

## Female Independence in Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*

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### Abstract

More provocatively than her contemporaries, Mary Robinson argues in *The Natural Daughter* that women must establish their voices in the public sphere to enact change while separately attending to the influential roles of wife and mother. She argues for financial independence and personal satisfaction by entering the public sphere through intellectual productions, such as writing. By examining Robinson's concern for converging public and private spheres, we see a unique argument for women's intellectual worth to be free of their reputations.

In *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), Mary Robinson argues that "Woman is destined to pursue no path in which she does not find an enemy. If she is liberal, generous, careless of wealth, friendly to the unfortunate, and bountiful to persecuted merit, she is deemed prodigal, and over-much profuse" (78). Robinson's argument entwines this problematic view of women with a concern that men render women's reputations and abilities from "opinions of sexual imbecility; and in order that their convenient plea may be sanctioned by example, they continue to debilitate the female mind for the purpose of enforcing subordination" (45).

Published the same year as Robinson's address to English women, Robinson's novel *The Natural Daughter* explores many of the same issues through the falsely accused Martha Bradford Morley and the abandoned Lady Susan Sherville. The two women's stories are intertwined because they

are wronged by the same man and much of the same society, allowing Robinson, though the text centers on Martha, to accomplish two possible versions of the female narrative in the same novel.

In *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson illustrates the grim outlook 1790s English women face should they strive for the independence that an occupation provides both economically and politically. Unlike the epistolary form Robinson favors in many of her other fictional works, *The Natural Daughter* is narrated by a confident, sometimes emotional, and often forceful narrator who frequently tells the reader how to understand characters' behavior and provides judgment as to the meaning of several scenes. After situating the narrative in the spring of 1792, this narrator asserts that "Wealth produces indolence; indolence is the parent of lassitude, and lassitude incapacitates the mind for every human enjoyment" before describing the Bradford family and providing interactions to characterize the family dynamics (91). Although the novel's female characters actively seek employment, the women do not become wealthy: they struggle to earn even an adequate income. Through this lens, *The Natural Daughter* argues that—like mothering—employment through writing or acting poses a threat to the patriarchal system which through the suffering and subordination of women allows profit and the flow of money in the male public sphere.

Felicity Nussbaum argues that women of the eighteenth century could not support their children, though ideology, empire and economics required women to bear them. Robinson seems to be making a comparable critique in *The Natural Daughter*. Both Martha, the adoptive mother, and Lady Susan, the biological mother, abandon Fanny. Neither woman can support the child within the confines society places on mothers or working women. She suggests that the maternal instinct "that saves its children instinctually and at all costs, excludes from its nurturing womb the issue of working women" (27). Morely forces both women to need employment to survive,

but to find employment both women must entrust Fanny to the care of someone else. Though Lady Susan cannot yet know how difficult supporting herself will be, she decides to find an occupation. Martha warns, “The toils of intellect are more severe than even the miseries of adversity” (119). Martha’s warning, ironically, should be taken personally, but more significant, the warning argues Robinson’s main investment in the novel: women are unable to earn sustaining wages for writing or otherwise disseminating their opinions and interpretations. Any money earned on women’s exertions in these areas will necessarily be misappropriated.

Robinson’s characters give up mothering and providing for their children in order to preserve themselves, economically. In this backhanded way, Robinson suggests that women may participate in public discourse, even while supporting themselves and their children, as long as they can receive equitable economic treatment. In consequence, Robinson infers that barring women from earning money is more dangerous than granting and accepting them in the economic sphere. These mothers, unlike the doting, working mother of Robinson’s *Memoirs*, do not attempt to reconcile mothering with employment. They leave the child in another’s care to protect mother and child.

From the opening chapter of the novel, the text grooms the reader to understand that women and men have different relationships with money. Martha marries Mr. Morely early in the novel, and Robinson spends no time depicting the married couple living happily together. Martha’s greatest verifiable lapses are her resistance to authority and her sympathy for an abandoned child and mother. Robinson also forces the reader to consider the relationship through a series of business interactions. Morely’s proposal letter indicates no need for a dowry (115). When Morely bars Martha from his home, Robinson summarizes the situation in terms of economics first: “Reader you may remember that Mr. Morely offered to marry Martha without a

dowry; and you may also conclude that Mr. Bradford accepted the proposal. In consequence of this prudent arrangement, the ceremony of making a marriage-settlement was omitted; and Martha was now driven from her husband's home without the means of future subsistence" (140). Robinson's direct address to the reader highlights the most significant aspect of the situation before later attending to Martha's emotional state. Robinson insists that the reader remember financial arrangements and Martha's lack of money, highlighting that she possesses no money—the money had always belonged to a patriarch.

Martha's father is the lazy, languid, and wealthy man of whom the narrator warns the reader. The novel opens with the narrator's opinions that "Wealth produces indolence . . . [and] incapacitates the mind for every human enjoyment" (91). The novel insists on a contrast between wealth and earning a comfortable living. Mr. Bradford defines himself through his wealth, regularly reminding his family, "And who is worth more than I?" (95). His incapacity to enjoy, tied directly to his wealth, renders a spirited daughter a managerial business decision. Mr. Bradford confronts his elder daughter Martha: "You had no business to think . . . it was your duty to listen . . . no business ever to speak," and he wishes Martha speedily married because she "wants one [a husband] to keep her in order; for, she is beyond my management" (93). Mr. Bradford's language reveals a cruel rejection of his daughter's words and thoughts. His rant, meant to silence Martha, exposes the exclusion Robinson spends most of the novel establishing through Martha's suffering. Bradford admits that he lacks the ability to find value in Martha's thinking and speaking, and he is incapable of controlling her intellectual outputs properly. Julia labels her sister's behavior "unaccountable" when she complains to her father, seemingly understanding the business aspect of the family group and the dangerous nature of Martha's spoken opinions (94). Martha's generosity is ridiculed and her productions of thought are deemed

dangerous in this familial organization, and because she poses a threat, the task of subordinating her should be passed quickly to the next manager as a commodity not properly serving one business.

Ironically, Mr. Morley forces his wife's entrance into the masculine sphere of money: unwelcome at Morely Manor, Martha must earn a living. Martha's father and husband both express concern about her threatening power to influence economic matters, and in the refusal of the Morelys' or Bradfords' support, Martha must seek employment. Mr. Dodson, a friend of Mr. Bradford, aids Martha in her search for employment; he finds her a "respectable situation," but first insists that Martha change her name and "carefully avoid every thing that might discover what had passed in her family" (146). Dependent on Mr. Dodson's kindness, Martha hesitantly agrees and "under the assumed title of Mrs. Denison she became the humble dependent" to Lady Louisa (146). Martha's disguise is necessary in order for her to find employment and to keep working. In order to participate in the exchange of labor for compensation, Martha cannot continue as herself—she must reinvent herself as something different from Morely's domestic partner and disgraced benefactor of victimized women. Martha's skewed reputation ultimately prevents her lasting participation in the economic system, despite her being a virtuous and industrious woman.

Although Martha's employer, Lady Louisa, is "liberal even to her own sex, in whatever situation Fortune has placed them," she dismisses Martha when the disguise fails (146, 157). In this way, she reveals Martha publicly. As Martha prepares to leave London, she encounters Lady Susan, also seeking employment and using the pseudonym Mrs. Sedgley, who inquires about the infant she abandoned in the hopes of keeping them both fed and sheltered (159). Martha quickly decides to accompany Lady Susan, "a provincial actress of the most promising talents," to pursue

a “profession which promised both fame and independence” (159, 160). Unlike other middle-class and the upper-class women of the novel, Martha does not judge Lady Susan. Martha shows no concern for the possibility of being discovered with Lady Susan, a woman with a scandalous reputation and an acting career. Martha’s focus switches to camaraderie and the freedom a salary promises her: she will be dependent on no one and avoid a mediator in the acquisition of money. However, this transition requires a partial disguise: like Lady Susan, Martha can market her talents, but will have to use a pseudonym to protect herself and her potential employers.

The novel first mentions Martha’s career when it describes her decision to seek “a profession which promised both fame and independence” (160). Previously, she advertised “for an asylum as companion to a single lady,” but had yet to consider earning money outside of a dependent relationship (145). After becoming more acquainted with Lady Susan’s encounter with a deceptive Englishman in Revolutionary Paris, Martha makes her stage debut and “looked not forward to anything beyond a decent independence”; however, despite being noticed as “engaging, discreet, sensible, and accomplished . . . she was an actress, and therefore deemed an unfit associate” (181). Martha can earn a living, but she will continue to face judgment because of this profession. Furthermore, her disguise is in name only, so when she is recognized as the notorious Mrs. Morely, she is fired by the theatre company, “the victim of persecution” (194). Although labeled with a poor reputation because of her profession as an actress, the public still rejects Martha from even that profession because of her previous scandal. But when she is again recognized, Martha is dismissed despite the fact that society “respected the merit and applauded the industry which had led Mrs. Morely to adopt a profession, at once honourable to her heart and creditable to her talents” (218, 216).

Robinson writes in *Memoirs* that her husband's family found her more acceptable after she began her stage career: "Miss Robinson's manners condemned a dramatic life, the labour was deemed *profitable*, and the supposed immorality was consequently *tolerated!*" (143). The difference between Robinson's reported experience and Martha's is the Robinson family accepts the objectionable nature of a female actress in trade for the money with which she is able to support her family. Martha's estrangement from her family prevents their backing, and her rejection is public as Robinson experienced when her affair with the Prince of Wales became publicly scorned. The public recognizes Martha as a fallen woman and forbids her continued performances. In this way, even as Martha is compelled to submit to the patriarchal values of her society, she still continues to face adversity whenever she attempts to earn money.

Fergus and Thaddeus suggest that few options were available for genteel women who "wanted or needed to make money," a problem especially vexed for writers of the late eighteenth century: although some authors depict working as essential, some "more genteel authors viewed earned money with a certain unmistakable distaste" (191). Martha's literary career differs drastically from her stage career in that the public display of the author is not present for moral objection. When Martha encounters her husband by chance, Morely is appalled by Martha's "dramatic profession" as a "strolling actress" despite forcing her into the profession (201). Writing exists as an acceptable profession for women, but Martha is unable to earn enough money as a writer to be independent. Robinson reveals a trap where the educated, industrious woman is blocked from the valued act of earning one's way despite societal opinions surrounding acceptable work for women. She is told that no market exists for intellectual writing, like Martha's, which portrays a realistic and female narrative. This process of rejection from the two

occupations most likely to provide an adequate wage transforms Martha into a victim of patriarchal double standards.

Robinson depicts Martha as capable and intelligent, but she faces discrimination based on the common perceptions of her gender. Although, as the narrator observes, “The busy metropolis, it is true, presented a variety of roads to independence: but a female . . . had little to hope for from a world selfish and prejudging”—hence the need for Martha to write a novel to attain “fame and profit” (207). Again, despite the backing of family, Martha not only yearns for a wage to provide her with independence, she also wishes to attach fame to that profession. She apparently understands that the unfair judgment sullies her chances, but she chooses “to obtain some new mode of obtaining a subsistence” through writing, thinking her other options exhausted (207). Martha attempts to stand “before the tribunal of the public on the basis of her own talents; but it was undermined by arts which even the most transcendent genius cannot always counteract” (181).

After Martha “confined herself to incessant labour” for six weeks, she offers her “first-born” to several publishers, but she is told the market is “already over-stocked” (208). However, Mr. Index pays Martha ten pounds for her novel. The publisher tells Martha that there is no market for her story which is “melancholy” and contains “portraits drawn from living characters” (208). Not surprisingly, the market is saturated with such stories, a situation that is both factually accurate and also reveals Robinson’s wish to convince her reader that Martha’s story and her novel represent wide constituencies of 1790s England. When Martha and Lady Susan first meet, the latter suggested that she earn a living using her intellect, but Martha interrupts the new mother, exclaiming, “There is no harder labour” (119). Martha’s insistence that the work be deemed “labour” feminizes the creative acts of writing and acting. For Robinson, these acts are

simultaneously intellectual and of the body. They are costly in terms of health and mental stature, much like the process of giving birth to a child. Just as Lady Susan parted with her infant daughter, Martha must part with her first act of creation in order to survive. For Robinson, mothering is in danger, and with it, the role and influence mothers possess. Julie Shaffer argues that Martha must “betray her maternal role if she wishes to keep *herself* alive” (306). Shaffer’s close analysis of the comparisons made between Lady Susan and Martha as mothers to Fanny points to Robinson’s discussion of women’s creations as legitimated in the public sphere only when a man “fathers her work” (307). If Martha understands this clearly, the zeal with which she works and her optimistic attitude about the reception of her work are naive. Instead, Robinson portrays Martha as the victim of forces she cannot predict. Although Martha attempts to approach each of her creative activities logically, the system bests her efforts without a man approving the activities. Children and novels become illegitimate in this system.

In the novel’s only scene in which Martha deals directly with publishers, Mr. Index, a comical character, offers advice for Martha to maximize profits and to find a market for her writing. He suggests that Martha write a dedication: “That part of your business should be done skillfully” (207). With this suggestion and others, Mr. Index’s advice clearly recommends that Martha consider her writing as a business transaction with her audience. The narrator suggests that Index is kind in his payment to “support a first attempt” and in his advice intended to help Martha earn more money (207). When Martha delivers her first novel to Mr. Index, she is rewarded with only ten pounds for her efforts. Robinson portrays the situation as unfair, in that Martha does not receive ample compensation for her industry. Robinson thus establishes the devalued status of any female labor. Robinson, in this way, challenges Fergus and Thaddeus’ claim that women of this period only “believed that they were working in an atmosphere that did

not condone their money-making activities” and their acknowledgement that “Much of the current rhetoric supported this belief” (201). Though Fergus and Thaddeus suggest that Robinson may have received special considerations from Longman that no male writers received, such as frequent and substantial loans, she continues to portray publishers in an unfavorable manner. Fergus and Thaddeus further argue that Robinson was adept in translating her “publishers’ patronizing impulses into financial support,” suggesting she controlled the relationship (201). For Robinson, publishers cultivated predatory relationships with female authors despite the evidence supporting a fair relationship with Longman. In Robinson’s depiction of Martha’s business with a publisher, the publisher cheats the new author from the beginning of the relationship.

Index, of course, stands to benefit from his support of promising new writers. The revisions he requests of Martha will help her reach the tastes of a larger readership. Index tells Martha that “We have our warehouses full of unsold sentimental novels already” (208). Index is a savvy marketer, it seems, as the market for fiction was then smaller than for other genres (Fergus 200). If Martha wants to continue to publish fiction, she will need to consider both the marketing and storyline of future works. Though Martha listens and occasionally smiles as he offers suggestions, she participates little in the scene, neither commenting nor asking for clarifications (210). Martha wants an independent process for earning money, and a dedication to a patron would involve her in a dependent relationship. She therefore resists writing a dedication to her novel. Though in desperation she later pursues a patron for her poetry, Martha appears to have not considered the idea of a patron until Index delineates the exact nature of a dedication as a technique to sell books.

Martha’s experiences with Mr. Index seem not to have been motivated by her own experiences as a publishing author. Fergus and Thaddeus suggest that Robinson was treated fairly

by her publishers, and even may have received special consideration. As a matter of business, Robinson was paid fairly for her fiction, and no evidence from the publishers' ledgers suggests that she was paid differently than male writers (201). Robinson switched publishers from Hookham and Carpenter to Longman, where she sold the copyrights to her novels and earned more as a consequence, but she did not earn enough to support herself (197). Regardless, Robinson portrays Martha as cheated by her publisher. Despite initially appearing as a kind mentor to aspiring writers, Index's treatment of Martha suggests that Robinson wants her reader to scrutinize the treatment of women in the publishing industry. Index robs Martha, deemed insane by the madhouse attendants for thinking her novel could be in print or successful, of enjoying the success of her novel both financially and as a celebrity. Furthermore, this theft denies Martha the experience of a positive public reputation. Robinson's text reveals a belief that although capable of producing popular, successful literature, the business of publishing forbids women from benefitting in any way from their talents. Honest, acceptable work, though available, is not possible for women to publish in *The Natural Daughter*.

Rooney's insistence that Robinson portrays writing as a "marker of identity" for the female characters of *The Natural Daughter* partially addresses what is at stake in Martha's narrative (370). Martha wishes for an independent identity and attempts to author one. Martha, forced to accept that she could not profit as a writer, moves on to other employment. Other than the six weeks Martha "confined herself to incessant labour," she is not a writer by trade (208). Rooney further argues that Martha would not have been a failure in Robinson's opinion: "the formation of a new, writing, self-authorizing female subject whose intellectual powers, mobility, and independence endow her with a dignity that enables her to assume her rightful position as the equal partner of a man" (371). Moreover, at least six editions of this fictional fiction are in print,

as the novel concludes. But while Martha presents herself in a dignified, honest, and industrious way, she is still dependent on many of the other characters. While Martha writes poems and letters to express herself, revealing an intellectual side equal to many of the men she encounters, she remains dependent. Martha's writing may provide some self-satisfaction, but fails to grant her fame and independence. Robinson clearly shows that although Martha authored her story, someone else saw the profits.

Martha again finds employment as a lady's traveling companion, but the job ends in Martha's admittance to a private madhouse where her novel is given to her for reading material. The copy of Martha's novel is the sixth edition for which she was paid ten pounds (242). The attendants find Martha's response so preposterous that when Martha declares the book was written by her, one attendant responds, "She is not the only crazy woman who fancies herself an authoress. I have seen many since I first took up my business" (243). Martha's experience in the madhouse suggests the outcome under the current system of a woman's attempt to be treated fairly in the publishing industry. The attendant's accusation ridicules the idea that women are authors and emphasizes the supposed state of mental health for women who attempt writing as a career. Through the nameless attendant, Robinson suggests a common view of female authors. Whether or not this view accurately describes the businesses of publishing in relation to women, Robinson dramatizes the scene so that a rational, intelligent, and well-read author is restrained in a madhouse for declaring herself for what she is and demanding fair compensation. The damaged system Martha faces lacks rational thought, and her efforts will go unrewarded. Instead, she will face punishment and continued incarceration in the madhouse.

Furthermore, the attendant suggests that women cannot author their lives. Martha hopes that her novel will provide her with fame and an income to make her independent, but her

experience in writing supplies neither. The work of an author never provides Martha with control of her existence. As with her acting career, Martha actively seeks fame through her talents and associates money with such recognition (207). Whether her pursuit of fame stems from a need for personal satisfaction or is blended with a wish to replace her poor reputation is unclear. Martha's admiration for intellectual accomplishment suggests that she seeks fame as a celebration of creative and intellectual work; however, ultimately she is denied such an ending in the novel. Anne Close suggests that Martha imagines "a wide audience who can support her—turning to, variously, publishers, the legal system, family, friends, and other women for assistance" (48). The narrator, however, characterizes Martha's move to new employment with frustration, for example: "Once more left with no resources but that which would arise from her own talents, Mrs. Morely resolved on making another effort" (214). Martha wishes to make a living supported by an audience, the nonexistent audience the deceitful Index warns her about, with which she is exchanging her writing and performances; instead, she must accept charity as opposed to a salary. While Martha's novel reaches a sixth edition, she receives no compensation or celebration—she is unaware of the success until she sees the novel while in the madhouse. Writing in exchange for money does not supply Martha with control over her life.

Enraged by the publisher's success, Martha threatens her attendants: "You shall answer for this outrage, if there is to be justice or humanity in Britain" (243). Like Robinson, Martha feels cheated that the money made on her creative work was another person's profit. Her frantic, emotional response is met with disbelief and ridicule. Not only do the attendants fail to believe Martha, but they laugh at her demand for justice. Kidnapped, imprisoned in the madhouse, and labeled crazy for thinking herself an author, Martha demands humane treatment, calling into question the subjugation of British women, generally. In Martha's darkest time as an employee,

Robinson demands justice from the oppressors. As Martha becomes more frenzied, a doctor commands “her to be silent” and then tortured (243-244). The doctor expects Martha to say nothing and accept unjustified suffering. As an author, as she declares she is, she threatens the expectation that women will continue to endure silence and mistreatment in the public or private spheres. Though Martha never garners the direct rewards of her effort, Robinson portrays the writing woman as a true threat to the accepted system. Martha’s demands are not immediately met, but the novel contains a sense of imminent change.

Robinson’s narration suggests that rage will be enough to destroy the current patriarchal structures delimiting women writers and women generally. The madhouse that wrongfully imprisons Martha burns down after several institutional attempts to alter and silence her. Now unrecognizable as a result of having been tortured, Martha is freed from the madhouse by fire: “The flames raged furiously . . . the destruction of the whole fabric was deemed inevitable” (244). Martha’s demand for justice is partially realized in the burning. The madhouse scene and the subsequent fire reveal the vindictive nature of the policies that restrict women from participating fully in society. Martha herself is a kind of fire, threatening to destabilize the institutional structures—madhouse and family alike—designed to subjugate women. The doctor, believing Martha is her employer, declares that she has been admitted to the madhouse because she is “in the way of her family” (244). Martha’s demands threaten a system which maintains the subordination of women by imprisoning them and denying acknowledgement of their narratives. Gaining the “humanity and justice” Martha demands can be achieved in a variety of ways: the fire fulfills the novel’s wishes by providing a radical alteration of these institutions in the most violent, destructive possible way. The scene serves Robinson to showcase the force of the

growing anger. The inability to contain the fire and the resulting horror asks the reader to meditate on the situation of women in England, generally.

Robinson alerts us that Martha's "honourable, her incessant industry" is "insufficient for the purposes of attaining a permanent independence"—indeed, as a relatively single woman, she is a target for licentious men indeed. Martha, for instance, is offered a substantial sum to become a rich man's mistress (221). She refuses, although the money offered to her would easily meet her needs, and although, throughout the narrative, she accepts nearly every opportunity for employment with which she is presented. Robinson declares that Martha "proved that to *seem* and not to *be* was the all-powerful clue to private praise and public reputation" (220). Men see in Martha a possibly fallen woman, wrongly assuming that she has been promiscuous. She therefore struggles to find legitimate employment and endures cynical attempts at seduction. What Martha appears to be is more important, then, than what she is: her wholesale adoption of the values of her culture makes little difference to her situation.

For Rooney, Martha is first and foremost an author, writing both privately and for publication. In this way, says Rooney, Martha stands apart from her sister or Lady Susan, who aren't writers. Martha alone possesses "authentic virtue and independence," such that Rooney can identify "Robinson's privileging of the writing woman" (370). Rooney reads Martha's narrative as the story of a reinvented woman whose transformation yields very familiar rewards: like Richardson's *Pamela*, the ending of the novel rewards Martha for her labor and virtue and ends rapidly in a marriage to Lord Sherville (Rooney 364, 370). What Rooney neglects to observe, however, is how Martha has been seeking independence and fame—and that marriage offers Martha neither. Though Martha's admiration for Lord Sherville grows throughout the novel and the marriage is no way a punishment, her goals remain unachieved. Robinson never writes

Martha into a situation in which she can provide for herself. The novel refuses to let her evade the false accusations that would allow her to maintain employment at any of the jobs she accepts. After discovering that Mr. Morely is the father of the illegitimate child he accuses Martha of mothering, and the discovery that Lady Susan was Morely's mistress, Morley dies in a horrific accident (295). Because Robinson's point is that women are prevented from supporting themselves no matter how hard they work at supposedly acceptable employment, Martha is immediately remarried to Lady Susan's brother. After Martha facilitates reconciliation between Lady Susan and her brother, she insists on dividing her share of Morely's fortune with Lady Susan (296).

Lady Susan receives a happier ending than Martha, at least as defined by her own interests, earning reconciliation with her family. She is free to mother Fanny and receives half of Martha's share of Morely's estate, despite her status as his mistress. It is Lady Susan, then, and not Martha, who gains independence and restored reputation of the kind recommended in *A Letter to the Women of England*. Better yet, we might say that Lady Susan and Martha represent two versions of female success as defined by *A Letter to the Women of England*. They share Morely's inheritance even as they are liberated from his immorality, a kind of double victory marked by the even distribution of wealth. Susan's reconciliation with her family depends upon Martha's unwavering sympathy and kindness, suggesting the need for sympathy and solidarity between women. Lady Susan, bound to no one but her child, now possesses a considerable amount of money. Though she need not marry Sherville for money and the union is likely a happy one, she has yet to earn money based on her talents.

Recognized easily as Mrs. Morely the fallen woman and as an actress, either of Martha's displays of potential female sexuality and public worth as intellectually capable in the novel find

the same response of rejection. As Martha attempts to reclaim her sexuality, public esteem, and intellectual capabilities, we see each of these attempts consistently rejected throughout the novel: she is only and always Mrs Morely, the fallen woman and actress. In what is a seemingly common succession of judgments against women, Robinson's female characters are denied economic and social independence. Martha perpetually suffers more in her attempts to earn independence than she does as the wife of the tyrannical Mr. Morely or as the daughter of her businessman father. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson wants women to be able to contribute meaningfully in the public sphere, and to have more autonomy privately. In *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson scrutinizes the inability of women to support themselves whether they want or need to have economic freedom. Martha represents the writing woman who will resist silence, injustice, and incarceration, and she will sacrifice everything but her virtue to obtain those rights. While the ending does not reward Martha with independence and fame, her liberation from Mr. Morely suggests hope. Martha does not submit; she continues to struggle and make new attempts at independence. For Robinson, the solution exists in women continuing to enter the public world in a myriad of capacities. Specifically, Robinson uses Martha's narrative to justify the fair treatment of women in business settings. Robinson's project attempts to reconcile, or at the least suggests women should be free to make attempts to reconcile, a responsible, caring identity as wife and mother with the ability to converse in the public sphere. *The Natural Daughter* insists that the need for equal treatment justifies the granting of women's equal status.

### **Biographical notice**

Katherine Watts is graduate of the University of Idaho where she studied Romantic and early nineteenth century British literature. Her master's thesis is titled *Separation of the Domestic and*

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