "unsatisfied love" as a "form of sickness" (58). Small notes that male characters were the subject of love melancholy during the seventeenth century, but that the eighteenth century saw a shift from male to female characters as the primary sufferers (6). Mary Robinson clearly draws on this tradition in her poems about grieving lovers, but her depictions of love melancholy depart in certain ways from the archetypes found in other works. Small notes that *The Man of Feeling* treats madness as a commodity (12), which I see as a way of buying morality. Commercializing madness is not, as I see it, moral in any sense of the word. This commercialization acts in the opposite way from the treatment of Robinson's female heroines. Commercialization further traps those who are identified by society as mad and objectifies them. However, Robinson, treats mad women as acting in their own interest—perhaps even with a heightened ability to do so. Madness does not impede her heroines; if anything, it enhances their ability to act meaningfully in the world.

Perhaps the most influential study of literary madness is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a feminist study of nineteenth-century fiction that analyzed the phenomenon of literary authority through the lens of gender and sexuality. Their text literally opens with the question, "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (3). Their answer is that many nineteenth-century male authors seemed to think so. Within this phallocentric literary economy, women had to try and write themselves out of the metaphorical prison of "the male-inscribed literary text" (15). Gilbert and Gubar claim that, despite these cultural disadvantages, women "have the power to create themselves as characters" and that they can "reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text and help her climb out" (16). The argument here is that women's writing is a source and practice of liberation. Gilbert and Gubar focus on the role of "mad doubles" in women's literature, through which female authors write their rage into female characters who struggle to articulate themselves legibly in the patriarchal terms of literary authority (85).

The question for me is this: is Mary Robinson's writing doing the same? I read Robinson's depictions of madness followed by self-annihilation as a reflection of women's entrapment in a patriarchal society, and their finding unexpected channels of movement and lines of kinship in these unpromising circumstances. In this way, Robinson is arguably attempting to write herself out of "the looking glass" as Gilbert and Gubar put it (16). If we read Robinson's lovesick heroines as "mad doubles" in this sense, then they are not vehicles for individual sympathy but a way of protesting the collective oppression

of women under patriarchal order. Robinson is not writing herself into the poems here—these characters are not Gothic doubles of herself, personally. Rather, they are various characterizations of a shared state of oppression that compels women to invent new forms of expression to make themselves heard. How then, does madness tie into ideas of oblivion and death? I argue that oblivion is a type of madness, but that death, while a decision made by a person depicted as mad, can lead to freedom.

I earlier stated that death and oblivion are different states of being. Therefore, I must answer the question – what is death? How are death and oblivion different? Of course, the huge question for mankind is: what happens after death? Mary Robinson's poems suggest that there is an afterlife, and that there is also an in-between-life-and-death place where ghosts exist. The life after death is posited in her poems as the site where separated lovers will be together again. "Lewin and Gynneth" ends,

> Thrice did he ope the lattice grate,
> And thrice he bade adieu;
> When lo, to join the parting shade,
> The MAIDEN'S SPIRIT FLEW! ("Lewin" lines 145-49)

Interestingly, the number three appears here again, as it did in "Golfre: A Gothic Swiss Tale," suggesting that the number three has some ritual significance for Robinson. Gynneth's spirit performs this ritual with the opening of the lattice grate; his departing words act as an invitation to which Lewin responds by dying and joining her lover in the place opened by death.

All three protagonists arguably choose death in the end. In "Lewin and Gynneth," Gynneth's ghost asks for Lewin to join him in death, imploring her to "Mingle thy dust with mine" ("Lewin" line 112). The reference to dust invokes the Biblical imagery of the human as that which comes from and will return to the earth: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (*King James*, Gen. 3:19). In essence, Gynneth's spirit asks Lewin to choose death once she has performed an act of remembrance: building a shrine over Gynneth's remains. Before Lewin found Gynneth's remains, she sought oblivion in nature—that is, she wanted to forget Gynneth's death and pursued this loss of memory and feeling in nature. However, Gynneth's request that she build a monument to remember him by returns her to the depths of memory and feeling alike. It pulls her back from oblivion, back to life—from where she is able to choose the unification of death.

Lewin describes the monument as one of "woe," saying that her own ghost or spirit will show where the monument is physically located:

> There wet with many a holy tear,
> The sweetest buds shall blow,
> There LEWIN'S ghost shall mark the shrine
> A monument of woe! ("Lewin" lines 141-44)

The monument is one which marks her remembrance of her lost love, and states that her ghost will stay behind. However, the poem also states that she "join[s] the parting shade"

(line 147). So, either her actual spirit and conscience stays behind and Gynneth's is also there, or – and I prefer this reading – her ghost is a memory. It is a leftover echo that remains behind to remind people of her and Gynneth's thwarted love story. Memory here is also powerful, in that not only does it return Lewin to her senses, but it also is a physical reminder that she chose death to ultimately win against societal powers which would otherwise have separated her and Gynneth. The monument is both an indictment against patriarchal power, as it is a reminder of pain, but also a mark of triumph.

Oblivion for Robinson is about forgetting pain—whether by disassociating from one's suffering body or by disavowing unbearable memories. When Lewin and Marguerite seek oblivion, it is a response to the impossible task of living apart from their lover. However, after Robinson's narratives reveal that their lovers are already dead, then the possibility of choice reappears. In order to return to their lovers' sides, these female protagonists choose to die rather than to continue living. The freedom to choose their own path forward in life or death is Robinson's main treatise here. Further, the option of death allows the female protagonists to join their lovers, an option that living does not. As Lewin says, "Thy kindred spirit calls me hence / I haste to follow thee" ("Lewin" lines 131-32). Robinson wants us to see that there is power in Lewin's being allowed to make the choice between living (miserably) and dying (eagerly), a kind of power that is perhaps not readily available to women compelled to live in ways that benefit colonial patriarchy. Robinson's poetry steadily pushes back against the patriarchal power structures that she sees pushing women around in eighteenth-century society. She is interested in how her

heroines form bonds with nature in ways that augment their ability to survive subjugation. But Robinson's consideration of death as distinct from oblivion shows that she is focused on the question of freedom and trying to imagine a way for her heroines to be free from the restrictions placed on women's actions.

Freedom

William Blake's poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* reflects the state of women's rights in the eighteenth century, and the first word of the poem is "Enslav'd" (Blake line 1) in reference to women. Some women, like Zelma, are literally enslaved within the mechanisms of racial capitalism, whereas others are enslaved in a more figurative way, as Mary Wollstonecraft famously (or infamously) argues in her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). As many scholars have argued, there are various problems with this comparison, as there is a vast difference between the experiences of enslaved Black women and socially restricted white women, and eliding that difference reproduces forms of unexamined white supremacy within feminist movements (see, for example, Moira Ferguson's article "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery," Carol Howard's article "Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on Slavery and Corruption," and Sudan's chapter "Mothering and National Identity in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft"). Yet, it is important to recognize that Mary Robinson wrote in a moment when the movement to abolish the transatlantic slave trade informed British women's growing political consciousness about their own forms of restricted freedom. Robinson's female

protagonists are all separated from their lovers by forces that can be traced to some broader form of power or social structure. In Zelma's case, it is the institution of slavery that keeps her apart from Draco. In Marguerite's case, her lover is exiled by the country's ruling power. In the case of Lewin, her lover Gynneth has been captured by enemy forces in an armed conflict. In each of these instances, the power that is at work to separate the lovers is societal rather than individual. Mary Robinson was well aware of the various struggles of women and that her poetry reflects a fight for women's recognition and freedom.

I will focus in this concluding section on the example of Zelma, who argues for her own rights as a Black enslaved women in "The Negro Girl," showing that Robinson was trying to think about how these different struggles for freedom resonated with each other. To read Zelma in this context, I use the model of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which has been defined as "a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice" (Cho et al 787). Therefore, thinking of Zelma only as "a woman" or only as "a Black person" ignores the ways that Zelma is marginalized specifically as a Black woman. As a Black woman, Zelma's rights have more infringements than those of white women like Marguerite or Lewin, and the poem demonstrates that she is well aware of this fact.

Zelma makes an impassioned argument for freedom on the beach as she watches her lover founder on the ship which would carry him away across the ocean. Zelma cries,

"O! barb'rous Pow'r! relentless Fate!

"Does Heav'n's high will decree

"That some should sleep on beds of state,—

"Some, in the roaring Sea?

"Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,

"While worth and DRACO pine—in Slavery and woe! ("Negro Girl" lines 25-30)

Immediately, Zelma questions the governments that allow slavery as well as the concept of world order that tolerates such atrocities. She asks if heaven would allow this fate to befall her people, deploring the economy by which some people benefit from—even luxuriate in—the enslavement of others. She names slavery as oppression and asks this question in such a way that it demands that readers think on her argument. Robinson's naming of the state as not only culpable but responsible for the enslavement of Zelma and her people creates a political impetus for awareness of the structural problem.

Zelma's argument does not stop there. She cries out her logical reasoning, pointing to the precious humanity of her fellow slaves:

"Thou gav'st, in thy caprice, the Soul

"Peculiarly enshrin'd;

"Nor from the ebon Casket stole

"The Jewel of the mind!

"Then wherefore let the suff'ring Negro's breast

"Bow to his fellow, MAN, in brighter colours drest. (lines 37-42)

This poem resonates with many other examples of abolitionist poetry, such as "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) by William Cowper, "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq" (1791) by Anna Lætitia Barbauld, and "Slavery, a Poem" (1788) by Hannah More. Zelma argues that the Black enslaved, herself among them, have both souls and minds no less exquisite than any others. In fact, she calls her mind a "jewel," insisting on the value of the Black mind. Zelma demands answers as to why, as equals to their enslavers in soul and in mind, her people are treated unequally by nature and God.

When Zelma, unable to reach her lover on the shore, declares that rather than stay left behind, she would rather perish, she names her oppressors:

"Why, cruel WHITE-MAN! when away

"My sable Love was torn,

"Why did you let poor ZELMA stay,

On Afric's sands to mourn?

"No ! ZELMA is not left, for she will prove

"In the deep troubled main, her fond—her faithful LOVE." (lines 103-08)

I want us to dwell here on the fact that Zelma actually names "white men" here as her oppressor. Those who do the actual enslaving are named here in capital letters. It is not left up to interpretation or left unsaid or implied. The energy of this accusation both emphasizes the cruelty of her situation and reanimates her resolution to refuse it, as if

Zelma is on the verge of giving in to despair when she rallies to declare that she will prove her faithfulness and love to Draco by plunging herself into the ocean alongside him. Her emphatic "No!" shows that Zelma sees her death as a triumph of refusal rather than an action born of despair.

In the end, both Draco and Zelma die, one foundering on the ship and the other entering the water from the beach. In this poem, Zelma readily seeks death when she realizes that her beloved is also dead or doomed to die. Draco himself is seen as stoically and uncomplainingly accepting that he will die. The poem does not make much of an effort to suggest that either of these characters fears their impending death. According to Davison, "Gothicists readily identify death as one of the foremost terrors at the heart of [our] cultural field of study" (1). Most of the characters of eighteenth-century Gothic works fear for their lives at one point or another, and this fear is frequently the animating spirit of the literature. However, where other characters see death as a terror to be avoided, Mary Robinson's heroines in these particular poems seek death as a logical and defiant response to their unjust circumstances. It is important to recognize that Zelma is not suicidal—she does not want to die, she wants to live. But, for multiple reasons, living is not an option. She sees death as the only option where she and Draco can be free together.

Robinson's exploration of death as a form of freedom from oppression is consistent with the late eighteenth-century turn to particular concepts of freedom itself as a condition of being. Philosophers such as Sacha Golob have shown how we have

inherited from this time period certain notions of what it means "to be" as humans, particularly from the work of thinkers like Immanuel Kant. Golob asserts that "man … is the entity that understands being, and whose freedom may be grasped, at least to some degree, by considering canonical accounts of agency such as that of Kant" (193). What I take this assertion to mean is that an entity that understands the concept of freedom must understand its own existence in conjunction with the concept of agency. Now, according to Kant scholar Lucy Allais, Kant believes that

> Seeing yourself as an agent (someone who acts for reasons) involves (implicitly) seeing your actions as governed by the constraint of respecting the humanity of others. I suggest that this means that making sense of yourself as an agent (someone who acts for reasons) involves (implicitly) seeing yourself as having an ordered self whose fundamental principles make the pursuit of self-interest conditional on morality. This means that there will be internal pressure to interpret yourself as basically good – in a sense this is part of what it is to see yourself as a rational agent and to make sense of yourself as having acted for reasons. (95)

This argument asserts that human agency is reliant on rationality and logical reasoning in conjunction with morality, which can only be conceived relationally, by imagining how your agency interacts with other beings. The clause "see yourself as" suggests that although a person may see themselves as having acted rationally, this does not guarantee that a person actually *did* act logically and with good reasoning, only that they imagine that they acted for a reason. Yet the point stands that agency, as theorized in Robinson's

time, is where reason and imagination come together to enable the individual to act in ways they believe will have specific impacts on others in the world.

This brings us back to the agency of the women in these poems. If we consider the women in these poems as figures of resistance rather than as reflections of real women with real thoughts and feelings, then the idea of death as freedom is a formal answer to the question of how to achieve freedom when the social and political framework allows no reasonable or imaginable action. In patriarchal eighteenth-century Britain, there were very few options for freedom for women as a whole. Marguerite, Lewin, and Zelma are all meant to be representative of women as a community of people. They all assert their free will in severely constricted circumstances through the act of dying. As such, they are only free after their deaths and not before. That leaves us with a rather sticky question: if Mary Robinson presents death as the only option for women trapped in "the looking glass" (Gilbert and Gubar 16), how is freedom supposed to be enacted in practice? Death as a theory of freedom is much different from the praxis of freedom in real life. How does one *live* with the shackles of patriarchal society when the other option is death? For practical purposes, there is very little to recommend death as a solution.

However, Robinson set this question up as a formal problem of enslavement. If one thinks of Robinson's set-up as a chessboard, then self-sacrifice might be the only option when your only piece left to lose is the King itself. A struggle to live within the framework is still depicted in the poems – all three women are willing to live while their lovers are still alive. It is only when the lovers succumbed or were revealed to be dead

that the protagonists submit to death. Until then, these women struggled across rough terrain and extreme landscapes. The fact that they do not give up their lives easily or without rationale models the kind of struggle Robinson sees as necessary, combining the strength to bleed, to persevere, and to pivot to the unimaginable as circumstances require.

The Dark Reaches of Love and Freedom

What conclusion then, can be draw from our sojourn in the dark reaches of love and freedom? I have argued thus far that thwarted love and the pain that it causes is a place of potential for action. I continue on to say that there is energy created in the separation of the two lovers in all three poems and that there are interesting occurrences happening when one considers the Gothic nature of their love and the sublimity of pain. Further, the liminality of natural spaces allows these women to enact their own agency and willpower in their own interests. I also say that oblivion and death are two separate types of being, oblivion being a form of forgetting and death being a form of reconnection. Lastly, I consider the agency of these women and how death and freedom are related.

I have come to the conclusion that nature acts as not only an agent in its own right, but by acting in solidarity with women, nature augments these protagonists' own agency and power. The Gothic acts as a lens to magnify both the injustice of women's subjugation and the power a woman has when acting in conjunction with Gothic nature. The significance of my argument is that women writers such as Mary Robinson wrote their female characters as having willpower and agency, particularly when they are

immersed in green spaces. I suggest that Mary Robinson wrote her poems for women and the environment, and that she wrote in solidarity with other women writers and her fellow women in general. She also saw nature and wrote it as having its own agency and rights, which is important for considering the environment as alive and acting.

Chapter 4

Gender, the Gothic, and Dark Nature

A little learning is a dangerous thing (Pope xx)

Introduction:

Have we not always been fascinated by the figure of a woman in breeches? Cross-dressing women appear throughout English literary history: Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl* (1611), Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1602), Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1623), Eowyn in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), and even the modern example of Alanna in *The*

Song of the Lioness (1983). The cross-dressing character of Sir Sidney Aubrey in Mary Robinson's novel *Walsingham* (1797) joins a host of other familiar characters. Shakespeare scholar Hollyann K. Mellor argues that Shakespeare "presented [his] female crossdressing characters as figures who had the potential to pose a real threat to the established notions of Elizabethan patriarchy" (3). Not only that, but as Michael Shapiro points out, women cross-dressing as men "offered images of physical bisexuality, or hermaphroditism, which was generally regarded as monstrous" (Shapiro 21). However, Sharon Setzer argues that Sidney Aubrey is different from the Shakespearean roles of cross-dressing characters such as Viola and Rosalind, characters whom Robinson herself played as a noted actress: "[Sidney's] situation presents a striking reversal of the conventional scenarios in which female-to-male crossdressing is a voluntary act, a willed strategy for empowerment" (314). Sidney Aubrey does not cross-dress voluntarily; rather, she is forced into her male role by her mother to allow Sidney to take over the estate of her late father. Nowadays, according to Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva, cross-dressing is commonly used in literature, particularly that aimed at young adult readers, to explore identity and selfhood and to add fulfillment to the life of female characters who would otherwise to relegated to a passive existence (81). It should be noted that twentieth and twenty-first century cross-dressing is complicated by the existence of drag culture[16] and performances—a site of queer community and practice that is distinct in many ways from

[16] See Roger Baker's *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (NYU Press, 1994) and M.M. Bailey's *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press, 2013) for further information on drag culture.

the forms of feminist cross-dressing I discuss in this chapter. While there are examples of feminist women cross-dressers in twentieth and twenty-first century novels (such as Alanna from *The Song of the Lioness*), the concept of dressing across gender boundaries is associated more strongly with the kinds of drag performance that appear in queer communities across Great Britain and its former colonies. Shapiro points out that as contemporary readers of historical fiction, we must be careful not to use anachronistic thinking to interpret cross-dressing in historical fiction (20). As such, I strive to approach themes such as gender, sexuality, and identity with historical care.

The concept of Gothic gender and the ways in which the Gothic subverts gender is not a new idea. Many scholars have already discussed the Gothic and gender, including Diane Long Hoeveler, Diana Wallace, Sue Zlosnik, Angela Wright, Catherine Spooner, and others. The Gothic, it is generally agreed, allows for subversions of gender and gender roles in both male and female characters; feminized men and masculinized women populate Gothic stories, although whether these roles are presented as individually empowering or socially dangerous varies by novel. I endeavour to add my voice as one of many who discuss the Gothic and gender in the eighteenth century, focusing specifically on Mary Robinson's novel *Walsingham: or, the Pupil of Nature* (1797), which features the character Sir Sidney Aubrey, the eventual love interest and wife of the protagonist Walsingham Ainsforth. It is an interesting novel which raises questions about gender and sexuality, many of which are remarkably pertinent in the twenty-first century.

I begin this chapter by positioning my own perspective on gender, as someone

living in the twenty-first century, because it is a crucial aspect of how I wrestle with how Mary Robinson saw and depicted gender. I then discuss the novel *Walsingham* with an eye toward how Sir Sidney Aubrey's gender identity impacts possible understandings of gender in the eighteenth century in ways that may still resonate today. I discuss how Sir Sidney's gender relates to sexuality and how it might confuse or muddy issues of sexual identity. Additionally, I explore the figure of the femme fatale and gender to consider how Sir Sidney upends this trope. Lastly, I turn to the issue of marriage and how the figure of Sir Sidney is finally contained – or not – by this heteropatriarchal institution. I argue that Sir Sidney is a fatal woman figure who upends eighteenth-century British society and is a danger to patriarchal values, but that Sidney does not fit perfectly into the mould of the fatal woman. To this end, I suggest that she is an imperfect model for the very reason that she is then imperfectly contained. Further, perceptions of gendered characters such as Sir Sidney push against barriers of binary gender and allow her to transcend these barriers.

The Gender Matrix

In the twenty-first century, the issue of gender identity is at the forefront of public debate and discussion. While some movements assert that gender is related to "biological sex" and "what is between your legs" in order to police persons and bodies that do not conform to a strict binary distinction between "male" and "female," theorists of gender and sexuality have long identified gender as something that exists in the brain as much as in the body, and is much more complex and dynamic than a simple binary set of options. It

is not simply a matter of whether you have an "innie or an outie." In place of the "gender binary," I approach these issues through the framework of "the Gender Matrix,"[17] which allows us to think of gender as something like the model of the universe itself, in which gender and ways to be that gender are the result of endless and complex iterations of material possibility. This is a deliberate reference to the 1999 movie "The Matrix," which I love, and which plays with Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra to consider ideologies of embodiment in what many viewers consider to be a trans allegory. I think there is something to be said about the social aspect of gender being something like life in the Matrix, which I will explain more at length below.

First of all, gender is more complex than mere biological functions. I myself am genderfluid, which I explain as being like the neutron in an atom. I am always moving around the universe of gender, and my movements are not only restricted to being male or female, but sometimes rest in between somewhere. When I say that gender is like the universe rather than a spectrum, it is because male and female are not endpoints, but rather complex identities in and of themselves, and part of a wider interconnecting web. Further, male and female are not more important than the middle part of the spectrum model used in many queer spaces.

In one of the most influential analyses of gendered identity, Judith Butler writes,

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a

[17] Not to be mistaken for "Gender Analysis Matrix" used by social scientists during the COVID-19 pandemic to measure differences in disease impact among intersectional communities (Davies and di Piramo 77).

> mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted to it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (9)

Butler flips the hegemonic understanding of gender as determined by biological sex when they write that "sex itself is a gendered category" (10). The assertion that gender does not equal sex was a radical one when *Gender Trouble* was first published in 1990, and it has remained hotly contested into the present moment of this dissertation's writing thirty-four years later. Yet even for Butler, this line of inquiry was not new. Roughly forty years before *Gender Trouble* appeared, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* similarly questioned the stability of the category of woman, insisting that "Not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity" (3). "Is femininity secreted by the ovaries?" (3) De Beauvoir asks. She famously concludes that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283).

According to these theorists, a person actively participates in the construction of herself as woman. This is the heart of Butler's theory of performativity, often misunderstood as claiming that gender is simply a kind of theatrical performance that one puts on or takes off as they please. Instead, gender performativity refers to the way that, in Butler's words, "gender is always a doing" (34), not simply a way of being. The way that individual people "do gender" is frequently shaped by cultural pressure, or "compulsion,"

but because the act of doing gender is never complete, there is always the possibility for change, variation, undoing, or redoing. As something that one does rather than something one is, womanhood is an open concept that can accommodate people unassigned "female" by biological markers, allowing them to participate in the modes and actions that denote "woman" in the cultural field.[18]

For Butler, performing womanhood does not mean "acting like a woman" in a theatrical way, but rather "being" a woman in a deliberate and purposeful way – even if that purposeful way of being feels "natural" to the individual doing it. When I think of "being" a certain gender, I think of how people introduce themselves to or interact with others; if they present themselves as a woman no matter what clothes or accessories they wear, if they move through society as female, then they must be a woman. This concept reminds me a little of the concept of Indigeneity and how one must deliberately exist as an Indigenous person in order to resist colonialism (Vizenor 1). Gerald Vizenor describes this idea as "survivance" and how it is "an active sense of presence over absence" (1). Although being an Indigenous person is different from being a woman, it still shares a root of resistance and survival. If one is actively and purposefully a woman, then that person is performing an act of resistance.[19]

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[18] However, I still have many questions. What actions does one perform in order to become a woman? If the answer is something like "wearing makeup" or""wearing dresses," then I must protest that cis men (who are not necessarily trans women by performing this action) may also wear makeup or dresses.

[19] I have written elsewhere about the concept of Indigeneity and my own experience as an Indigenous person studying eighteenth-century literature. See Alex Wagstaffe and Eugenia Zuroski, "The Problem of Indigeneity," in *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Literatures in English*, ed. Sarah Eron, Nicole Aljoe, and Suvir Kaul (Routledge, 2024), pp. 35–47.

To further explore the concepts of gender identity and resistance, I would like to address the idea that individuals who are trans can have a fraught relationship with gender identity, expression, and performativity. The question of "presenting" as a woman or female as a measure of "being" a certain gender is more vexed for those with gender dysphoria, especially those who have yet to transition or are in the process of transitioning. Another aspect of this vexed relationship is the connection between external markers such as dress and legibility as the gender they are. The link between gender performativity and Vizenor's "survivance" theory is that of survival and resistance of a hostile environment. Much like Indigenous peoples who must struggle to survive in contemporary society, trans people must likewise struggle to exist. The struggle for trans people to survive in a society that pressures them to present as their assigned gender at birth (AGAB) directly opposes the need for trans people to present as their self-identified gender for reasons of gender dysphoria. But in many ways, the gender binary is still enforced, forcing trans women and trans men to follow a certain code of action and image to "fit in" or even "pass" as cis. The possibility that to exist deliberately as one's identified gender is enough to be seen as the same by others without the need to medically transition, act or dress a certain way, or "pass" as cis is not just a dream, it is a goal.

Returning to the idea of the Gender Matrix, we should consider the category of woman and its place in the matrix or universe of gendered life. I consider the category of woman to be as complex and capacious as the universe, one that cannot be reduced to the linear figure of the spectrum. The spectrum model places male and female at either end of

a broad continuum, with variations of each ("more" or "less" male or female) and non-binary genders in the middle. This model suggests that male and female are the defining extremities of gender and that non-binary people are somewhere "in between"; it makes it hard to imagine that to be non-binary is to be outside of the male/female binary system altogether. If one imagines gender not as a spectrum but as the universe, then not only is there a three-dimensional model that allows gender to be mapped out in non-linear ways, but, additionally, the touchpoints of male and female are freed from their defining opposition to one another, allowed to circulate and interact with other genders as equal concepts and points of possibility. In this model, the category of female is not an end point, a closure: rather, it too can expand and encompass a broad range of experiences of femaleness. Other gender theorists have considered models other than the spectrum. Sophia Aboim and Pedro Vasconcelos consider the "fields" of gender which are impacted by "social, scientific, medical and political spheres" (17). This type of theory, that gender is affected in different spheres of knowledge, can intersect with the one I have just proposed.

Aesthetics and Gender

A more capacious model of gender such as a matrix or universe can help us make sense of how Romantic-era writing disperses gender everywhere—not just onto people, but onto landscapes, literary styles, and aesthetic and epistemological phenomena in general. Anne Mellor splits Romantic texts into two distinct categories: "masculine" and "feminine"

Romanticism (3). She herself acknowledges the drawbacks and limitations of applying this distinction to Romantic texts, noting that a man can write feminine texts and a woman masculine texts, "even within the same work" (3). Yet Mellor argues that there is enough of a difference between these categories that labelling them as such is useful for formal analysis. That difference is that in "masculine" Romanticism, there is a distinct binary model at work, whereas in "feminine" Romanticism, there is a resistance to this polarity (3). Further, because the main genre in focus in Romantic-era writing and twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship of Romanticism is poetry, Mellor contends that poetry is both a masculine pursuit, and one that is generally carried out by "the aristocratic or leisured class" (6). The work I have chosen to discuss in this chapter is *Walsingham: The Pupil of Nature*, which is a novel rather than poetry. This is my only chapter that discusses a novel rather than Robinson's poetry, which is, while unintentionally done, very apt in this context.

Mellor's reasoning, while logically deducted, relies on broad and generic statements to support her argument. As I see it, she came to her conclusions by using a syllogistic structure:

The Big Six are all male authors.

The Big Six are all famous mostly for their poetic works.

Therefore, poetry is a masculine pursuit.

She goes on to discuss sub-genres of poetry such as the epic, for example, as more masculine than other forms of poetry and fictional prose (6). The novel, which is a form

that many female authors such as Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe are known for, is, by comparison, feminine (7). Thus, if we follow this logic, then Mary Robinson's novel *Walsingham* falls into the feminine Romantic category. As a site for discussing social depictions of gender, the novel does have many of the resistant traits Mellor associates with feminine Romanticism. However, Robinson also writes poetry, including ballads, as well as essays such as *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), which would all fall in the masculine Romantic category if not for the messages of resistance throughout these works. Mellor indicates that the spectrum of Romantic works from masculine to feminine is a "fluid continuum" (4). I have already mentioned the limitations of using a spectrum model to discuss gender, but I would like to reiterate that putting masculine and feminine at either ends of a spectrum can be seen as reductive. I acknowledge that Mellor published her monograph *Romanticism and Gender* in 1992, now over thirty years ago, which dates this critical position. The framework Mellor uses here is a good example of how difficult it is to contain gender, as for every rule we make for how gender works, there is an exception, if not a host of them. The novel *Walsingham* demonstrates that attempting to confine gender in an easily defined way causes all sorts of oozy problems.

These gender distinctions are not limited to Romantic literature; they also inform the aesthetic theory and Gothic architecture that shaped Romantic imaginations. Edmund Burke's foundational *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) describes aesthetic theory as being heavily gendered, with the sublime being masculine and the beautiful being feminine:

> The *Physiognomy* has a considerable share in beauty, especially in that of our own species. The manners give a certain determination to the countenance, which being observed to correspond pretty regularly with them, is capable of joining the effect of certain agreeable qualities of the mind to those of the body. So that to form a finished human beauty, and to give it its full influence, the face must be expressive of such gentle and amiable qualities, as correspond with the softness, smoothness, and delicacy of the outward form. (117)

The Burkean concepts of beauty all align with qualities generally seen as feminine: smallness, delicacy, smoothness. The connection of feminine beauty to nature demonstrates a clearly gendered divide. The sublime is associated more with masculine qualities:

> For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (123)

Masculine nature is seen as rugged and physically large with a gloomy atmosphere. The corresponding adherence of these traits to humans demonstrates that, for many Romantic era philosophers, different aspects of nature are gendered male or female. This projection of gender onto an entity that is not human demonstrates a society that relies on gender to

express meaning. It could be argued here that aesthetically, Sir Sidney is described as "beautiful" throughout the novel, even when presenting as male. Sir Sidney's actions and appearance are at odds, and although no characters in the story every suspect that Sir Sidney is not a man, aesthetically, the word "beautiful" could be seen as a gendered marker.

Burke is not the only philosopher to discuss nature and aesthetics. William Gilpin's *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape* (1792) discusses the picturesque as being a mixture of rough and smooth – or, masculine and feminine aesthetics. When discussing the picturesque as a landscape painting, Gilpin observes,

> Why does an elegant piece of garden-ground make no figure on canvas? The shape is pleasing; the combination of the objects, harmonious; and the winding of the walk in the very line of beauty. All this is true; but the *smoothness* of the whole, tho right, and as it should be in nature, offends in picture. Turn the lawn into a piece of broken ground: plant rugged oaks instead of flowering shrubs: break the edges of the walk: give it the rudeness of a road: mark it with wheel-tracks; and scatter around a few stones, and brush-wood; in a word, instead of making the whole *smooth*, make it *rough*; and you make it also *picturesque*. All the other ingredients of beauty it already possessed. (8)

Gilpin treats aesthetics as pieces that make up a whole rather than a whole that is intrinsically picturesque. Each piece alone would not be picturesque, but as a whole,

make up an image for admiration. Gilpin notes that there is a difference between real nature and images created by the human hand (3). Therefore, the picturesque is something created, a social and aesthetic value attributed to a landscape painting which is a simulation of the original.

The sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque as aesthetics are important to the Gothic landscape as they describe how the environment is constructed or composed in a particular way, just like a painting. This imaginative work is necessarily political, as it is a project of material world-making. In *Gothic Romanticism: Architecture, Politics, and Literary Form*, Tom Dugget argues that architecture, in the Romantic era, is "politically charged" and "definitive of a cultural movement" (2). As architecture, landscaping, and literary description join forces to organize the world into private and public spheres, space itself comes to be classed as either feminine or masculine. Yet I want to emphasize that the pervasive gendering of space, place, and form in the eighteenth century is not unilateral or uncontested. If Romantic writing introduces strict modes of imagining the world through gendered difference, it also generates deliberate experimentations with and deviations from these strictly defined modes.

Gothic writing encompasses some of the most striking experiments along these lines. While tropes such as the Gothic hero and the Gothic heroine reproduce the binary pairing of masculine and feminine figures, the genre's flagrant departure from realistic storytelling also unsettles emergent gender norms. The Gothic therefore presented a particular opportunity to women writers. Diana Wallace asserts that "from the late

eighteenth century, women writers, aware of their exclusion from traditional historical narratives, have used Gothic historical fiction as a mode of historiography which can simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion" (1). This interpretation of Gothic fiction as intervening in history itself as a mode of storytelling is consistent with Walpole's own definition of *The Castle of Otranto* as an "attempt to blend the two kinds of romances, the ancient and the modern" (9). Originally published as a "found" (5) history, *The Castle of Otranto* introduced Gothic fiction as an unexpected eruption into the historical record. It therefore makes sense that writers would turn to the Gothic as an appropriate mode for reinserting women into historical narratives from which they have been excluded.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, there are several distinct categories of female characters in the Gothic mode, and I am particularly interested in two of them: the Gothic heroine and the femme fatale. The category of Gothic heroine is perhaps best represented by Ann Radcliffe's most well-known heroine, Emily St. Aubert from *The Mysteries of Udolpho.* Several scholars have considered gender in the context of the Gothic heroine, and while some condemn her by saying that "female gothic novelist [construct] female characters who masquerade as professional girl-women caught up in an elaborate game of playacting for the benefit of an obsessive and controlling male gaze" (Hoeveler 4), others come to the opposite conclusion, saying that "Emily is in fact always an agentive heroine, but... her agency in the novel is... constantly fragmented" (Rogers 541). While I agree that Gothic heroines like Emily St. Aubert have agency, I further

suggest that there are similarities between gendered assumptions made by both sides of this argument. For example, one of these assumptions is that Gothic heroines are passive, or that passiveness relates to female characters' actions or lack thereof. Our understanding of passiveness assumes a "doing" rather than the "purposeful existence" I mentioned earlier in this chapter. By moving past these assumptions and examining how agency is formulated by gendered characters, I will put pressure on these assumptions, which will bring us to a new understanding of gender and female characters.

As figurations of an ideal femininity, Gothic heroines tend to combine the qualities of beauty, purity, mental quickness, and moral superiority. Emily St. Aubert, for example, is described thus:

> Emily resembled her mother; having the same elegant symmetry of form, the same delicacy of features, and the same blue eyes, full of tender sweetness. But, lovely as was her person, it was the varied expression of her countenance, as conversation awakened the nicer emotions of her mind, that threw such a captivating grace around her. (Radcliffe 5)

Emily's character naturalizes a mutually reinforcing relationship between aesthetic, intellectual, and moral qualities; she is not only physically beautiful, but also intelligent, and her intelligence makes her more beautiful still. The novel's focus on "the nicer emotions of her mind" is significant in the context of late eighteenth-century debates over whether women were valued as intelligent beings. Perhaps most famously, Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued that

women's intelligence was deliberately suppressed by an excessive emphasis on physical beauty, social submissiveness, and superficial accomplishments:

> The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove, that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty… One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives. ("Introduction" paragraph 1)

Wollstonecraft insisted that better education for women would make them more ideal marriage partners, precisely because it would make women less dependent on men as intellectual subjects. If one interprets Emily as having intelligence that will outlast her fleeting physical beauty, then perhaps Radcliffe is foregrounding in this passage the more lasting mental qualities that will remain valuable and useful her entire life. Yet the overall effect of her "captivating grace" arguably presents an eighteenth-century version of the "feminine mystique" that couches women's intelligence in the softer qualities of beauty and tenderness, from where it poses no threat to established social order.

A similar evocation of female intelligence can be found in Lord Byron's poem "She Walks in Beauty":

> One shade the more, one ray the less,
> Had half impaired the nameless grace

Which waves in every raven tress,

Or softly lightens o'er her face;

Where thoughts serenely sweet express,

How pure, how dear their dwelling-place. (Byron lines 7-12)

The poet here is similarly captivated by a woman's face as it reflects her thoughts: by moving from the physiological details of her hair and face to arrive at "how dear their dwelling-pace" (her mind). Unlike Wollstonecraft, Byron weds intelligence to beauty: he describes a woman's "thoughts" as a current that animates the face in an aesthetically pleasing way and extends this aesthetic pleasure to imagine her mind as something similarly pleasing, "pure," and "dear." This passage might suggest that an active mind is not necessarily incompatible with feminine forms of social compliance. Of course, this argument does urge women to be socially compliant, which does not align with the proto-feminist movement's goal of social change.

The logic of this formula is clarified by its contrast with the figure of the fatal woman, or femme fatale. The fatal woman represents the threat posed by the combined qualities of intelligence and beauty without the tempering qualities of tenderness, sweetness, and moral purity. Her sexuality represents the risk inherent in the Romantic fantasy of, in Radcliffe's terminology, the "captivating" woman: if a woman's beauty can be elevated by qualities of mind to the degree that she commands men's attention, might she pose a danger to patriarchal social order? The femme fatale is as much a Romantic fantasy as the Gothic heroine, and the danger she poses is part of the fantasy. We must

therefore heed Adriana Craciun's warning that "we need to avoid two dangers of interpretation" when reading this figure:

> The first is that these images of aggressive women represent and celebrate unbridled female agency and power. The second, equally dangerous position is that these images of aggressive women are simply products of male misogyny internalized by women. (47)

By avoiding these two totalizing interpretations of the fatal woman, we position ourselves to better understand her complex appeal in the broader context of Romantic femininity. It is important not to attempt to put the fatal woman back into the same box that she has just fought her way out of—whether the box of pure power or the box of pure monstrosity—because what she points to is the cultural need to imagine what kind of woman refuses to stay contained by such representations. The category of fatal woman is useful for noting that women could be imagined as dangerous to patriarchal systems under the condition that (given how often this figure dies as a result of her actions) we conflate this quality with the danger she poses to herself.

Being a female character in Gothic fiction can be empowering but also dangerous to the character herself. Now, I consider the character of Sir Sidney Aubrey, a female character in Mary Robinson's work *Walsingham: or, the Pupil of Nature* who lives the majority of her social life as a man. While the main character Walsingham Ainsforth marries her in the end, Sir Sidney spends much of the book as his supposed romantic rival. The previously discussed gender matrix and femme fatale characteristics can be

used to examine how gender functions in the novel as something fluid and changing. Perceptions of gendered characters over the course of the narrative confuse the traditional concepts of binary gender and allow Sir Sidney to transcend these barriers.

"Sir" Sidney Aubrey

Walsingham's Sir Sidney Aubrey is raised as a man and carries her femaleness as a sustained secret. It is clear from the beginning that there is some kind of mystery surrounding Sir Sidney, who keeps her secret in something like agony, specifically from Walsingham, who mistakenly believes himself and Sir Sidney to be bitter rivals for Isabella's affections. Despite Sir Sidney's plea to "believe my most solemn assurance, that *I* never shall be the lover of Isabella" (167), Walsingham does not believe her until Sir Sidney reveals the secret of her identity. Isabella, one of the few people in on Sir Sidney's secret also tries to assure Walsingham that they are not lovers, to no avail. For most of the novel, Walsingham, pursues Isabella in this false rivalry while Sir Sidney herself is in love with Walsingham, making for a fine, squishy mess akin to that of Shakespeare's *As You Like It.* Although Walsingham believed himself thwarted in love, near the end of the novel, Lady Aubrey reveals that she has a daughter and not a son. In order that Sidney inherit the estate of Glenowen, her mother raised her as the male heir. While her secret is now revealed, Sidney accidentally takes what Walsingham believes to be a fatal dose of laudanum, which nearly kills her. After this near-death experience, Sidney returns to Walsingham as a woman, and he marries her.

Where to begin to unravel the situation? I offer that we start with the problem of Sir Sidney's gender. In the twenty-first century, some people argue that if a person is "socialized" as a certain gender, then they must therefore be that gender. Of course, these people are often discussing trans women and their supposed socialization as men, which is, in turn, suggested to make it impossible for trans women to be women. Thomas A. King offers an explanation:

> One *became* a *social person* by entering into these discrete and differing relationships. By contrast, dominant Western understandings of sexuality and gender today tend to assume that one is *already* a certain kind of person, having a core "truth" or identity before one enters relationships with others. (275)

King's assertion that one becomes a gendered social person through relationships with others as opposed to the dominant understanding of one already being a certain gender (AKA "gender assigned at birth") returns to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This explanation of the friction between two opposing theories of gender allows a deeper dive into Sir Sidney's gender identity.

While Sir Sidney is clearly "socialized" as male, she recognizes that she is not male. However, when dressed and acting as a man, Sir Sidney is not recognizable as a woman. When she is acting as a man, Sir Sidney does not come across as a feminine or womanly man. And although I do not think there is anything wrong with feminine men, eighteenth-century society certainly did. Declan Kavanagh explains that political theorists such as John Wilkes and Edmund Burke worked to curb effeminacy through treatises and

speeches on freedom and aesthetics: “the development of the sexually normal is coterminal with the foundation of modernity’s notions of personal liberty and freedom of the press” (xiii). This pairing of antieffeminacy and freedom creates a systematic hostility to departures from gender normativity. Kavanagh continues, “antieffeminate hostilities are deployed to debar certain kinds of male and female agency within the public sphere” (xv). Interestingly, this hostility towards effeminate men also curbed women's agency. Sir Sidney, then, must completely convince others in the public sphere that she is a man, and does so successfully. Many readers of the novel, your author included, had no idea that Sir Sidney was a woman until the truth comes out. Robinson dramatizes the secret that Sir Sidney keeps while simultaneously giving no hint of what that secret is. Of course, the revelation of the secret causes an uproar which is only curbed by the fact that Sidney is then safely married to Walsingham. Sharon Setzer notes that both the *Analytical Review* and *Monthly Mirror* find the plot unlikely and improbable (307).

Descriptions of Sir Sidney are often very vague and do not necessarily point to gender – either male or female – in their insubstantial nature. Isabella describes – or, rather, fails to describe – Sir Sidney in a letter:

> Sir Sidney is an angel! Never did nature form so wonderful a creature! How shall I describe him? What pen can do justice to that model which mocks the power of description?... Figure to yourself a form moulded by the Graces, and fashioned by a studious desire to please; a countenance rather interesting than regular; eyes! - Oh Walsingham! I will not attempt to delineate them; they would mock the power

> of a more experienced artist. (*Walsingham* 128)

Isabella seems comically unable to describe Sir Sidney at all, leaving the reader with only an impression of a handsome, graceful man. It is also clear that Isabella is captivated by Sir Sidney, describing him in adoring tones, in spite of giving us no clear description of his actual appearance. Walsingham himself does a little more, describing him as "handsome, polite, accomplished, engaging, and unaffected" (129). Neither of the two have any reason to suspect that Sir Sidney is a woman.

Not only is Sir Sidney aware of her female gender in spite of being raised as a man, she also knows how to act as a man in society. It is unclear throughout the novel whether Sidney wishes to live as a woman because of her female gender, or because she wishes to marry Walsingham. This muddiness allows a multiplicity of possibilities, all of which allow Sidney to transcend the gender binary. The skills Sidney displays as a man are perhaps on fullest display in her interactions with Isabella. "How prettily an English girl blushes!" (130) she exclaims at one point, proceeding to openly—and, in Walsingham's eyes, audaciously—flirt with Isabella. And although Sir Sidney reassures Walsingham that "I never will be your rival" (130), Walsingham does not believe these words. Walsingham's certainty that Sir Sidney is his rival in love in spite of both Sir Sidney's and Isabella's assurances testifies to the persuasiveness of Sir Sidney's displays of masculine swagger. As the novel unfolds, Walsingham becomes more rather than less certain that Sir Sidney is a formidable rival.

This divide between Sir Sidney's "secret" and "public" genders raises the question

whether or not Sir Sidney's actions are that of a woman or that of a man. Sir Sidney's situation gives her a certain kind of freedom in society, but also a certain kind of restriction. As a woman, she must hide who she really is in order to be accepted in society. However, as a woman acting as a man, she is afforded many freedoms that women are not, such as receiving a foreign education abroad. Other people also listen to her and take her seriously as a man, which allows her to move around in the world in a different way than if she were perceived as a woman. For example, in one instance a male character Colonel Aubrey decides to join the army, and Sir Sidney tells her mother that she will "accompany him to Gibraltar" (Robinson 125). While presenting as a man, there is nothing that Sidney's mother can do to stop her without revealing the secret. Thus, are all her actions as a man that of Sir Sidney's play-acting, or are some of her actions that of Sir Sidney the woman who is allowed to do the things she would otherwise not be allowed to do? Thinking back to her flirtations with Isabella, is Sir Sidney simply play-acting as a man, or is she flirting because she wants to and is allowed to? Her reassurances to Walsingham that she is not his love rival does suggest that it was just an act on her part, but the skill with which she embodies the part suggests the possibility that this is not a theatrical performance but a more Butlerian instance of performativity.

Sir Sidney does many things that a woman would not generally be allowed to do in eighteenth-century society. As previously mentioned, she declares that she will join the army, causing her mother – the perpetrator of the fatal secret! – to faint (143). Sir Sidney does not end up joining the army; however, presenting as a man, she could have, and

would have likely been an officer. At another point, Walsingham challenges Sir Sidney to a duel with pistols (164). And although she chooses to discharge her pistol in the air in order not to shoot Walsingham, Walsingham does shoot at *her*. Interestingly, in his own thoughts, Walsingham calls Sir Sidney a "monster" (135). Walsingham uses this word because of her supposed seduction of Isabella, but it is a particularly interesting word to use for a woman pretending to be a man. In this scene, Sir Sidney puts herself in a specific kind of danger reserved for men of a certain status in order to satisfy Walsingham's sense of dignity. I find this duel interesting because it raises the point that Mary Robinson makes in her treatise *A Letter To the Women of England* (1799). Robinson, under the pseudonym Anne Frances Randall, writes,

> If a man receive an insult, he is justified in seeking retribution. He may chastise, challenge, and even destroy his adversary. Such a proceeding in MAN is termed honourable... But where a woman to attempt such an expedient, however strong her sense of injury, or important the preservation of character, she would be deemed a murderess. (5)

Robinson's implication here is that women *should* be allowed to defend themselves against such provocation, the same as men. While Sir Sidney chooses not to shoot Walsingham in response to his challenge, the scene places her in a situation akin to the one Robinson imagines, in which a woman might participate on equal terms in masculine rituals of honour.

In addition to showing Sir Sidney participate in this hyper-masculine spectacle,

the scene draws a sharp contrast between Sir Sidney and Isabella: the former participates in the duel in a collected and deliberate way, while the latter falls to the ground in tears (164). Although the novel invites us to recognize both characters as "actually" women, it also goes to great lengths to amplify the differences between them as social actors. This effort is consistent with the claims in *A Letter to the Women of England* in which Robinson writes that "Man is able to bear the temptations of human existence better than woman, because he is more liberally educated, and more universally acquainted with society" (6). By framing gendered comportment as a pedagogical and sociological issue, Robinson echoes Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the liberatory potential of education for women. "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it," writes Wollstonecraft, "and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing" (38). The kind of femininity on display in Isabella is, according to this argument, not an expression of any inherent gender identity but a set of learned behaviours that have been promoted to reproduce women's subservience. Sir Sidney is Mary Robinson's answer to the question of what happens when a woman is allowed an education and the freedom to pursue it. Her comportment is no more innate than Isabella's; rather, she has been given a rare opportunity to learn how to move through the world with the cultural toolkit typically reserved for men.

This discussion returns us to the distinction between performance and what Judith

Butler calls performativity. What makes Sir Sidney a woman rather than a man? Sir Sidney herself is never allowed to assert her own gender, although others around her describe her as a woman once her secret is revealed. Additionally, Walsingham writes in a letter that describes the change he witnesses in her:

> The prejudices of early infancy, originating in the most barbarous deception, are completely counteracted by the virtues, the heroic virtues of my transcendent Sidney! Indeed, so completely is she changed, so purely gentle, so feminine in manners; while her mind still retains the energy of that richly-treasured dignity of feeling which are the effects of a masculine education, that I do not lament past sorrows, while my heart triumphs, nobly triumphs in the felicity of present moments. (495).

What then, is the true performance? That of Sidney's actions as a man, or as a woman? Where does one draw the line between the two? Walsingham himself seems not to be certain either, as his letter presents Sidney as being "heroically virtuous," which seem to me to be a combination of masculine heroics with female virtue. Further, Walsingham values the mind that received a masculine education so much that he does not lament the past which forced Sidney to act as a man. Of course, as both Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson argue, if women were allowed an education that is similar to a man's, then Sidney – among other women! - could have the same quickness of mind as if they had been raised male.

The change that Walsingham describes, delineating a transition for Sidney from

masculine to feminine, is rather abrupt. Suitably, it is Sidney's near death that seems to precipitate this change. One of the male characters – Walsingham's former tutor Mr. Hanbury – says this of Sidney: "The amiable Sidney has been educated in masculine habits; but every affection of her heart is beautifully feminine; heroic though tender; and constant, though almost hopeless. She will, nevertheless, demand some time to fashion her manners to the graces of her sex" (492). This description comes closely after the revelation of Sidney's secret and shortly before Sidney takes a strong dose of laudanum which nearly kills her. It seems like an arrangement is being made for Sidney to return to being presented as female to society when her near-death interrupts. Instead of transitioning smoothly, Sidney abruptly changes from male to female. Sir Sidney's almost-death was not only necessary but inevitable. Sir Sidney, I contend, is a fatal woman character, and, like many other fatal women characters before her, she must die to be contained. Containment, at this point, is entirely necessary for eighteenth-century readers (particularly male readers), because any alternative threatens the patriarchal foundations of society. In order to become more acceptable to society, Sir Sidney must die and transform into Miss Aubrey – or, rather, Mrs. Walsingham Ainsforth.

However, Sidney Aubrey survives the near-death experience. Although her "death" as Sir Sidney and "rebirth" as Mrs. Ainsforth contains her in the legal sense, as she marries Walsingham and is now his property, her death is only figurative. She is still the same person that she was before, and her transformation does not erase her past. Sir Sidney is still inside her, waiting for her to release that side of herself once more. In that

sense, she is still exceedingly dangerous to a patriarchal narrative. She lurks within the pages, as much a monster as ever. Her potential to take on the identity of Sir Sidney is there, and always will be.

Interestingly, this narrative could be seen as a trans narrative, or something similar to that. Julia Ftacek examines works of eighteenth-century fiction that "feel trans," attributing this sensation to a concept which she calls "chirality," or, the idea that mirrored images of one another cannot be flipped in order to be superimposed on one another, no matter the configuration (578). Ftacek says," Eighteenth-century literature that 'feels trans' does so, I think, because its underlying chirality threatens a kind of crisis. That is, the question of selfhood that runs through so much eighteenth-century work becomes particularly unstable—not in the sense of mental illness, mind you, but structurally, narratively, a kind of change feels imminent" (579). I argue that Sir Sidney feels trans in the way that Ftacek describes. Sidney is a woman who must live as a man most of her life. Not only that, she "comes out" as female at the end of the novel. And, of course, there is the fact that her family force this gender role onto her against her will. These are all things that a trans woman might find relatable. Of course, in the story, Sir Sidney is a cis woman, but her life being forced to live as a man creates a narrative that speaks of frustrated gender issues. She says to Walsingham, "'If you knew the fatal secret that wrings my bosom, you would not condemn, but pity me '"(*Walsingham* 148). Sir Sidney often comments on this "fatal secret" which she only hints at throughout the novel until the end. The secret clearly makes her miserable, as she would like to live as a woman, a

woman who would be free to be in love with Walsingham.

Sexuality

Tying gender to sexuality is the next logical step in the argument. This novel plays with gender and sexuality in fascinating ways and creates a confusing and squishy mess. How does one unravel the sexuality of these characters? In the beginning, it is clear that Walsingham has romantic affection for only Miss Isabella Hanbury, the sister of Walsingham's tutor. Walsingham, presumably, is a heterosexual man. However, the person that he ends up marrying is not Miss Hanbury, whom he proclaims to love throughout the novel, but his supposed rival Sir Sidney! Granted, as soon as he finds out that Sidney is actually a woman who is in love with him, Walsingham wholeheartedly and immediately agrees to marry her. The issue comes when we consider that masculine Sir Sidney is the same person as the "wonderfully feminine" post-reveal Sidney. How can we reconcile that these two sides of Sidney are actually the same person? Walsingham does not seem to have any problems with the fact that Sidney was allowed to traverse society as a man. However, does he love the person that Sidney becomes when she is acting as a man as well as the feminine version? In the novel, it seems like a switch is flipped as soon as Walsingham realizes the truth. But is that the entire truth of the matter? It seems rather strange to suddenly go from a heated rivalry with a supposed man to a sudden romantic relationship with the revealed woman. How does Walsingham rationalize this sudden switch in his head? He says," All that has passed now rushes on my memory in proof of

what you have disclosed. What a fool – what a blind, thoughtless fool have I been! – How unworthily, how barbarously have I repaid this heroic attachment!" (*Walsingham* 492). It could be argued that Walsingham, having reviewed his own memories of events, realizes that the discrepancies in Sidney's actions were due to her true nature. Yet this switch itself is extremely sudden, and although the reveal of her real gender also reveals the past events in a new light, it seems implausible that Walsingham could so suddenly love someone he once reviled.

In the same way that, as Ftacek argues, eighteenth-century fiction can "feel trans," I argue that Walsingham's desire in this novel feels queer. To further construct this framework of queer "feeling," I must consider the possible homosexual feelings that Walsingham has for Sidney. Although Sidney is not a man, Walsingham *thought* that she was a man. Additionally, as Julia Shaffer points out,

> When Walsingham learns that Sidney is female and realizes that he loves her above all women, he has yet to see her as a female. She is still too masculine to take her female role and needs time to reshape herself as a proper woman. As such, Walsingham falls in love with a male, or at least masculine, Sidney. (72)

Because Walsingham's sexuality, at this point, falls in a murky area, I consider it queer, though not declared as such by the text. Even if his queer desire muddies the waters of social acceptability, his relatives do not object. Sidney's mother, of course, would find this union respectable as a solution which fixes the problems that Sidney's multifaceted gender identity cause in the first place. Who else besides Walsingham would marry a

woman raised to appear and act as a man? Walsingham voices no concern about the propriety of his actions, and the threat of homosexual desire does not occur to him. Perhaps to Walsingham, Sidney's revelation is a relief, because his heated feeling for the male Sidney was not socially acceptable.

During the eighteenth century, acceptable sexual desire was to only occur between a man and a woman, and in many cases, this sexual contract was also seen as an economic contract (Armstrong 67). Nancy Armstrong argues in her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* that

> In [conduct books] one can see a culture in the process of rethinking at the most basic level the dominant (aristocratic) rules for sexual exchange. Because they appeared to have no political bias, these rules took on the power of natural law, and as a result, they presented— in actuality, still present— readers with ideology in its most powerful form. (68)

Conduct books, and even novels, were powerful forms of heteronormative propaganda which restricted sexuality not just by gender, but by class. Whereas in previous eras marriage occurred contractually for aristocrats, the rise of the novel promoted the "love match" between people of a variety of social class. Heterosexuality was the only socially acceptable option, and even then, women were not expected to voice their sexual desires – only men. Indeed, Paul Kelleher indicates that

> Eighteenth century literature and philosophy fundamentally rewrote the ethical relationship between self and other as heterosexual fiction, as the sentimental story

> in which the desire, pleasure, and love shared by man and woman become synonymous with the affective virtues of moral goodness. (8)

Kelleher's monograph *Making Love: Sentiment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (2015) argues that sentimentality and heterosexuality are linked, and that this connection then makes homosexuality a moral depravity. Mary Robinson's character Sir Sidney throws a wrench into the inner workings of sentimental heterosexual desire. What would happen if I interpreted every instance that Walsingham mentions his rivalry with Sidney as a moment of homoerotic desire? Walsingham thinks of Sir Sidney repeatedly throughout the novel, and these feelings are powerful – though not necessarily positive. For example, when Walsingham presents Sidney with a pistol for the duel, he has a "convulsed and burning hand" (135). The convulsion of his hand could speak of disgust or even horror, but the word burning denotes rage – or desire. Thus, Walsingham's feelings could be anger or lust. Further, I will consider Isabella's contribution to the mayhem by analyzing the previously mentioned duel in the forest.

Even though the characters of Walsingham, Sidney, and Isabella are purportedly heterosexual, there is a tinge of homosexuality in these relationships. First, Walsingham falls in love with a person who calls herself Sir Sidney for the majority of her life. Again, as Ftacek says, this relationship "feels" queer. At least, there is something non-normative about this relationship, particularly when we consider their supposed rivalry – a kind of tension between the two. Then, we must consider that Sidney and Isabella travelled together – alone! – which indicates to the general public that Isabella is Sidney's mistress.

Sidney says that Isabella will be her "dear and inseparable associate" (135). The public perceived a heterosexual couple, and although Isabella knows the truth of the matter, the public perceives her as the mistress of someone whom she knows to be a woman. This relationship is certainly a form of female solidarity, but it could also be seen as a sapphic attachment.[20] Although all of these relationships "feel" queer, they are also safely contained by heterosexual marriage at the end of the novel.

Another point of contention is Sidney's mind, which demonstrates a unity of masculine logic and understanding and feminine grace. She received a masculine education, and although she is female, Mr. Hanbury suggests that she needs time to "fashion her manners to the graces of her sex" (492), suggesting that she needs to relearn her position in society as a woman because she is accustomed to her masculine education prevailing in her actions ("Introduction" 21). I suggested earlier that Robinson demonstrates the role of education in the formation of the female mind through Sidney's character. Men, both fictional and real, might find the character of Sidney threatening to their masculinity and their role in eighteenth-century society. However, Walsingham appears to value the masculine education Sidney received (495). The juxtaposition between the typical traits of a woman – beautiful, but not necessarily intelligent, and certainly not educated – and how Sidney acts and thinks demonstrates potential. Sidney, as an educated woman, does not reflect the normally desired traits in a woman. In fact, she seems to be a woman with superpowers, or someone with a special exemption from

[20] See Susan Sniader Lanser's book *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) for more information.

the rules of society. She can act and think as a man if she so chooses, and although her secret is revealed, that side of her did not magically disappear. Robinson portrays this situation as acceptable because of Sidney's marriage to Walsingham but does not explore the consequences of Sidney's deception.

Isabella's first impression of Sidney and her subsequent attraction further complicate the narrative. Eleanor Ty argues, "Sir Sidney is so adept at acting like a man that s/he is almost more attractive to women than the men around him/her" (Ty 48). Ty uses him/her pronouns for Sidney, suggesting a fluidity or looseness of gender. Many of the women in the novel fall for the masculine side of Sidney, demonstrating her masculine attractiveness. Ty continues, "Sidney's straddling of both masculine and feminine arts breaks down customary boundaries between the two" (49). The radical ideas that 1) a woman can be attracted to another woman, and 2) that a woman can perform masculinity so perfectly that other women fall for her break down and blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Robinson questions strict eighteenth-century gender roles as well as cultural presuppositions about women's intelligence and rationality.

The subtitle of the novel—"The Pupil of Nature"—can also be tied to gender, identity, and performance. Eleanor Ty discusses an observation that Walsingham makes in the novel: "we are all performers vying for applause, that there is no unmediated state where the 'natural' can take place" (46). *Walsingham* compares human nature to a performance – not necessarily in terms of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, but in the sense of the stage or the theatre. Mary Robinson, as an actress herself, would

have been intimately aware of how performance affects identity. I further want us to think on the concept of survivance, which I mentioned earlier. There is a difference between existing purposefully as a woman, which I link to performativity, and identity as a performance. Performance is public-facing, while performativity can be private. Was Sidney performing her role as a man to face the public while existing purposefully as a woman? Or is "woman" also something that she performs as an actress? She does, after all, need time at the end of the novel to fashion herself back into a "proper" woman. I wonder if she was at that point readying herself for a performance that would prove to Walsingham that she is, in fact, a woman. To what extent is womanhood in general a performance versus performativity? This question is another that Robinson's novel presents to us as readers to consider.

Nature, as previously mentioned, is a much-contested term at the time of the novel, as well as in the twenty-first century. Eleanor Ty notes that the term is contested within the novel itself, having various roles in Walsingham's life as well as Sidney's. Ty notes, "Hence, though nature is frequently invoked, it is not always with hope or faith in its power" (44). Nature can bring comfort or solace, but as Walsingham himself says, he is "The Pupil of Nature – the victim of prejudice – the heir to misfortune!" (*Walsingham* 470). Nature does not protect Walsingham, nor does it "always manifest itself through pure and virtuous action on his part" (Ty 44). I turn back to ecocriticism in order to consider this question and draw upon the example of Sidney and Walsingham's duel in the woods. Walsingham believes that he needs to avenge Isabella's honour, and that the

only way of doing so is by duelling Sir Sidney with pistols (161). This duel takes place in the forest, and as such, the two of them are immersed in nature (alongside Isabella). This duel in the woods exemplifies the question of nature as an imagined concept.

I have already discussed nature at length in this dissertation, and covered the multiple ways that nature, according to authors and critics, is multi-faceted. I remind readers of the quotation from Alan Bewell suggesting a "plurality of natures" (xx): that nature does not necessarily have to stand in for only one thing or one idea. It changes and has fluid characteristics. This idea helps us as readers and critics consider what nature means to Mary Robinson because she also writes nature as being multi-faceted. Walsingham, at least, seems to have, at various times throughout the novel, varying attitudes towards nature. These varying attitudes speak to a complex and changing relationship with nature. And, of course, Walsingham himself acts in a way that seems erratic in some instances, speaking to an unsettled identity. Ty argues that "[Walsingham] invokes nature paradoxically as a guide, a symbol of truth, and a bearer of misfortune" (45). Walsingham does not acknowledge these varying attitudes, or even seem to notice that this discrepancy exists at all.

This idea that Walsingham is "the Pupil of Nature" presents him as having a similarly varied human nature. Walsingham's actions certainly lend themselves to this idea. His actions are erratic, and, at times, immoral. At one point in the story, Walsingham kidnaps a woman he believes to be Isabella in a carriage, takes her to his lodgings, and has sexual intercourse with her, thus causing her social damage (*Walsingham* chap 52). It

matters not whether he assumed the woman to be Isabella, as his actions would damage the reputation of any high-ranking woman. His strange and, in many cases, scandalous behaviour mirrors how Walsingham himself views nature. Nature's "true" or "one" definition is impossible to pin down. Instead, nature – much like gender – is a fluid and multi-faceted entity.

The roles of gender and nature in *Walsingham* seem chaotic and possibly dangerous to British social order, harbingers of change, that ever-dreaded beast. Sir Sidney's gender fluctuations pose a threat to British society in several ways. First, she uses her masculine identity to upend the property and citizenship laws in place during the eighteenth century, usurping the male heir and other male inheritors. The risk of a woman becoming the heir of land and property is one that supporters of a patriarchal society would find deeply unsettling. Not only is Sidney culpable as the individual at the centre of the plot, but her mother Lady Aubrey and Mrs. Blagden also perpetuate the lie which keeps Sidney in her role as a man. Multiple female characters in this novel upend the so-called "natural" order of hierarchy in British society, elevating Sidney above her gendered station. The novel poses women – especially ambitious and greedy women – as being dangerous to patriarchal society and property.

Secondly, Sidney upends the system of what Judith Butler calls "compulsory heterosexuality" (26). According to Butler, "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is

accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (31). The upholding of compulsory heterosexuality is based on the opposition of male versus female as well as a strict binary system dividing them categorically. In order for this system to be rigid, there can be no deviation from the binary, and women and men must have strict roles within the system. Unfortunately, the very nature of the system is that it is unstable because discrepancies exist in spite of all attempts to suppress them. For example, in twenty-first century society, some believe that what they call "biological sex" is the same as one's gender. The proponents of this idea call themselves "gender critical," a misleading and even laughable term for an overt strain of biological essentialism in their thinking and logic. The very existence of "Sir" Sidney is one which destabilizes this type of structure and thinking. Therefore, Sidney's constructed identity as a man as well as her switch to identifying as female is a danger to society. Her existence implies that there is no "natural" gender, and that one can easily slip between them.

"Consign them to the Grave!"

One of the most compelling scenes in the novel is one in which Walsingham chooses to duel with Sidney because of his offended pride at the presumption that Sidney has seduced Isabella. He overhears a secret conversation in which Sidney reveals her true gender to Isabella, but Walsingham misunderstands their conversation. On this basis, he decides that he must duel Sidney. The scene starts with Walsingham contemplating his actions: "I shivered with conscious horror, while my hand grasped my pistol, and my tortured soul meditated *murder*!" (*Walsingham* 161). At this point, Walsingham is wild

with jealousy over his supposed usurpation by Sir Sidney. He believes that Isabella has chosen Sir Sidney over himself, and that their conversation indicates that the two of them will be companions as Sidney has convinced Isabella to give up her romantic attachment to Walsingham. (The actual reason, of course, is that Sidney romantically loves Walsingham and convinces Isabella not to pursue him in the hopes that one day, Sidney may be able to marry him instead.) Walsingham's choice to even consider murder speaks to a jealousy that overrides his conscience. In fact, many times throughout the novel, Walsingham's feelings override his conscious thought and lead to disaster.

The area where the duel takes place is a natural area, or a green space, close to Glenowen – the estate where Sir Sidney and his mother live. Walsingham describes it as such: "the asylum of my youth, the abode of virtue, the scene of past delight, the spot in which I should entomb every hope of earthly happiness" (160). Walsingham describes how this space encompasses many different traits and experiences in once sentence, ranging in feeling from a refuge to a tomb. In a typically dramatic manner, extolling his unhappiness at the current state of affairs to the point of despair, he decides he must avenge himself and Isabella by shooting Sir Sidney. In the past, Walsingham adored this space as an asylum and site of "virtue" and" delight," but that changes abruptly on this one night when he finds himself contested, as he believes, by Sir Sidney and Isabella. Isabella is not an unwelcome presence, but Sir Sidney certainly is. The space which encompasses all three of them is a natural environment, a wooded area with a glade – a room made of natural elements.

In this scene, Sir Sidney and her secret compete with Walsingham's despair and rage, creating a space where nature's chaotic and multifarious presence is clearly discernible. First of all, and strangely at that, this space encompasses a form of female solidarity. Isabella and Sidney's firm friendship transcends the boundaries of gender as well as propriety. The friendship is figured as scandalous, as the two of them travel alone unchaperoned. Yet, Sir Sidney uses her masculine privilege to afford Isabella a certain type of freedom. This freedom Sir Sidney offers Isabella in exchange for Isabella giving up her own place as Walsingham's beloved. Isabella admires Sidney even more now that she realizes Sidney's true gender. She agrees to protect Sidney's secret and to tell it "'to no mortal breathing'" (*Walsingham* 162). Isabella is firmly on Sidney's side in this endeavour and accepts that Sidney's love for Walsingham surpasses her own. Sidney absolutely trusts Isabella to keep this secret – which she does faithfully throughout the novel. These women have each other's best interests in mind and agree to help one another through turmoil and trouble. This trouble includes the real physical danger to Sidney during the duel.

Violence also occurs in this green space, caused by Sidney and Isabella's secrecy. Not only is their conversation completely misinterpreted, but to keep the secret means that Sidney cannot appease Walsingham's sense of maligned honour. Walsingham himself blames both Sir Sidney and Isabella for the supposed seduction and subsequent loss of Isabella's honour. "I was close on the footsteps of that being," he says, "whom I considered the vilest of the human race; - the woman, whose frailty excited my

contempt... I envied the monster I despised – and still loved; yes, tenderly loved the victim I contemned [sic]" (*Walsingham* 163). Walsingham clearly understands his own hypocrisy as the defender of Isabella's honour: *he* would usurp Sir Sidney's place but simultaneously condemns Sir Sidney's libertine actions. He considers Sir Sidney a monstrous figure in his use of Isabella but admits his own impure desires. His own self-loathing and hatred for Sir Sidney culminate in a duel for Isabella's honour, which provides a violent outlet for Walsingham's feelings.

Nature, in this instance, represents a place where violence can be enacted as well as solidarity cultivated, speaking to its ever-changing and complex role in the novel. In the space of one second, it changes from a place of secrets and safety to one of possible murder. Hearkening back to my previous distinction of dark nature versus everyday nature, I contend that because of its multifaceted and complex role in the novel, nature as Robinson represents it, is dark. This particular squishiness also denotes the Gothic mode, a mode which also allows social transgressions such as Robinson's gender-play. Sidney asks," What law can sanction murder?" (164) in response to Walsingham's invocation of "laws of [British] society" which allows him to duel her (136). Tellingly, Sidney decries British society's laws as unnatural, and implies that no law – natural, societal, religious or other – can sanction killing someone else. I hold no doubt that should she have been inclined, Sidney – with her masculine education – could have shot Walsingham. It is important that she has the ability to take his life, but instead chooses to discharge her pistol in the air, because otherwise, the gesture would be meaningless.

I have spoken already of nature bearing witness to acts of murder in a previous chapter, where I argue that such an intimate and visceral experience as having a murder take place within one's own environment causes an equally violent reaction. In Robinson's writing, human violence resonates within natural settings and nature responds in kind. Yet, as I have also shown in previous chapters, nature is for Robinson a place of potential power and agency for women in the face of structural and interpersonal violence. The duel in *Walsingham* clearly demonstrates this idea. Sidney, in this instance, demonstrates not only a lot of power, but also restraint. Danger is near and death could occur at any moment, but she welcomes it, saying,"' I value life too little to refuse the challenge – fire '"(164). She allows Walsingham to fire first, giving him a chance to kill her. Although he misses, the danger is still there – close and intimate. Once Sidney alone has a shot left to fire, it is her decision what to do. She chooses to fire into the air, causing no danger to Walsingham – at least physically. Mentally, Walsingham despairs once more, escaping in disgrace. Socially and legally, Walsingham represents one of the injured parties in the deception.

In this green space, Sidney decisively defeats Walsingham at his own contest. Although he found solace in nature previously to the duel, his own actions – borne of anger and humiliation – lead to further humiliating events. He falls into the deepest despair. However, in the very next chapter, upon Walsingham's escape, he feels "revived" by nature's beauty. He says, "Every leaf was spangled with drops of rain, and the freshness of the morning air passing over the meadows, revived my senses, almost

annihilated by the anguish of reflection" (165). When one considers the senses, one must consider the Enlightenment duality of mind versus body. Sense can be taken to mean a rational and logical mind, but it can also mean the five senses which embody our physical sensory experience as human beings in the world. In the previous scene, Walsingham has taken leave of his senses (the logical kind), overcome with emotion. Sir Sidney appears to be the rational one in this scenario, although it could be argued that her romantic feelings overwhelm her reasoning as well. Walsingham describes his feelings as being overwhelmed: "My brain was convulsed – the woods seemed to wave before me, as though they were shook by a trembling of the earth; the wind began to rise, it moaned over the mountains" (162). An earthquake, although imaginary and taking place in the psyche, physically reflects Walsingham's leave of senses, moving the earth in response to his feeling. The world *seems* to move, and Walsingham's senses betray him. Although Walsingham enacts violence within nature's boundaries, nature still revives him and gives him solace. It also reacts to his anger and despair, suggesting that although nature responds to his feelings, it does not reject him based on his actions.

Thus, nature bears witness to human exploits but does not take sides. Take into account these various examples of events that happen within nature: 1) Sir Sidney shares her secret and promise with Isabella; 2) Walsingham and Sidney duel without any bloodshed; and 3) Walsingham revives and recollects his senses. It is important that nature does not have any particular devotion to either Sidney or Walsingham, instead sharing space with them in equal measure. This multi-dimensional space encompasses all

of these actions and reactions. Nature, a robust and complex system, can encompass all people and all their decisions and feelings. Truly, there are, in Alan Bewell's words, a "multiplicity of natures" (xx), and even a certain segment of nature, such as this glade in the wood, can hold and embrace all of these actions and sentiments.

The exploration of Sidney, who can defy not only social norms but even death, continues. Why can Sidney, who herself says that she does not care for her own life, escape death here? One answer relates to narrative timing: simply, it is not yet time for her to die and reinvent herself as Miss Sidney Aubrey. She must continue her gender masquerade as Sir Sidney, and therefore, she must not die yet. However, I think back to previous chapters in which women *do* die in natural spaces and I must ponder on the differences between those situations and this one. For one, Sidney is more masculine, one who has received a male education and is acting as a man at the time. But the rest of Sidney's story – her seemingly impossible love for Walsingham and her mission to keep him from marrying anyone else – would create an almost perfect example of star-crossed lovers along with thwarted and excessive love. The only difference, which seems to create a shield between her own situation and the fate of the other women in poems such as "Poor Marguerite" and "Lewin and Gynneth," is that she is acting as a man.

Sidney does not die in this natural space. Once she is in the domestic sphere, however, she is more vulnerable and in danger of dying. She takes a lethal dose of laudanum and comes close to death, while all those at the estate believe she is truly dying. Further, she only comes close to death once her secret is revealed, revoking her shield of

masculinity. Both her role as a man and her immersion in nature protect Sidney, whereas her return to womanhood and encapsulation in a patriarchal space designated for women leave her open to persecution once more. A few different contradictions arise in this situation, and I recognize that Mary Robinson desires Sidney's return to womanhood—it is a crucial turn in the novel's progress toward a "happy" ending. However, Robinson also recognizes that, as a woman, Sidney is less protected from violence and society's most restrictive rules than as a man. The novel's interest in this "shield of masculinity" compels me to return to Robinson's treatise *A Letter to the Women of England*.

What I have decided to call the "shield of masculinity" rescues Sidney from coming to any harm when she lives and acts as a man. Her masculine education aids Sidney in her machinations to prevent Walsingham's attachment to any woman other than herself. Robinson writes in her treatise: "Let WOMAN once assert her proper sphere, unshackled by prejudice, and unsophisticated by vanity; and pride (noblest species of pride) will establish her claims to the participation of power, both mentally and corporally" (2). This passage clearly delineates Robinson's argument for women's equal capabilities under equitable conditions, and also describes Sidney's power, stemming from her masculine education. She acts as a man in the political and social sphere of men. Not only is she mentally astute, but she is also physically able to wield pistols, and move about the world as a citizen of the nation. No harm befalls Sidney in this state. Interestingly, the "shield of masculinity" only seems to apply to Sidney. Walsingham, who is actually a man, does not seem to benefit from a similar safety net. Instead, as the

"pupil of nature," he blunders his way through social encounters and makes a mess of his own life because of his feelings.

Robinson presents Walsingham as a "sensitive and marginal" figure (Ty 51). Eleanor Ty explains that he is a "feminized" hero, and that he is possibly modelled after the stock character of the sentimental man or "man of feeling" (51). However, Robinson turns this stock character on its head. Many sensational novels, such as Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771), present sentimentality as indicative of morality. Although Walsingham is clearly sentimental to the point of being ridiculous, he still enacts violence, including his participation in the aforementioned duel and his rape of a woman whom he mistakes for Isabella (*Walsingham* 290). Presumably, readers are meant to feel sympathy for Walsingham, the protagonist of the novel. Yet, although he goes through many miserable trials throughout the novel, he also unquestionably perpetrates harm. Walsingham at his most harmful is depicted as acting on maddening feelings, which suggests that, as an emotionally-driven character, he is feminized and only sympathetic to the extent that we read him as such. Then again, is the perpetration of social and emotional harm a purely feminine pursuit? I would suggest not.

What, then, is the point of creating a sensitive and emotionally-driven character in counterpoint to the masculine Sidney? The juxtaposition between the two characters demonstrates that men can have "feminine" emotions and actions and women can have a "masculine" education and social comportment. Robinson continues to play with gender and gender roles in her novel, suggesting that eighteenth-century gender roles are too

strict a binary system to truly encapsulate every man and every woman. The question then remains – what does the marriage of two such characters make possible?

Marriage and Fatal Women

I have argued throughout this dissertation that Mary Robinson's female characters are fatal women. This argument stems from the fact that 1) they pose a danger to society because of their transgressions of societal and "natural" laws, and 2) they tend to die at the end of their stories. In earlier chapters, I offer examples of the fatal woman trope: characters like Victoria in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), who are highly sexualized, provocative, antisocial, manipulative, and motivated by their desire for power, particularly over men. I would argue that Sir Sidney Aubrey can also be counted a fatal woman character. While she does not represent the typical fatal woman who is powerful, sexually provocative, and dangerous, she does share some of these characteristics which show themselves in non-typical ways.

It may be counterintuitive to describe Sidney Aubrey as a fatal woman, considering that she does not even present as a woman for most of the novel. Not only is she recognized as a man, but by multiple accounts she is a remarkably desirable one. Isabella describes Sidney in her manly role as an "angel," and then goes on to describe how handsome and congenial she is. Even Walsingham begrudgingly notes that Sidney is "handsome, polite, accomplished, engaging, and unaffected" (*Walsingham* 129). As a charming and attractive man, Sidney seems to be the opposite of the fatal woman. But it

is precisely Sidney's masculine charisma that poses a danger to the structure of patriarchal society. She is more attractive as a man than the other men around her, upending the regular, compulsory heterosexuality of the eighteenth-century world. Before she learns that Sidney is a woman, Isabella finds her very desirable; Walsingham, too, is so captivated by her male charisma that it drives him into a jealous rage that is allowed, by her coming out as a woman, to be reformulated as romantic love. So powerful is the draw of Sir Sidney that it upends the way that patriarchal-run society is supposed to – *must* – run. Sidney's desirability threatens the heteronormative foundations of eighteenth-century society.

Sidney's queer charisma disrupts gender roles, heterosexual attraction, and marriage plotting, as well as laws of land ownership, inheritance, and citizenship. She is extremely powerful as a female figure, and her power is a danger to eighteenth-century British society – the power that men hold over women and the patriarchal ideology that maintains masculine superiority. Even worse, it is unclear to onlookers exactly how dangerous she is. She is insidious, hidden beneath a masculine facade, quietly upending the world through her very existence. It is very important to her perilous nature that no one – not even eighteenth-century English readers of the novel – realize her true gender until her mother reveals her gender to all. She is completely hidden while still remaining in plain sight to those around her. I can only imagine the alarm that this idea might have caused to the reading public – that a woman could dress and act as a man so completely that she is indiscernible from the real thing. That facet of her identity is the one which I

believe makes Sidney a fatal woman.

I make this argument to show the stakes of the power assigned to fatal women characters, which marks them as threatening even when they are shown to be good people and upright citizens. Robinson does not portray Sidney as an evil character like *Zofloya*'s Victoria, but the queerness of her position in the world of the novel may incline some readers to see her that way. To the extent that her mere existence is dangerous to the powers that uphold patriarchal society, it would be to their advantage to interpret her as evil. When one considers that she is a poor example of evil, the defensive posture of heteronormative patriarchy is exposed. It is not that she is frightening, but that the patriarchy is frightened.

Sidney also fits into the trope, although imperfectly, of fatal women who die at the end of the piece. In *Zofloya*, Victoria's death is an apt ending to her sexual rampage through Italy. In the case of Sidney, she takes a fatal dose of laudanum that Walsingham at one point meant for himself (*Walsingham* 493). As I previously argued, Sidney must symbolically die before being reborn as a woman. In the case of most fatal women who die, the purpose is to contain them so that they cannot contaminate society with their dangerous sexuality and power any longer. Sidney, as a man, is a considerable danger to British society. If Sidney becomes a woman, which is her true form, and then marries a man, she is somewhat contained. I previously mentioned that Walsingham found her masculine education to be of value, which then suggests that perhaps she is not wholly, but imperfectly contained.

Conclusion:

What is the significance of Sir Sidney being imperfectly contained? Of course, the implication is that she can still break free of her containment. Her contentment with being contained is the only thing which keeps her safely married to Walsingham and living as a woman. Thus, much of the responsibility for her containment falls on Walsingham himself, who we have noted is also an imperfect specimen of mankind. There is still considerable danger that Sidney may break free and once again become the unsettling but desirable Sir Sidney. Or, perhaps, there is also the danger that Sidney will exercise the masculine education she received as a man in her womanhood, becoming the kind of woman that Robinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other feminists were urging into being.

Mary Robinson was almost certainly aware of the puzzle that her novel would present to the public when she published *Walsingham*. She creates a huge conundrum with the strange character of Sir Sidney, who is both an ideal man and a spectacular woman. Robinson upends the heterosexual matrix of eighteenth-century British society through the confused desire of Isabella for Sidney, Sidney for Walsingham, and Walsingham for both Isabella and Sidney. Overall, Mary Robinson presents her readers with an imperfect hero in the form of Walsingham who must then contain the dangerous yet wonderful Sidney Aubrey. Sidney can break free at any moment, which hints at suggestions of a society precariously balanced on the edge of gender disaster.

Chapter 5

There's Something Squishy About Mary

Introduction:

In this concluding chapter, I bring the many strands of thought I have explored in previous chapters together as part of a reading of Mary Robinson's "The Poor Singing Dame." I have been thinking about this poem on and off for around four years already and look forward to thinking on it for about as long again. I presented a very early draft of this material at the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism conference in 2019

in Chicago, and the questions that were asked there drove me to pursue a whole dissertation in answering them. To this end, I must thank Terry Robinson for chairing the panel and for asking me the question about identity, which became a central component to this chapter.[21] I hope to be able to answer these questions in my following chapter: 1) How does the titular Dame interact with nature before and after her death at the hands of the tyrannical lord? 2) What is identity, and how does this concept change when Mary becomes a hybrid character, combining herself and nature in one? 3) What does solidarity between women and nature look like and how can women seek justice in a tyrannical and patriarchal society? I seek in this chapter to begin to unravel what solidarity and justice mean in terms of a relationship between female characters and literary nature and how that might speak to a praxis of reciprocity in the world beyond pages of literary texts.

"The Poor Singing Dame" is a poem that found me rather than the other way around: I happened to read it in an eighteenth-century anthology alongside "The Haunted Beach," and it swept me away, much like the incoming tides. In this chapter, I will look at the relationship between Mary and nature both before and after her death. I will discuss fatal women characters as well as poke and prod at issues of identity and justice. I find it fitting that this last chapter contains the word "squishy," which will address the ways that the titular character's identity and morality are difficult to encapsulate. To this point, I will try and come to some conclusion about what all this squishiness means, but be

[21] NASSR conference 2019 took place in Chicago at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The panel was called "Melodrama," chaired by Terry Robinson. Terry Robinson asked me (approximately) what the impact of the poem character Mary's gothic hybridity was on her identity.

warned that like that gunk that oozes between your fingers when you try to catch it, finding an answer or even a way forward is like following faerie lights through a swamp. Now, without further ado, I will continue. Follow if you dare.

Mary and Nature

I would like to return to the term "ecofeminism" before we delve into a close reading of the poem. As I mentioned in the Introduction, ecofeminism is a field that has been around since the late twentieth century, and the influence of scholars including Val Plumwood, Carolyn Merchant, and Karen J. Warren has echoed throughout the decades since its conception. A foundational principle of the field, according to Karen J. Warren, is that

> Important connections exist between the treatment of women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other. Ecological feminists claim that any feminism, environmentalism, or environmental ethic which fails to take these connections seriously is grossly inadequate. Establishing the nature of these connections, particularly what I call women-nature connections, and determining which are potentially liberating for both women and nonhuman nature is a major project of ecofeminist philosophy. (3)

This passage suggests an intersectional reading of texts that includes nature as a facet of the term. In the following pages, I will be discussing the woman-nature connections between nature and Mary as bodily and identity connections, which place a dark twist on

the ordinary ecofeminist lens. My understanding of ecofeminism has been greatly shaped by Warren, alongside Plumwood and Merchant, and I hope to use this short foray into ecofeminism to come to an understanding of my own work.

Carolyn Merchant says in her 2016 monograph *Earthcare* that

> A view of nature as a process, one that is more powerful and longer lasting than human societies and human beings, is a sufficient basis for an ethic of earthcare. Women and men can participate in ecological movements to save the earth not only because it fulfills vital human needs, but because it is home to a multitude of other living and nonliving things, many of which are beautiful and inspiring in their own right. (xxii)

I would like to note that "nature as process" is another facet of nature that we can add to our list of what nature is or could be. In the poem "The Poor Singing Dame," nature does appear to be more of a process that an object: it does not stay static, and in fact remains a dynamic presence throughout the piece. Nature, it would seem, changes based on the presence of stimuli, which suggests its intelligence and conscience mind. Real nature – not just literary nature – also changes according to stimuli, but this poem focuses on the change of literary nature. When I say "literary" nature, I mean that in this case it is a construct, or simulacra of real nature. While the ecofeminist principle of "earthcare" focuses on real nature—the living and climatic planetary world we live in—I am interested in the question of whether literary nature can also function as a site of care, woman-nature connections, and liberation.

When I say "simulacra," I am referring to Baudrilliard's theory of simulation and simulacra. Baudrillard describes simulation through the allegory of a map that covers a territory exactly as it exists (1). He describes simulacra as a further abstraction from the original territory: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept... It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). I find the concept of a hyperreal without a model interesting, and I want to think for a moment of literary nature as a hyperreal construct. Baudrillard uses the concept of Disneyland as an example of a hyperreal space, explaining that its construction is a hyperreal because there *is no real* to base it on, and yet, it exists. Of course, there is a real and tangible nature which exists in our world, and even if we disagree on what constitutes nature, we can agree that it is real. However, the reason I call literary nature a hyperreal is because the construct of nature in "The Poor Singing Dame," for example, is not based on any specimen of real nature. There is no space which Robinson literally uses as a model for her literary nature. It is imaginary and constructed in her mind. Ergo, the literary space where nature occurs is both constructed in Robinson's head as well as every head which imagines this nature.

What, then, is the purpose of literary nature as a hyperreal construct? I suggest that this hyperreality is a space where "real world" change can be imagined and implemented. In the case of Robinson's poetry, it allows female characters agency that women in the world might not be allowed to exercise, and it allows readers to follow their explorations of what that power brings to their literary worlds. To return to ecofeminism, I quote Val

Plumwood's description of utopia:

> The story of a land where women live in peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias. This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth. (Plumwood 7)

In this passage, Plumwood repeatedly focuses on a *where* that does not exist. Ecofeminism orients itself toward fictional utopias because it strives to bring currently nonexistent worlds into actual being. Plumwood is discussing stories of feminist utopias such as Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In that novel, the protagonist dreams of two worlds – a utopia and a dystopia, both of which have an equal chance of coming true. This utopic dreamworld where women and men are equal and nature is respected and flourishing exists only in the female protagonist's head and in the uncertain future which could tip in either direction. This imagined space, like Baudrillard's simulacra, is rooted in fantasy rather than actual current material conditions, but this is what makes it potentially transformative—it allows us to imagine freely about what *could be real*. I argue that in the same way that Piercy's protagonist has a decision to make about which future to create, so too do we, and what could be termed ecofeminist literature puts this very question to us again and again. Without this literary space to dream in, the *where* that Plumwood seeks will never coalesce.

Romantic ecofeminism is a fairly new field, as Kaitlin Mondello notes in her chapter "Romantic Literature and Ecofeminism" in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* (424). Mondello points out that gender and nature are "rarely considered together" although ecocritics and ecofeminists have "shared concerns," those of environmentalism, but also pushback against the definition of Romantic poetry as merely "nature poetry" (218). She also argues that an ecofeminist approach to Romantic poetry offers a more complex, nuanced, and accurate version of the period. Mondello notes that there are many scholars, including Melissa Bailes, Sylvia L. Bowerbank, Daniela Garofalo, Dewey Hall and Jillmarie Murphy, Kari E. Lokke, Kate Singer, Ashley Cross, and Suzanne L. Barnett who are discussing Romantic ecofeminism currently and are expanding the field (424). This dissertation aims to expand on the criticism of female-authored Romantic literary works, something which is still important to feminist and ecofeminist Romantic scholars alike.

To begin the discussion, I return to ecocriticism, which focuses mainly on the so-called Big Six of Romanticism. Scholars such as Jonathan Bate, James C. McKusick, Kate Rigby, Alan Bewell, Alan Liu, Kevin Hutchings, Karl Kroeber, and many others focused on the discussion of the penultimate question: what is nature? I have discussed the issue of nature in the introduction of this dissertation, but I return to Alan Bewell's assertion that there is a "multiplicity of natures" (13). Nature, as I said, is a squishy mess. Another question in the field of ecocriticism is "who is our scholarship for?" Mary Mellor, for one, has pointed out that ecocritical scholarship often focuses on able-bodied

male individuals: “Although it is not always explicitly stated, human-nature relations are idealized as the lone figure in the open and wild landscape. This figure is not always male, but is unlikely to be ill, infirm, in a wheelchair or holding the hand of a small child” (M. Mellor 139). The growing field of ecofeminism is one way to address the problem of gate-keeping access to nature.

Romantic ecofeminism, as a field, is mainly concerned with the dynamics of liberatory movements such as environmentalism and feminism and how these two movements can entwine and inform one another. Kathryn Walchester, for example, argues that women-authored travel writing, a mobile and capacious literary form, demonstrates a “female-centred view of politics” (42). Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and Dorothy Wordsworth bring together nature and gender in their travel writing to describe “positive social movements or the overthrow of non-democratic governments” (42). These social movements are still important today, and I believe it is important to continue to study and interact with scholarship in this area. It might even be said that in the twenty-first century, we have reached a tipping point on the issue of environmentalism in a global sense. I will also mention the current women’s rights issues in the United States, such as the overturning of Roe vs. Wade and forced births. Resisting tyranny is just as important now as it was in the eighteenth century. Women-authored nature works in the Romantic period such as Mary Robinson’s can be a basis for further study of ecofeminism. The poem “The Poor Singing Dame” is a work which depicts a female character in solidarity with nature, and which allows a form of justice to be served when that possibility is not

tenable under the patriarchal laws.

The poem "The Poor Singing Dame" begins with the character of the Dame living in a peasant's hovel below the castle of the lord. The Dame's hovel is juxtaposed with the lord's castle, and Mary's hut is decorated with natural details:

> The summer sun gilded the rushy roof slanting,
> The bright dews bespangled its ivy-bound hedge,
> And wild buds thick dappled the clear river's edge
> When the castle's rich chambers were haunted and dreary,
> The poor little hovel was still and secure;
> And no robber e'er entere'd, nor goblin nor fairy,
> For the splendors of pride had no charms to allure. ("Dame" lines 9-16)

Take note of words like "gilded," "bespangled," and "dappled" that refer here not to rich and ostentatious ornamentation, but to the natural elements surrounding the hovel. In contrast, the lord dwells in "haunted and dreary" chambers, which are rich, but empty and sad. The description is set up so that the reader sees value in the lush natural elements that surround the Dame's cottage and also recognizes that in spite of the castle's magnificence, it is "haunted." The Dame, in spite of her poverty, is quite content with her life. As the final line in the above passage notes, she is not at all charmed by the splendour of the castle and sees no need for it—not when the richness of her own life comes from being surrounded by and immersed in nature.

I want to draw attention to the Dame's connection with nature here. It is

significant that from the very beginning, the Dame not only sees value in nature, but has a physical and spiritual connection to it—one characterized by a kind of mutual respect. Robinson describes the hut: "A neat little hovel, its lowly roof raising / Defied the wild winds that howl'd over its shed" (lines 3-4). In this scene, her hovel, while small and humble, still manages to defy the strong natural elements around it. The scene demonstrates that the Dame is not scared of nature, even angry, powerful, and dangerous nature. In comparison, the lord's castle's turrets "Were rock'd to and fro, when the tempest would roar" ("Dame" line 5). The fact that the nature physically rattles the lord's castle, while the same wind and storm has no effect on the Dame's cottage, suggests that the different dwellings signify different ways of inhabiting nature and relating to the natural world. The lord's castle, which is supposed to be a stronghold of protection and a deterrent to invaders, moves alarmingly in the winds, representing the lord animated by a fear of nature—a fear that also feeds anger, resentment, and envy.

The lord seems to have the same emotions of anger and fear towards the Dame herself. Mary's humble contentment with her life is demonstrated through her singing. Robinson portrays the Dame thus:

> To the merry-ton'd horn she would dance on the threshold
> And louder, and louder, repeat her old song:
> And when winter its mantle of frost was displaying
> She caroll'd, undaunted, the bare woods among:
> She would gather dry fern, ever happy and singing,

With her cake of brown bread, and her jug of brown beer,

And would smile when she heard the great castle-bell ringing,

Inviting the proud – to their prodigal cheer. ("Dame" lines 25-32)

Not only is Mary undaunted by nature and its various phenomena (such as the frosts of winter), but she also seems unafraid of the lord and his riches and power. Her singing unwittingly taunts the lord as she responds, smiling, to the noises of the castle. She may be inviting the proud ruler to be cheerful, but he finds the singing an impertinence. The lord is angry that although Mary is content and humble with her life and is cheerful in spite of poverty, *he* is miserable among all his riches and power. The next stanza portrays the lord's "envy" and his hate that "poverty should be so cheerful" (line 35). He is angry that the Dame is upsetting what he sees as the "natural" order of things: he should be happy and content because of his wealth and power, and she should be humble and meek, not defiant and satisfied. In the face of her happiness, he is angry and resentful.

I would like also like to take note of the word "threshold" in the above lines. The line says that Mary would "dance on the threshold" (line 25), suggesting that she is literally dancing on the boundary between her own domestic space and external nature. She is also metaphorically dancing on the threshold, as her daily household labours take her into the woods to gather the materials of her domestic life. Living in happy symbiosis with the woods, Mary already lives in a kind of hybrid form with nature. As such, she occupies a liminal space in which she has the energy to transform things, such as turning grain into humble bread and beer. This energy is demonstrated through her song, which

connects the space of her "hovel" to the space of the natural world. Further, Mary's song has the ability to transcend boundaries between life and death, forming a constant presence throughout the poem. Through her singing, Mary seems to be able to slip across multiple dimensions within the constructed world, much like nature itself.

Nature, it should be noted, is not just a setting but a willful presence in the poem. It is an active agent which is able to change the course of the story, and which interacts with Mary. Returning, for example, to the lines, "The summer sun gilded the rushy roof slanting, / The bright dews bespangled its ivy-bound hedge," we can see how nature is in an active partnership with Mary, collaborating in loving care of her home environment. Nature is free to do as it pleases, and Mary's home as a space of natural richness is evidence of a reciprocal relationship between Mary and nature. Kevin Hutchings describes nature's agency as "the idea that non-human creatures and environments have the active capacity to influence human thought and behavior" (190). He continues, "This proposition is well worth exploring, for a determined belief in nature's passivity risks closing down dialogue between the human and the non-human (or more-than-human) world before it can even begin" (190). I argue that Robinson's poem and the actions of her protagonist are structured to reinforce the idea of nature's agency – and the Dame's. The next part of the poem sees the tyrannical lord of the castle imprisoning the Dame and his subsequent haunting by what I argue is a Mary-nature hybrid character.

Tyranny and Evil Overlords

The lord of the castle in "The Poor Singing Dame" is a tyrant who is angry that "poverty could be so cheerful" (line 35) and imprisons Mary for her continued defiance of the social order—that is, her refusal to be miserable in poverty. Interestingly, the lord of the castle is ruler of what one might call a "geo-imaginary" – a place that does not exist on the map or is absent from the map; a blank space. Siobhan Carroll explains the geo-imaginary this way:

> To speak of a "geographical imaginary" or "geo-imaginary" is, on one hand, to harken back to Said's work on the imaginative geography of the Orient. It is also, via one's invocation of "the imaginary," to situate the term's subject (such as the imperial geo-imaginary) or object (such as the geo-imaginary Tropics) within a discourse of identity formation and maintenance—a discourse that can escape as well as reinforce the boundaries of such traditional units as the nation. (11)

This term is useful to bring to the table because it points to the importance of the imagination to British empire, and how connections to imagined lands are central to British identity. The coherence of what it means to be British is formed through the material conquering and colonizing of territory combined with the creative work of imagining the world in terms that serve British national interests. British citizens rehearse stories and fantasies of what exists "out there," such as Said's Orient, to anchor their ideas of place. The imperial imagination does not only envision the world as already under British control. Carroll also discusses atopias, imaginary places can be reached theoretically but are uninhabitable and therefore uncolonizeable (6). As Carroll describes

them, these places are the land on maps marked “here there be tigers” as a warning. They mark the threshold of the empire itself, which tends to disintegrate at the edges, indicating both the possibility of further expansion and the fear of collapse.

Mary Robinson also anchors her own ideas of identity and place in a geo-imaginary space, including the lord’s territories in “The Poor Singing Dame.” Robinson does not specify which land the lord’s territory occupies or which nation he serves. Even the time period is arguably indistinct, creating a mythical sense of a land which fades into nothingness at the edges. As a geo-imaginary space, these territories are the opposite of Carroll’s atopia—a mystified vision of the heart of civilization that is familiar, but unidentifiable. It is a land which exists in a vacuum, like an island surrounded by darkness. Thus, although it may be said to be colonized, as the presence of the castle on once-wild lands implies, it is also a place that floats in a hazy sea of uncertainty in the sense that it seems to be disconnected from historical time. This blurriness of boundaries again suggests the hyperreality of the simulacra which is not what we might consider “real” but is more than real in the sense that the world of the poem and what happens in that world are in super-focus, allowing us to witness the cultural logic play out.

The imaginary quality of the lord’s castle, and its disconnection from historical reality, raises the question of whether or not the lord actually has any territory he can call “his” beyond the boundary of the castle itself. A castle’s function is to provide a stronghold for concentrated authority to oversee a surrounding territory, but in this poem, that authority fades into nothingness beyond the castle walls. The lord rules the people

inside his castle, but beyond that, who rules? Where does his authority come from, and to what extent is his authority something that can be challenged? The lord's insecurity as he observes Mary living happily outside suggests that he feels like he is under siege rather than in charge of the world around him. This idea that nature is not just passive territory but that it has power, and that it can surround and engulf an entire community, pits Robinson's literary nature against patriarchal civilization.

The civilization within the castle seems to be single-handedly run by the lord, "a proud, surly ruler." Although it is clear he has the authority to "rule," it is not clear what larger structure grants him this authority. The hierarchical nature of patriarchy is brought into question when one cannot see where the line of authority goes. This obscurity places the lord in a strange microcosm surrounded by natural and blank spaces on the map. The main antagonist of the poem and a symbolic stand-in for patriarchal power itself, the lord is effectively stranded on an island, surrounded by what he interprets as a hostile presence. If we return to the lines, "The turrets, that frown'd on the poor simple dwelling, / Were rock'd to and fro, when the tempest would roar" ("Dame" lines 5-6), we can see that nature is seen as a force which assaults the castle physically. Further, the juxtaposition of the "poor simple dwelling" against the imposing castle, which remains "still, and secure" while the winds rock the turrets, suggests that nature is on the Dame's side, and wants the lord to know it.

I want to discuss authority for a moment and consider how it functions in "The Poor Singing Dame." A simple definition of authority is this one: "power to influence or

command thought, opinion, or behavior" (*Merriam-Webster.com*). The key word here is "power," which might seem obvious, but by deconstructing structures of power, we are better able to dismantle oppressive forces. In the late eighteenth century, the question of power—who has it, how it should be used, and when it is abused—was not just a literary concern. William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham said in a speech to parliament on January 9, 1770:

> It is not impossible, my Lords, that the inquiry I speak of may lead us to advise his Majesty to dissolve the present Parliament; nor have I any doubt of our right to give that advice, if we should think it necessary. His Majesty will then determine whether he will yield to the united petitions of the people of England, or maintain the House of Commons in the exercise of a legislative power, which heretofore abolished the House of Lords, and overturned the monarchy. I willingly acquit the present House of Commons of having actually formed so detestable a design; but they can not themselves foresee to what excesses they may be carried hereafter; and, for my own part, I should be sorry to trust to their future moderation. Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it; and this I know, my Lords, that where law ends, tyranny begins! (Pitt 141)

This point was then paraphrased by Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Creighton, which reads, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority" (Acton, n.p.)

Although Robinson places her poem in an imaginary space outside of history, she is asking questions politically relevant questions about how rulers wield power. What is the nature of power in the poem, and how does power function? How does the poem engage the assertion that power corrupts integrity and morality? There are two sources of power within this poem – the patriarch and nature. I want to discuss both in the following paragraphs.

The lord of the castle is not a good person, and the patriarchal system which endows him with his power is shown to be corrupt when he has Mary seized and incarcerated. The basis for the Dame's imprisonment is that she will not stop singing when the lord tells her she must. Robinson writes,

> Thus she lived, ever patient and ever contented,
> Till envy the lord of the castle possess'd,
> For he hated that poverty should be so cheerful,
> While care could the fav'rites of fortune molest. (lines 33-36)

The lord's reasoning comes from a place of jealousy. He wants to be happy, but when he is not happy he takes out his anger on the Dame instead of reflecting on his own unhappiness. The Dame upends the supposedly normal order of society – she should be poor and miserable and the lord should be rich and content. Her defiance of the social order is represented by her song, and so the lord orders her to stop singing to suppress her freedom to exhibit her own happiness. However, she keeps singing, still defying his orders and the social order he yearns for, in which happiness itself belongs only to him.

This reaction marks the lord as a tyrant—the corrupt wielder of absolute power that statesmen like William Pitt and Lord Acton warned against. Robinson writes, "He sent his bold yeomen with threats to prevent her [from singing]" ("Dame" line 37). Singing, a somewhat harmless pastime, becomes a mark of resistance against control, and the lord responds in kind. The lord then imprisons the dame, for an unnamed crime which nevertheless threatens his authority. In late eighteenth-century Britain, the question of when legitimate authority becomes tyranny was intensely debated. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence that established the United States as a sovereign nation famously justified the break from British governance in these terms: "The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."[22] The concern was not new, however; in 1689, John Locke addressed the problem of tyranny in his *Two Treatises of Government*. According to Locke, a tyrant "makes not the law, but his will, the rule; and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion" (123). On the basis of this definition, which would have been familiar to all eighteenth-century Britons, but especially those like Robinson engaged in discussions of civil rights, then the lord – who is envious and angry – who uses his power for revenge against the politically powerless Dame is certainly a tyrant.

We cannot be sure what the actual laws of the land are, because, as previously

[22] https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript

mentioned, we are in a place that is outside of geography. However, there are some suggestions that this is a feudal-era lord who can govern his own fief and answers only to a king. The first of these suggestions is the use of the word "roundelay," which originated in French in the fifteenth century and was then modified into Middle English ("roundelay" n.p.). The second is the very isolation of the lord's castle, giving the impression of a contained unit such as a fief. Furthermore, the Dame's given name, Mary, suggests that this fief is in England. The English name Mary, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, derives from the Hebrew "Miryam," "a word of unknown origin, said to mean literally 'rebellion'" (Harper n.p.). If we assume that the poem is discussing feudal-era England, then we can ascertain the laws of the land. This medieval setting is also a convention of the Gothic, in which British writers would set their tales in Arthurian-type environments. Among the reasoning for this shift in time is to distance the British reader from the terrors and horrors of the Gothic.

In the English Middle Ages, a type of law called "common law" was at play in society. It was a form of law assuming that there was a universal type of law that applied to the whole system and that the King's word was law. The principal of common law is that is was founded on reason (Kiralfy n.p.). If we consider common law as the rule of law and justice in the land that governed the lord's lands, then not only is he failing in his duty as a lord to his vassals, he is failing in his duty to the king. The application of the law in the lord's estates is biased and based on emotion rather than reason. Of course, because of the way that the land is laid out, the King's law would have been difficult to

enforce, and so the lord's tyranny is hard to detect and react against. It would be difficult to argue in a court of law that a woman's singing is at all punishable by imprisonment and death, but the plight of the Dame would not likely be discovered.

Now that we have discussed the full extent to which the lord is a tyrant, I want to turn to the concept of patriarchal tyranny. Without the structural framework of patriarchy being enforced in both eighteenth-century and feudal society, the Dame would not be put in the perilous situation she was. The poem uses its geo-imaginary setting to show that patriarchy is at work in British culture from at least the age of feudalism all the way up through the supposedly Enlightened eighteenth century, calling attention to the temporal longevity of patriarchal rule as well as its rootedness in oppressive social and cultural systems. It is important that the Dame is oppressed not just by the lord, but also by a hostile system, because the poem is part of Robinson's critique of systemic injustice. By breaking down the system, rather than just replacing bad rulers, society as a whole becomes healthier, not just the Dame's life. Further, while the British patriarchal system oppresses women in Britain specifically, recognizing it as a system reveals how it is connected to other oppressive orders around the world. If one points out the system of oppression, there is also potential for solidarity and counteraction.

The Mary-Nature Hybrid

Of course, Mary does not escape the patriarchal system in her own lifetime, and it takes her death for her to reach a type of freedom from oppression. The lord makes an example

of Mary to show his vassals what defiance will bring:

> Three weeks did she languish, then died broken-hearted,
>
> Poor dame! how the death-bell did mournfully sound!
>
> And along the green path six young bachelors bore her,
>
> And laid her for ever beneath the cold ground!
>
> And the primroses pale 'mid the long grass were growing,
>
> The bright dews of twilight bespangled her grave,
>
> And morn heard the breezes of summer soft blowing,
>
> To bid the fresh flowerets in sympathy wave. (“Dame” lines 41-48)

The detail of death by a broken heart seems to belong to the genre of thwarted love that Robinson explores elsewhere, but in this case, it is the separation from nature that causes the Dame’s fatal heartbreak. The poem does not mention a husband or even a human friend who will mourn her death. Indeed, the six young bachelors who bear her to her grave are not mentioned beyond the line in which they appear, nor are they named. Neither are any family or friends mentioned as being by her grave site – not even her fellow vassals or peasant-folk attend her in death. Instead, what we see is that nature “bespangled her grave,” adorning her resting place as if in mourning. Further, the fresh flowerets “in sympathy wave,” personified as mourners. Mary was not broken-hearted because of her separation from society or bonds with fellow humans, but because her imprisonment took her from her home in nature.

This broken-hearted passing and the bell which knells the song of her death are the beginnings of Mary's transformation. The first inkling of Mary's change comes when the six bachelors take Mary along the "green path." The green path is not just a literal path to her grave but a metaphorical path towards her hybridity. When the bachelors place her "forever, beneath the cold ground" ("Dame" line 44), they are literally placing her within the earth's embrace. They bury her, and like a seed, she will grow into something more than human. The poem continues,

> The lord of the castle, from that fatal moment
> When poor singing Mary was laid in her grave,
> Each night was surrounded by screech-owls appalling,
> Which o'er the black turrets their pinions would wave! ("Dame" lines 49-52)

Once Mary is buried in the ground, she becomes part of nature. Instead of being in dialogue with the natural world, she merges with it. Where Mary once connected to nature through her singing, now her singing takes the form of nature's own expression, particularly the song of the owls which haunt the lord: "On the ramparts that frown'd on the river, swift flowing, / They hover'd, still hooting a terrible song" ("Dame" lines 53-54). Before her death, Mary was unjustly imprisoned for singing. Her death doesn't silence her but changes her song from cheerful roundelays to haunting dirges.

In the end, the lord dies as a result of the haunting he endures. Physically, he begins to show his ill-health:

His bones began wasting, his flesh was decaying,
And he hung his proud head, and he perish'd with shame;
And the tomb of rich marble, no soft tear displaying,
O'ershadows the grave of the poor singing dame! (“Dame” lines 61-64)

The lord literally begins to rot. He is wasting and decaying while he is still alive. It is as if the lord’s inner self begins to show on his outer shell, displaying his tyranny and rottenness for all to see. He also “perishes with shame” (62) suggesting that he feels shame for being brought down by a woman’s vengeful spirit. I doubt very much that he feels shame for his actions. Interestingly, his grave, which is made of marble, still overshadows the Dame’s grave. It seems to suggest that even when the two are both dead, there is still a hierarchy that needs to be observed—a sign that individual revenge such as the owls’ hounding of the lord is not enough to change social norms. Although Mary’s posthumous revenge may not affect society beyond the world of the lord’s castle in the poem, I take this line to mean that there is more work to be done before justice can be said to be done. Rather than offering a fatalistic and tragic ending, it may be a call to action.

I want to return to the issue of fatal women as defined by Adriana Craciun and consider what about Mary makes her a fatal woman and why that matters. I read Mary as a fatal woman because she fits the basic specifications: 1) she is perceived as a danger to society who must be contained, and 2) she dies in the end. One might even add a third quality, if we recognize Mary in her posthumous form: she kills the lord. Why is it

important that Mary dies in the end, and then comes back as a supernatural force? It comes back to the question of agency for me. We know from Robinson's other works how focused she was on the question of women's agency under patriarchal oppression, yet Mary is not given room in the poem to say or do anything following her imprisonment but languish and die. This happens so quickly—in the space of one line—that it doesn't feel like Mary has actually disappeared; it is just more difficult to distinguish her from the natural beings that continue to speak and act on her behalf. Mary's agency is nature's agency. She ends the poem a hybrid of a ghost-woman and woman-nature who actively haunts the lord in the form of singing owls until he dies as well, completing her cycle of revenge. When I consider Mary as an agent of revenge, I think of her as a particularly drippy ghost who oozes and gunks up the line between life and death. In other words, she is not a clean ghost (not that many ghosts are clean) – she slimes and slithers and is just generally icky, at least in the eyes of the patriarchy that wants to eliminate her. Instead of disappearing, she gets everywhere. Of course, we are not given an image of Mary-as-ghost in the poem. This imagery is my own imagination thinking of how Mary is a messy character who, again, does not stay contained. She is squishy.

The nature of squishiness is that not only does it not stay contained, it actively resists containment. If one tries to tighten their grip on it too much, it oozes between their fingers and gets everywhere. Mary, I argue, is conceptually squishy in that she does not stay nicely in a box of fatal woman, or Gothic woman, or ghost woman, or ghastly double. She traverses and transgresses all of these character archetypes. For example, one

may ask the question: how is Mary an owl? How does she influence nature to do her bidding? *Is* it her bidding, or is it nature's bidding that the owls haunt the lord? If one thinks back to the beginning of the poem, one can see that nature is already starting to creep and crawl into Mary's life. Even when nature is "light" and "happy" it is beginning to adorn Mary's house and grow on surfaces around her. This contact zone between Mary and nature starts off as being supernatural and there is a hint of darkness, of transgression before any other Gothic instances happen.

Once Mary dies and is literally placed in the ground to rot, she becomes part of the environment around her. Literally, her bones and flesh will decay and start growing environments of their own. Mary melts into the dirt enveloping her and becomes one with nature. It might be argued that nature is monstrous throughout the poem, that it seeks to envelop Mary within itself from the very start. This idea is very dark, suggesting a particularly ecogothic reading of the poem. However, Mary is not scared of nature, as I mentioned earlier. She defies the terrifying elements of nature such as the wind that rocks the towers of the lord. This defiance, I argue, is not about being scared, or even resisting nature's attempts to envelop her. I argue that Mary values nature and welcomes her eventual metamorphosis into a hybrid creature. It is only through this willingness to become one with nature that Mary is able to get her revenge on the patriarch who seeks to eliminate her.

Mary dies, but so does the lord. Both are placed in the ground, and although the lord is placed in "a tomb of rich marble" ("Dame" line 63), he is still inside nature.

However, we have reason to believe that the lord finds this engulfing of his self horrifying, even "shameful," rather than welcoming. The poem ends with his death, and, unlike Mary's, his death is very final. He has a wasting death, in which he decays while he is still alive. I do not believe that the lord will become part of nature and have the same agency that Mary does in death. There will be no epic battle at the end over who gets to control nature, because control is not the point. Mary and nature are equals, whereas the lord fears, loathes, and seeks to suppress nature. This difference in attitude towards nature is the element which decides that Mary will become a hybrid creature and that the lord will simply die and disappear.

In spite of the lord's attempts to contain Mary, she is very much *not* contained—especially not in death. Instead, she becomes a more powerful being, even more transgressive than before. She evolves into something that, as the Gothic tropes of Robinson's poem indicate, patriarchal powers find truly monstrous. Reading Mary's transformation from happy singer to vengeful spirit raises the question of violence, which Adriana Craciun pinpoints as a vital part of her definition of the fatal woman. Many femme fatales are not only dangerous socially and sexually, but also physically. For example, in Dacre's *Zofloya*, the main character Victoria is an accomplished murderess. Although much of the violence of the poem is directed at the Dame rather than from the Dame, Mary's haunting still causes physical harm to the lord. Robinson herself advocated for women and their ability to defend themselves from harm *and* revenge themselves upon those who have caused them harm, including using violence such as participating in

a duel ("Letter" 8), as Sir Sidney does in *Walsingham*. Robinson does not exclude violence from her imagined set of women's defenses against the patriarchy.

Craciun points out that "Women's violence transgresses the boundaries that establish both sex and gender like no other act can – not only are such women not properly feminine, they cease to be female" (47). If one considers the character of the Dame in this framework, is she written as female? This question leads me to the problem of identity that I will address in the next section.

Identity

Thinking on Lady Macbeth's famous words in the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare —"unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (Act 1 Scene 5) —it seems to me that in the English literary tradition, in order to commit violence, a woman needs to become something other than a woman in order to carry out the deed. Indeed, Macbeth tells his wife, "Bring forth men-children only / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (Act 1 Scene 7). Such a line suggests that the capability of cold-blooded violence is a masculine trait. These lines from Shakespeare's play seem to mirror what Craciun describes in her discussion of the fatal woman archetype – that a woman ceases to be a woman in the eyes of men when she commits acts of violence. However, when I consider women's writing, particularly Mary Robinson's poetry, I find that women remain women no matter what act or atrocity they may commit. The capability of women to enact violence while retaining their gender

identity is important, because it reminds readers that women are properly people and not just objects. A woman is not masculine, but *human* for enacting violence.

I realize that what I suggest here, then, is that violence is a part of the human condition. I do not say so lightly, and not without several caveats. I do not mean to say that people commit violence for no reason at all, as an expression of some kind of human instinct. Even the lord in Robinson's poem has a reason for committing violence—as I argue above, that reason is culturally conditioned response to humiliation and emasculation. According to Julian Walker and Victoria Knauer, humiliation is a source of violence in individuals and that "dangerous levels of anger only occur with the additional trigger of humiliation" (727). When Mary refuses to stop singing, reinforcing her happiness while the lord remains miserable, not only is she demonstrating her humble yet threatening refusal to comply with tyrannical orders, but she is also humiliating the lord by defying his power. I am not excusing the lord's actions, but offering an explanation for violence – violence is not inherent in our species, but brought on by external stimuli, including the material and conceptual worlds that structure our lives and relations. Mary's violence follows the familiar narrative arc of revenge. The poem makes it clear that she will never receive justice by means of the laws of the land, and imaginatively provides her another form of justice, which ends with the lord's death by haunting.

The question of whether Mary "is still a woman" in this vengeance narrative is a complicated one, not only because she pursues justice through violence, becoming "unsexed" in Lady Macbeth's words, but also because she is no longer a human

individual at this point in the poem, but has merged with the vast powers of nature itself. Yet I argue that Mary remains gendered as female throughout the poem—that Robinson wants us to read her this way. Mary seeks justice not just as a woman, but *because* she is a woman. Mary's gender is an integral part of why she is punished in the first place. A peasant defying tyrannical authority is humiliation enough, but a female peasant? She had to be punished, to be contained, to be put back in her place. The lord's violence upon the Dame is a story about gendered lives and social orders.

Robinson shows how social relations organized by heteronormative gender make everyone vulnerable to violence, even men with authority and power. In the case of the lord, we see this vulnerability in his humiliation, which functions like a kind of pain. Edmund Burke has this to say on pain:

> The only difference between pain and terror is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger; but both agreeing, either primarily or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves, they agree likewise in everything else. (Burke 130)

The relationship between pain and terror, according to Burke, allows them to collaborate to cause fear. This fear will then cause the subject of the pain or terror to react in violent ways. Thus, a culture that conditions men and women to be afraid in different ways, and of different things, makes them vulnerable to different forms of pain—and likely to

respond with different forms of violence. The notion that violence is a masculine tendency, and that women who react to pain with violence are "acting like men," treats violence as a character trait, not a constructed social dynamic. I argue that Mary Robinson is pushing back against this understanding of violence, and showing that women who enact violence are doing so *as women*, in order to show how violent social orders generate specific kinds of violent responses. By shedding her individual existence and merging with nature to get her revenge, the Dame enacts violence not just as a wronged woman but on behalf of all women wronged by patriarchal power.

The concept of identity thus depends on the cultural structures that organize how people live. Gender is a crucial part of the world in Robinson's poem, but so are imagined geographies. I return to Siobhan Carrol's attempt "to add a new spatial axis to theories of British identity formation, calling attention to the ways in which Britain was imagined, not only in opposition to a continental or colonial Other, but also in relation to supposedly empty spaces" (11). British identity is also related to place, and geo-imaginary spaces generate imaginary identities. Geo-imaginary spaces do not actually exist, they just seem to exist—there is no material foundation for identity, and therefore identity is anchored in the unstable ground of discourse. Robinson is questioning such forms of identity in this poem by playing with them. By rooting identity in the wavery, insubstantial Gothic geo-imaginary, she creates identities that are paper-thin but also malleable.

As one such figure, the lord is representative of British patriarchy, and as such is also a representative of colonial power. He is lord of a land that both exists and does not

exist, an insubstantial land that fades at the edges. This means that the lord's identity and his power are also based on something insubstantial. I would like to note that the lord is never named, just referred to as "the lord." Despite his tantrums, he remains a flat and static character, one with very few personal identifiers and one who does not change throughout the story. These insubstantial characteristics suggest that the lord's identity is tied into the British national and imperial identity, one which is itself grounded in the unstable discourse of imagined global worlds. Robinson's critique of patriarchy is also a critique of the imperial imagination and its identity grounded in fantasies and practices of oppression.

As for Mary, she herself is not named until the seventh stanza. Up until this point, she is referred to as either "the old dame" or simply "dame." Thus, we know two things about her: that she is elderly and that she is a woman. Because we do not know her name until the seventh stanza, in our heads, she is simply an old woman. I also note that Mary is not named until after her death. In life, she is simply "the dame," "she," or "her." This choice might seem strange considering that the dame is the main character of the poem, but it reinforces the sense that the most significant aspect of the dame's identity is that she is a woman—the position that defines her relation, and her resistance, to patriarchal power.

But what are we to make of the detail that Mary is not named until her death? Mary only becomes Mary after she dies. There are many suggestions from various religious sources, including *The Bible* that names hold power and that being able to know

someone's true name means that one can control that person or entity. For example, in *The Gospel of Mark*, Jesus encounters a demon and asks his name, casting him out after the demon responded, "My name is Legion: for we are many" (*King James Bible*, Mark, 5.9). Often, this idea refers to demonic entities which are able to be summoned and controlled through use of their name, among other magical means. I do not mean to say that Mary is a demon, although to individuals like the lord empowered by the patriarchy, that might seem to be the case. What I want to suggest is that there is power in Mary's name, and that naming her is a reflection of Mary's power being augmented through a posthumous connection to nature. Her power is a reason to fear her, and naming her is a way to lend her power legitimacy, to make it recognizable.

It is also worth noting that Robinson's own given name is Mary. I do not think that this mirroring is a coincidence. Robinson's life was filled with strife and some of her letters suggest discontentment with her treatment by the public as well as by prominent male figures such as the Prince of Wales. She writes,

> I should consider a dungeon as a more comfortable abode than a palace, were the former a scene of quiet, and the latter a place of menacing persecution. I have therefore determined, if ever I am again arrested, to go to the King's Bench prison: for my proud heart shrinks, when insult and menaces, such as unfeeling creditors make use of, irritate and perplex me. (Setzer 311)

For Robinson, the act of writing was an exercise of power. In her treatise *A Letter to the Women of England*, Robinson writes,

> Yet, the present era has given indisputable proofs, that woman is a thinking and an enlightened being! We have seen a Wollstonecraft, a Macaulay, a Sévigné; and many others, now living, who embellish the sphere of literary splendour, with genius of the first order. The aristocracy of kingdoms will say, that it is absolutely necessary to extort obedience: if all were masters, who then would stoop to serve… I answer, women, but they will not be your slaves; they will be your associates, your equals in the extensive scale of civilized society; and in the indisputable rights of nature. (45-46)

Robinson's writing mirrors Mary's singing: they are both expressions of resistance to patriarchal power and they both defy attempts to silence them. Robinson was well aware of how women's writing could defy the patriarchal power system in place in eighteenth-century Britain. She is conceivably allegorizing her own resistance in "The Poor Singing Dame," set, as I argued earlier, in a strange geo-imaginary space. The Dame's world is a floating island of sorts, but this lack of definition serves a purpose—it allows Robinson's world and the dame's world to be one and the same, and to obscure this fact at the same time. Again, a squishy matter; be obvious and elusive at the same time.

It is also worth noting that Mary, in the Christian tradition, is also the name of the mother of Christ, the blessed virgin who miraculously birthed the son of God without having sexual intercourse. With the addition of this figure, there are not just two Marys in play; there are three. There is evidence in her other poems that Robinson herself holds the number three as significant—for example, as I discussed in chapter 2, "Golfre: A Swiss

Tale" endows the number three with mystic meaning—three lamps; the three peals of the bell. This echoes the significance of the number three in Christian doctrine, which defines God through the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (*The Holy Bible,* KJV, Matthew 28:19). Robinson's triad of Marys is a Gothic mirroring of the Christian God.

To what end does Robinson invoke these three Marys? How does it support her main point, which is that patriarchal tyranny must be resisted? It is worth noting that, in Christian theology, the Holy Spirit—the "third Person of the Holy Trinity"—has long been associated with the more "feminine" aspects of God, the Mother in the triad with the Father and the Son (van Oort). Theologian T. David Beck writes that "from the beginning, Christians have consistently associated the Spirit of God with life, sanctification, and renewal. In more contemporary formulations, pneumatology [the study of the Holy Spirit] emphasizes themes like vitality, creativity, transformative power, divine friendship, and liberation" (200). Beck argues that while many Christians think of the Holy Spirit as the divine "comforter," pneumatology includes a "'darker' side of the story" in which "the Spirit is also a transforming Dis-Comforter" that guides humans through "transformative suffering" (201). These characterizations of the Spirit resonate with Robinson's Gothic, which, as I have shown, explores how women characters pursue vitality, creativity, and liberation through various trials of "transformative suffering." Robinson's Gothic

mirroring of the Trinity with a triad of Marys connects the feminine—and feminist—themes of her work with a recognizable religious doctrine, lending them theological legitimacy.

Yet this Gothic mirroring also allows Robinson to hold a critical lens up to patriarchal structures, including the highly patriarchal institution of the church. The three Marys offer a trinity that is all Spirit, all feminine, and still all-powerful—a divine power capable of gathering human suffering into processes of transformation. In this way, they resemble the figure of nature itself in Robinson's work, the multifaceted entity that offers comfort and discomfort, support and retribution, in connection with women living under patriarchy. One of Robinson's main goals with her writing is to offer women a glimpse into a world in which patriarchal figures such as the lord in "The Poor Singing Dame" are held accountable for their abuse of women. Her Gothic trinity provides this glimpse, and helps us imagine that liberation from abusive worlds is possible.

Solidarity and Justice

Justice is a tricky concept, and although many people claim to understand what justice is, the matter of what counts as justice is a little more squishy than one might expect when pressed. In many cases, what people call justice looks more like revenge or punishment—making those who cause suffering suffer themselves. In other cases, calls for justice are calls for structural social change. For example, one might consider the popular activist chant "No Justice, No Peace." In an article on the recent Black Lives Matter protests,

Darryl Brown notes that this chant "points to the civil nature of peace, which is to say the state's responsibility for maintaining a normatively legitimate peace on just terms through just means" (Brown 96). BLM protestors called attention to the lack of peace in Black lives under violent policing practices; the justice they demanded included defunding the police.

I want to also consider the term "restorative justice," which is commonly used in discussions of community-based care. According to Courtney Julia Burns and Laura Sinko, restorative justice describes the ways in which Indigenous communities enact justice. Burns and Sinko define restorative justice as

> a global social movement with Indigenous roots focused on centering harm, fostering accountability, and transforming communities. Core principles include accepting and acknowledging responsibility for harm, repairing harm by centering the harmed party's needs, rebuilding individual and community trust through active accountability, and addressing root causes and social injustices that create conditions of harm. (341)

As you can see by this definition, the point of restorative justice is to bring balance and harmony to the whole community. The role of justice is not to punish anyone or to seek revenge, it is to return the community as a whole to a state of equality. It brings about harm reduction and gives even those who perpetrate crimes or violence a way forward. I emphasize restorative justice here, because this model is one that I agree with, and is consistent with the principles of ecofeminism I discussed earlier in this chapter.

What does justice look like in the world of "The Poor Singing Dame"? As I mentioned earlier, the laws of the land, whatever they may be, are not being enacted justly when the lord imprisons the Dame for singing and being happy. The lord, authorized to rule, enacts the law unequally—he uses it against the Dame, imprisoning her for the "crime" of tormenting him with her singing, as if he himself is not accountable to the law, in the manner of a tyrant. There is no justice here, and apparently no recourse. The poem shows that justice is impossible under the rule of a tyrant—not just for the Dame, but for everyone, particularly women. In this case, the tyrant must be removed in order for the citizens to be free.

These themes make sense when we recall that Robinson was writing in an age of revolutions—not only the American Revolution, but also the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution. The French Revolution had a particularly strong effect on many of British Romantic writers. The motto of the French Revolution – Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité – names the goal of the revolution as freedom (Liberté), equality (Égalité), and solidarity (Fraternité). Many of the Romantics took a step back from the ideals of the French revolution once the Reign of Terror began (Epstein 330). Yet the vision of a better, more just world remained a Romantic focus even as movements on the ground demonstrated the inescapability of violence in the world as it was. "The Poor Singing Dame" contributes to these revolutionary outcries against all-too-familiar forms of tyranny against common people. It also portrays the prison as a site of unjust oppression. Like present-day activists against criminal justice systems based on policing and

incarceration, Robinson did not seem to have much faith in the British justice system—the one with which she had first-hand experience. She was sent to debtor's prison for the sum of £63, and although she wrote to her former lover the Prince of Wales to clear the debt, he refused (Byrne 389). Undoubtedly, this event did not endear her to the justice system, or those who upheld it. She also writes extensively in her treatise *A Letter to the Women of England* about the right women should have to defend their own honour (5). These examples serve to demonstrate that Robinson may have questioned the laws in place in eighteenth-century England and the methods by which they were carried out.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in "The Poor Singing Dame," justice can only be served through vengeance in the form of haunting. Robinson writes,

> Wherever he wander'd they followed him crying;
>
> At dawnlight, at eve, still they haunted his way!
>
> When the moon shone across the wide common they hooted,
>
> Nor quitted his path till the blazing of day. (lines 57-60)

The owls only haunt the lord during the night, which is consistent with Gothic tropes related to setting, but also indicates the covert form that justice must take when the designated ruler and laws of the land fail to carry out their public responsibilities. This haunting is punishment for the crime of abusing his authority, and it is carried out not by Mary's ghost but by the forces of nature itself, seemingly infused with Mary's spirit. The owls that torment the lord are not Mary, but they protest on her behalf. This form of haunting, which isn't explicitly traced to Mary but seems overwhelmingly to be about her,

makes room for the possibility that the lord is actually being haunted by his own guilty conscience—a trope made famous decades later by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." It is important here that Mary and nature are in solidarity with one another. It showcases not only ways that women and nature can form connections, but also women and other women. And when the grievance comes from the collective, it has the potential to feel like it comes from the world itself, revealing large-scale wrongs. Robinson demonstrates that alone, one person cannot change their own fate or gain justice for themselves. But together, a woman and nature can be strong and help one another to become more powerful.

Solidarity among those oppressed by the patriarchy can then transform into a true form of resistance, even if the oppressed are not the same. Women are connected to each other, and to the natural world, through similar forms of oppression under colonial patriarchy, and can resist through creative solidarity. Robinson recognizes through her writing that solidarity is important and that together, women are stronger than alone. Through her writing, she forms a bond with other women across England, and into the future.

Conclusion:

Mary Robinson brought awareness of the injustices the patriarchy enacted against women in the eighteenth century through her poetry. "The Poor Singing Dame" is but one example of many poems that discuss injustice and inequality. That awareness is just the

start of movements across England for equality under the law and education for women that equaled that of men. Mary's identity as a woman is central to her struggles against eighteenth century society as Robinson's life was full of interactions and relationships with powerful men – including the Prince of Wales. Further, Mary's inclusion of nature in her own theory of justice signals the beginnings of ecofeminism.

I have been thinking about this poem on and off for about four years, and I look forward to thinking about it for about as long again. The squishiness of morality when it comes to patriarchal injustice committed against women and what is an acceptable, and effective, response is something of a mess. Is the lesson that we should become a hybrid Gothic creature who haunts our enemies in order to seek revenge? If it is revenge, could it also be something more? I conclude that there is no easy answer to these questions, and that is rather the point. Women are human beings, and they are allowed to be squishy and uncontainable beings. *That* is the point. Freedom for women to be able to act, *as women*, as men or citizens or humans or owls is the real struggle that Robinson writes into her poetry. In the end, there really is something squishy about Mary.

Coda

Dark Women; Dark Nature

Dark Women

In the end, dark women or fatal women are dangerous to the patriarchal world in which we live. Throughout literary history, there have been many examples of dark women: Grendel's mother, Lady Macbeth, even Morticia and Wednesday Addams. Dark women have an unstable moral compass in many ways, and many fatal women choose violence

or revenge in response to what has been done to them by the tyrants of the worlds they live in. Some of them choose death for others or for themselves in response to pain. I call the problematic characteristics of dark women "squishy" because the issue of morality and of truth are not always straightforward. The squishiness of the matter is the point that Mary Robinson is making, that dark women are not a monolith and that they are human. They have flaws and problems that make them relatable to real-world women, and their flaws are points of resistance against a patriarchal world that would fit women in a subservient, pliable mold. Further, women are not containable – even in death.

The uncontainable and squishy nature of women allows women to have a sort of freedom to act and think for themselves. In the eighteenth century, women were not allowed to do many things and were restricted in matters of education and women's rights. Mary Wollstonecraft details her reasoning behind why women should be allowed an education equal to that of men in her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791). Mary Robinson's novel *Walsingham* details what could happen if a woman is allowed to have a man's education and rights. Even in the eighteenth century, women authors were writing back against patriarchal ideals of womanhood.

Dark Nature

Much like dark women, nature is also a squishy issue. Nature is not tame, and it does not always act in ways that we understand or appreciate. Nature is not always beautiful, sometimes it is ugly, gross, or unpleasant. Sometimes it is scary. This unpalatableness

does not mean that we should not value this type of nature as much as beautiful nature. The type of nature this dissertation discusses is, for the most part, literary nature, or, as James C. McKusick puts it, "nature-as-construct" (16). This type of nature exists in the imagination of the author, and then, in the imagination of the reader. This multifaceted imaginary realm demonstrates what Alan Bewell describes as a "multiplicity of natures" (13). Even in the literary imagination, nature is not a static or flat creation. It lives and breathes as we do. And like women, it cannot be contained by patriarchal power structures at work in the eighteenth century.

Nature works as a character in its own right in Mary Robinson's literary oeuvre. It serves as an educator, a place of potential redemption, a place of solace or oblivion or death, a place of violence, a place for vengeance. Each of these places is an imaginary place which Robinson builds for the purpose of showing her readers that nature and women can work together, but that nature is not just a secondary supporter for women. Nature is important, and even when it acts in the literary imagination, it is a place of change, a place for growth, a place for action. The realm of nature is one of potential, of possibilities, of futurities. Even today's twenty-first century nature is still a place where we can find change and the potential for action.

Going Forward

As I speak of futurities, I speak of the potential for new scholarship, and new ways of thinking about nature and of women. My scholarship owes so much to the scholars of

eighteenth-century literature; I stand on the backs of giants. Chief amongst these scholars is Adriana Craciun and her work *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003) which gave me the basis of my analysis on dark women. I cannot put into words the ineffable feeling of loving and valuing the field I am in. It is too big for me to contain and is a squishy mess in its own right. As such, I want to give back to my community of scholars. I have this dissertation to offer you, a work I am proud of, and that I worked countless hours on. The hope is that this growing field of dark women and dark nature will grow a new branch, however small, of new thought and new scholarship.

Green Conclusions

In the end, what is the point of creating and learning and molding our world? I would like to think that it is because we want to create a better world. To create this better world, we need to work with nature rather than against it. The vast degradation of the environment has already had effects that have been felt the world over. Just this past year, my region of northern British Columbia has experienced fires, floods, mudslides, and resulting food and other resource shortages. We are not apart from the cycle of nature, but because we think that we are, we have created a world in peril. In the beginning of the Romantic era, there were already scientists and philosophers who were aware that the Industrial Revolution would create terrible environments for humans and nature alike. Romantic era women were not just fighting for the rights of women, although I have demonstrated that they were fighting for that as well. This is the real answer, the real conclusion to the

question of what field am I in. Authors like Mary Robinson were fighting for women, they were fighting for nature, they were fighting for the good green world in which we all live. And I am, too.

Thank you.

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