

# Mary Robinson

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Mary Robinson was born on 27 November, in the late 1750s, in Bristol, England. Many biographies describe Robinson as an author and actress. She was born to Nicholas Darby and his wife, Hester Vanacott. Robinson attended a school run on Park Street and had private tutors. Robinson later taught English in her mother's school for a few months, until her father got it shut down. She was then sent to Oxford House in Marylebone and started showing interest in acting. David Garrick (the famous actor and theatre manager) became interested in training her and organized rehearsals for her. Robinson's mother did not want her acting and looked for suitors for Robinson to marry. In her teens, she married Thomas Robinson, who had claimed to be wealthy but was a gambler. He was arrested for debt in 1775, and Robinson and her infant daughter spent a year with him in debtors' prison, where she started writing poetry to earn money. Her first work, *Poems*, was published in two volumes in 1775, but sold poorly. Robinson began acting in 1776 at Drury Lane and caught the eye of the Prince of Wales when playing the role of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare. This relationship lasted for about a year, including an exchange of letters under the pseudonyms Florizel and Perdita. Once the prince lost interest, Robinson threatened to publish them. Finally, in exchange for the letters, Robinson received £5000 and the promise of an annuity (unfulfilled). After this, she used other pseudonyms such as Laura, Tabitha, and Oberon when she published, but the public still knew her as Perdita. She passed away on 26 December 1800, in Surrey, England, due to ill health. Many of her works were published posthumously by her daughter, Maria Elizabeth.

"The Linnet's Petition" is a lyric poem in ballad stanza, presumably written in 1775, and it appears in *Poems*. In the 1700s, linnets were popular as caged songbirds. This sentimentalist poem captures the reader's attention by showing the suffering of the linnet. In the end, Stella feels pity, freeing the bird. It was during this time that anti-animal-cruelty movements were beginning. The concept of liberty, which is present in this poem, was the center of much political discussion during this time.

**Further Reading**

- Cross, Ashley J. "From 'Lyrical Ballads' to 'Lyrical Tales': Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2001, pp. 571–605.
- Civale, Susan. "Women's Life Writing and Reputation: A Case Study of Mary Darby Robinson." *Romanticism*, vol. 24, no. 2, 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.

## The Linnet's Petition<sup>260</sup>

As Stella sat the other day,  
     Beneath a myrtle<sup>261</sup> shade,  
 A tender bird in plaintive notes,  
     Address'd the pensive<sup>262</sup> maid.

Upon a bough<sup>263</sup> in gaudy<sup>264</sup> cage, 5  
     The feather'd warbler hung,  
 And in melodious accents thus,  
     His fond petition<sup>265</sup> sung.

"Ah! pity my unhappy fate,  
     "And set a captive free, 10  
 "So may you never feel the loss,  
     "Of peace, or liberty."

"With ardent<sup>266</sup> pray'r and humble voice,  
     "Your mercy now I crave,  
 "Your kind compassion and regard, 15  
     "My tender life to save."

"Ah! wherefore am I here confin'd,  
     "Ah! why does fate ordain,

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<sup>260</sup> Robinson, Mary, 1758-1800. *Poems by Mrs. Robinson*. Printed for C. Parker, 1775, pp. 28-34; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

<sup>261</sup> *myrtle* evergreen tree associated with female sexuality and poetry

<sup>262</sup> *pensive* "sorrowfully thoughtful; gloomy, sad, melancholy." (*OED*)

<sup>263</sup> *bough* long branch

<sup>264</sup> *gaudy* ornate but tasteless

<sup>265</sup> *fond petition* a foolishly trusting request

<sup>266</sup> *ardent* passionate, loving

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| "A life so innocent as mine,<br>"Should end in grief and pain."                                                                                              | 20 |
| "I envy every little bird,<br>"That warbles gay and free,<br>"The meanest <sup>267</sup> of the feather'd race,<br>"Is happier far than me."                 |    |
| "Sweet liberty by heaven sent,<br>"From me, alas! is torn,<br>"And here without a cause confin'd,<br>"A captive doom'd I mourn."                             | 25 |
| "When bright Aurora's <sup>268</sup> silver rays,<br>"Proclaim the rising morn,<br>"And glitt'ring dew drops shine around,<br>"Or gild the flow'ring thorn." | 30 |
| "When every bird except myself,<br>"Went forth his mate to see,<br>"I always tun'd my downy throat,<br>"To please, and gladden thee."                        | 35 |
| "Beneath thy window each new day,<br>"And in the myrtle bow'r,<br>"I strove to charm thy list'ning ear,<br>"With all my little pow'r."                       | 40 |

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<sup>267</sup> *meanest* lowliest

<sup>268</sup> *Aurora* Roman goddess of the dawn

"Ah! what avails this gaudy cage,  
 "Or what is life to me,  
 "If thus confin'd, if thus distress'd,  
 "And robb'd of liberty."

"I who the greatest fav'rite was 45  
 "Of all the feather'd race,  
 "Think, Stella think, the pain I feel,  
 "And pity my sad case."

"While here condemn'd to sure despair,  
 "What comfort have I left, 50  
 "Or how can I this fate survive,  
 "Of every joy bereft."

"My harmless life was ever free,  
 "From mischief and from ill,  
 "My only wish on earth to prove, 55  
 "Obedient, to your will. "

"Then pity my unhappy fate,  
 "And set a captive free,  
 "So<sup>269</sup> may you never feel the loss,  
 "Of peace, or liberty." 60

On Stella's breast compassion soon,  
 Each tender feeling wrought,

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<sup>269</sup> So in order that, i.e. if you set me free you will never be a captive yourself

Resolv'd to give him back with speed,  
That freedom which he sought.

With friendly hand she ope'd the cage, 65  
By kindred pity<sup>270</sup> mov'd,  
And sympathetic joys divine,  
Her gentle bosom prov'd.<sup>271</sup>

When first she caught the flutt'ring thing,  
She felt strange ecstasy, 70  
But never knew so great a bliss,  
As when she set him free.



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<sup>270</sup> *kindred pity* compassion for a creature similar to herself

<sup>271</sup> *bosom prov'd* her heart has passed the test because it feels sympathetic joy