

# Mary Robinson

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Mary Darby Robinson was born in Bristol, England in 1758. She is mostly known for being a poet, but she was also an actress, celebrity, and a supporter of women's rights. She grew up in Bristol where she attended her first years of school, until she moved to Chelsea where she was taught by a teacher known as Meribah Lorrington. Lorrington introduced Robinson to literature and poetry, causing her to fall in love with it and begin reading the poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, a poet who wrote her best works on women's rights and other political themes.

In her teenage years, Robinson's mother set up a school in which she worked as an assistant. David Garrick,<sup>102</sup> the manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, was Mary's dancing instructor and saw potential in her, and he encouraged her to take up a career in acting. However, at the age of fifteen, Mary was pressured into marriage by her mother. She married Thomas Robinson the same year and went on to have a child with him named Mary Elizabeth, born in 1774. In 1775 Thomas was arrested for debt and was sent to debtors' prison in England, where Mary and her daughter stayed with him.<sup>103</sup> During this time, she began writing poetry, including "Captivity: A Poem." After his release, her husband encouraged Mary to go forward with her acting career. Mary's forced marriage and her time in debtors' prison may have delayed her career; however, she continued with her acting goals and returned to David Garrick, taking her first role as Juliet in 1776. She went on to play many roles, including Lady Macbeth, Lady Anne in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*.

As an actress, she caught the attention of the Prince of Wales. They were briefly romantically involved, causing Robinson to become a celebrity. In her writing career, Robinson was also known by her pen name, "Perdita." She continued writing and published a total of fourteen volumes of poetry over her career. Some of those poems are birthday-themed poems, such as "On the Birth-Day of a Lady" and "The Birth-Day." Robinson also wrote on topics such as women's rights, and today she is commonly associated with poets of the Romantic period. "On the Birth-Day of a Lady," similarly to a birthday card today, gives wishes and hopes. Written in the standard verse form at the time, iambic pentameter couplets, the poem seems to be a hopeful and happy poem in Robinson's canon.

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<sup>102</sup> One of the most famous actors of his generation, David Garrick helped create further interest in Shakespeare's plays, as well as acting in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

<sup>103</sup> It was common for families to join a close relative in debtors' prison.

**Further Reading**

Civale, Susan. "Women's Life Writing and Reputation: A Case Study of Mary Darby Robinson." *Romanticism*, vol. 24, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 191–202.

Reynolds, Nicole. "The Many Lives of Mary Robinson's Memoirs." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2021, pp. 383–400.

## On the Birth-Day of a Lady<sup>104</sup>

To hail Louisa, this auspicious<sup>105</sup> day,  
 Ye sister muses<sup>106</sup> annual tribute pay.  
 Ye sons of science,<sup>107</sup> greet this happy morn,  
 On which my gen'rous, honor'd, friend was born.  
 My ardent<sup>108</sup> wishes, gentle maid receive, 5  
 My steady friendship, and my love believe.  
 Health and contentment, crown thy youthful days,  
 And sacred honor, guide thy peaceful ways,  
 Plenty and ease, thy constant help-mates<sup>109</sup> be, 10  
 From malice, envy, and oppression free,  
 May fortune smile, propitious<sup>110</sup> o'er thy life,  
 And guard thy gentle breast from care and strife.  
 Thus pass thy moments innocently gay,<sup>111</sup>  
 And joys arise, with each revolving day,  
 That when grim death, shall spread his shadows round, 15  
 With bliss eternal, may thy life be crown'd.



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<sup>104</sup> *Poems by Mrs. Robinson*. Printed for C. Parker, 1775, pp. 96–97. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.

<sup>105</sup> *Auspicious*: promising success.

<sup>106</sup> *Sister muses*: the nine muses of Greek mythology, inspiring artists and writers.

<sup>107</sup> *Sons of science*: men of learning in any branch of knowledge, including artists and writers.

<sup>108</sup> *Ardent*: enthusiastic or passionate.

<sup>109</sup> *Help-mates*: a helpful companion or partner, especially one's husband or wife.

<sup>110</sup> *Propitious*: giving or indicating a good chance of success.

<sup>111</sup> *Gay*: carefree.