RADICAL REFORM AND THE SHOCK OF THE PAST IN MARY ROBINSON'S *VANCENZA*

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Abstract: Mary Robinson's first novel, *Vancenza* (1792), charted a new path for politically liberal women writers. Robinson used her pre-existing reputation as an actress, mistress and established poet to carve out a space in which she could write and publish fiction, avoiding some of the pitfalls for eighteenth-century women of participating too eagerly (or at all) in public life. *Vancenza* challenges inherited relationships of patriarchal and political authority to argue for the importance of radical social change, weighing its destructive nature together with its positive moral value. Is the disclosure of truth a crucial step on the path to justice, or a misguided intervention that can lead only to suffering? Robinson uses Gothic tropes as coded political symbols, producing a political novel disguised as a Gothic one, in order to advocate societal reform rooted in honest reckoning with the past. Even if painful – so painful that the shock of it kills – *Vancenza* presents such a reckoning, and the change it brings, as the only path to moral regeneration.

Keywords: Gothic, Romanticism, Mary Robinson, women's writing, architecture, feminism, reform

Mary Robinson (1758-1800) was a stage actress who in 1779 became the first mistress of the future George IV, then Prince of Wales. Before meeting the Prince, she published poetry to support her family when her husband's debts led to their joint imprisonment, and she turned to writing again for supplementary income after her relationship with the Prince ended. From 1792 to 1800, she published fifteen works of fiction, poetry and essays, including seven novels. Her first novel, *Vancenza; or, The Dangers of Credulity: A Moral Tale* (1792), presents an ostensibly conventional moral: that women must offset their own vulnerability with constant vigilance, or risk not only destroying their own lives but blighting those of future generations. The point is made twice, in the subtitle ("The Dangers of Credulity")

and in the generic tag "A Moral Tale." While legible as an orthodox fable of sexual error and punishment, the novel's plot suggests a concealed moral of greater subversive power: namely, that a better solution to the problem of female vulnerability is recognition of the false positions in which individuals are placed by society's demands, followed by honest reckoning with the cruelty of those demands.

It is worth noting that the title is not *Elvira*, after its heroine, but *Vancenza*, after the castle and family name that both protect and menace her. "The dangers of credulity" might well refer to the hazards of female naivety, but credulity in these systems of power, inheritance and patriarchy can be equally dangerous. Robinson's notoriety as an actress and royal mistress helped her evade the strictures usually placed on female literary production. In *Vancenza*, she uses the tropes of Gothic fiction popularized in the same decade by Ann Radcliffe, not only to critique the social structures that disempower women and prevent them from participating in public life, but also to suggest that ignoring the reality of the oppressive systems we inherit leads only to personal and societal corruption. Through her characters' renovations to the interior décor of the titular castle, and the disclosure of secrets that follows, Robinson allegorizes both the need to excavate the cultural inheritance in which present reality is rooted, and the pain that can follow from such an act, suggesting that this is the only path towards a moral and just society.

As the mistress of the Prince of Wales, Robinson found the mould of modest, retiring femininity an uneasy fit. Marlon B. Ross notes: "the problem [was] how women [could] enter the loop of power without being contaminated by the consequences of power."[1] The only acceptable avenue of female engagement with politics in this period was literary composition. Even then, modes and genres associated with political discourse, such as satire, polemic and caricature, were largely off-limits. Robinson's extremely public life could have threatened her ability to make meaningful political commentary under the conditions of her time: the moral authority supposed to be held by women rested on their seclusion from the corrupting influence of political discourse and practice, but as a former actress and royal mistress, Robinson was obviously not secluded from the wider world.[2] This is, however, precisely what supports her fiction's political themes: she

1 Marlon B. Ross, "Configurations of Feminine Reform: The Woman Writer and the Tradition of Dissent," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 91-110.

2 Nancy Armstrong analyses "innocent" female protagonist-personae as cover for political critiques in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

already existed outside the boundaries of respectable womanhood. Although she often seeks to legitimate herself as a writer by espousing positions that seem conventional, closer reading reveals the details of her work as disruptive of established hierarchies of power, economics and gender.

Her fictional strategy is informed by the reality that explicit engagement with politics in print was dangerous. Though the Seditious Meeting Act and the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act were both passed in 1795, after *Vancenza*'s publication, the legal climate of the decade was defined by governmental anxiety about, and attempts to exert control over, freedom of the press.[3] Robinson's acquaintance with William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft – she maintained a correspondence with Godwin until her death – illuminates her approach.[4] The Godwin circle were interested in novels as a way of reaching audiences who might lack access to explicitly political works, particularly women: the suppressed preface to Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) describes "[a person] whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach," but who nevertheless deserves to know "the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism," while Mary Wollstonecraft declares in *Maria* (1798) her intention to reveal the "wrongs of women" to a public unlikely to have read her essays on the topic.[5] *Vancenza* is an even earlier instance – two years before Godwin, six before Wollstonecraft – of an author widening access to their argument about a maltreated class of citizens by choosing the forms of domestic and Gothic fiction.

Vancenza's plot and themes signal it as domestic. Nancy Armstrong writes that domestic fiction offered "fantasies of political power that were the more acceptable because they were played out in a domestic framework where legitimate monogamy – and thus the subordination of female to male – would ultimately be affirmed."[6] *Vancenza*'s events occur within the confines of a family

3 Danby Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large: From the Magna Charta, to the End of the Eleventh Parliament of Great Britain, Anno 1761 [continued to 1806]. Vol. 40* (Cambridge: John Burges; London: J. Johnson, J. & J. Robinson and D. Ogilvy, 1795). 36 Geo.3 c.7, "Anno regni tricesimo sexto Georgii III," 561-64; 36 Geo.3 c.8, 564-73. For an overview of repressive legislation in the 1790s see David Worrall, "Freedom of Speech," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 233-49.

4 "Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Robinson, n.d. [circa late 1796]," Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library; "Mary Robinson to William Godwin, 30 May 1800," Bodleian Library MS. Abinger c. 5, fols. 136-37.

5 Gary Kelly, "Women Novelists and the French Revolution Debate: Novelizing the Revolution/Revolutionizing the Novel," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 6 (July 1994): 369-88; Nancy E. Johnson, *The English Jacobin Novel on Rights, Property and the Law: Critiquing the Contract* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

6 Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 29.

and appear to affirm both female subordination to men – in the misfortunes of its female characters when they are left without a male relative to act as guardian – and the inviolability of marriage, in the plot twist that prevents siblings from marrying illegally (if also unknowingly). It is also clearly a Gothic novel, in which a dynastic tragedy of families secretly linked by historic malfeasance is fatally played out in the lives of a second generation. Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in defining "Gothic," in this context I use it broadly to mean generic tropes established by Ann Radcliffe's novels, among which is the structural trope of "[a] past crime discovered and set to rights in the narrative present."[7]

Marilyn Butler identifies Radcliffean Gothic as vulnerable to charges of individualism because of the mode's close focus on the heroine's personal experiences and perceptions. Such individualism, she argues, could be seen as threatening to the social order, venerating a character's emotions and actions in isolation from their responsibility to the society in which they lived. Butler suggests that Radcliffe's response to this vulnerability was to "remain resolutely orthodox […] and conservative" in her politics, pointing to her Southern European feudal settings and oppressors.[8] *Vancenza* superficially fits this model, with its fifteenth-century Spanish environs and omnipotent libertine villain. In the course of working out her Gothic plot, however, Robinson measures Georgian Britain against medieval Spain, elaborating a reformist position that challenges the self-satisfaction of 1790s "free-born Englishman" and "Rights of Man" discourses by highlighting the failures of a society whose women – even the most aristocratic – continue to live as helpless economic dependents.[9]

Robinson's political alignment shifted over the course of the 1790s, from non-radical Whig at the decade's beginning to supporter of popular reform by the decade's end. Adriana Craciun's authoritative account of that shift places its beginnings in Robinson's Francophile essays, such as *A Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France* (1793), and its further development in her feminist essay *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) and her later novels, such as *Walsingham* (1797) and *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), which explicitly debate the nature of citizenship and good government.[10] *Vancenza* is rarely employed in arguments about

7 Emma Clery, *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2000), 60.

8 Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 30-31.

9 For an overview of Robinson's engagement with the Rights of Man and related 1790s political debates, see Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 62-64.

10 Craciun, *British Women Writers*, 61-62. See also Anne Close, "'A Writer of Novels:' Mary Robinson and the Politics of Professional Authorship" (PhD diss., Loyola University

Robinson's politics, but it deserves closer examination as the site of her earliest fictional engagement with the disjunction between society as it is and society as it ought to be. In it, she writes a political novel camouflaged as a Gothic one, following the Godwinian ideal of fiction as a bridge to politics. Her generic choice may have diluted the power of *Vancenza*'s political message, but it extended that message's reach.

I

Vancenza details the life of an orphaned girl, Elvira, under the guardianship of the Spanish nobleman Count Vancenza. She lives with him, his niece Carline, and Carline's mother Madame de Vallorie, in their ancestral castle. Prince Almanza, the son of Vancenza's old friend, is wounded while hunting near the castle. Elvira nurses him and falls in love. When Almanza recovers and departs, her health declines. Count Vancenza succumbs to the encouragement of his wards and takes the household to Madrid for an extended stay at court. Attempts are made on the honour of both girls. While rescuing Carline from one such abduction, Vancenza is stabbed by a poisoned dagger, and dies of the wound overnight. The women return to the castle. Almanza professes his love for Elvira, and they become engaged. Preparing for the wedding, Carline decides that some antique interior décor is outmoded and inappropriate for the celebration, and supervises its removal. A hidden casket is found, containing a letter from Elvira's long-dead mother, Madeline, who is revealed to have been Count Vancenza's sister. This proves that Almanza is Elvira's biological half-brother. Devastated by this discovery, Elvira swoons and dies the next day. To complete the superficially "moral tale," Madeline's testimony is preserved as a monument to the "mistaken credulity" which led to her seduction by Almanza's father and to her daughter's untimely death.

The discovered family secret, particularly one pertaining to incest, is a common Gothic trope,[11] but Robinson invests it with political significance. Elvira is

Chicago, 2003), which argues that Robinson ought to be identified as a consistent political fiction writer.

11 Examples include the unwitting rape of a sister in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796); Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), featuring both mother-son and brother-sister coupling; and the (neutralized) threat of sibling incest in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). See, inter alia, Julie Shaffer, "Familial Love, Incest, and Female Desire in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century British Women's Novels," *Criticism* 41, no. 1 (1999): 67-99, and Min-tser Lin, "'What is this secret sin, this

vulnerable under a legal system that only protects her by means of familial male authority. Almanza seems to answer the second-volume problem of the missing patriarch, but the safety he offers is no more reliable than that of the castle or the count. The implication of Robinson's allegory is that no woman whose security rests upon male protection is ultimately safe: while Georgian Britain might offer greater egalitarianism and enfranchisement for propertied men than medieval Spain, female British citizens did not share those benefits.

Before most of its dramatic action occurs, *Vancenza* addresses the morality of female publicness, a phrase here denoting social appearances outside the home, particularly at court. Robinson's own identities as a "public" woman were defined by creative self-expression: while her literary persona rested on the rapid production of poetry, drama, fiction and essays, her earlier life as a royal mistress relied upon skilful use of fashion and portraiture to strengthen her position in high society.[12] Elvira and Carline also appear at court – often associated, disparagingly, with "worldliness" in the *Ancien Régime* intellectual culture which Robinson admired.[13] *Vancenza* manages the problem of publicness for women in two ways: first by conventionally disclaiming it, associating morality with retirement and privacy; then, more subtly, by suggesting the seductive appeal of public life. It also undermines the association of seclusion with virtue, by destabilizing the literary code in which rural tastes signal a sympathetic character.

Initially, *Vancenza* suggests a commonly held position: that to desire a life based on socializing and city living, especially politicking at court, is a sign of degeneracy, and conversely that virtue is defined by privacy. Before the novel begins, Madame de Vallorie, sister of Count Vancenza, has returned to her brother's home after her husband's death. This demonstrates her moral authority, and is intimately connected to her performance of wifely grief: "The specious enjoyments of the world fade," she tells us, "before the loathing eye of pensive

untold tale…?:' The Representation of Incest in Early British Gothic Narratives," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 3-31.

12 Much has been written on Robinson's performativity and self-fashioning. Among the most important treatments are Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011); and Claire Brock, "'Then Smile and Know Thyself Supremely Great:' Mary Robinson and the Splendour of a Name," *Women's Writing* 9, no. 1 (2002): 107-214.

13 Colin Jones's review of seven related books, "Political Styles and Sites of Power in Ancien Régime France," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 1173-82, provides an excellent bibliography for this association.

sorrow."[14] In the first quarter of the novel, the morality of the castle's isolation is balanced by emphasis on the worthlessness of "the world," going so far into abstraction as to claim the superiority of natural, sincere expression over "ostentation" or "studied language" (1:40-42). This opposition between city (villainous) and country (virtuous) is a pattern common enough to appear in at least one non-Gothic Robinson novel, *The Widow* (1794): we know Lady Seymour is a villainess from her first appearance because she is so disgusted by the countryside.[15] The Vancenza family's extended mid-novel stay in Madrid, therefore, is intended to make a reader cautious even before it begins. Carline is thrilled by the visit, but we already know that a young woman's eagerness for public life is fraught with moral danger.

However, an early scene at Vancenza Castle disrupts this conventional opposition. The ironically-named seducer Del Vero walks alone in the garden and experiences a rapturous appreciation of landscape: "All beauteous Nature! […] how extensive, how luxurious, are thy enchantments! […] Why then should MAN […] seek in the turbulent mazes of busy life, and the duplicity of courts, for gratifications fatal to his repose, and pleasures that must inevitably lead to satiety and remorse?" (1:35-36) The rest of his actions prove him untrustworthy, yet his taste allows him an affirmative response to the natural world. The interplay between taste, nature and morality in late eighteenth-century fiction is illustrated by Emma Clery's observation that our exposure to evil and its morally corrupting effects in these novels tends to be mitigated by "taste and imagination," rendering strong emotion safe through its sublimation in aesthetic experience. However, as Clery also notes, this moral litmus test can be falsified: cultured villains can also respond to the beauties of art and music. She suggests that "response to nature," therefore, "is the ultimate test… [of which] only a sensibility uncorrupted by city life and social conventions is capable."[16] Del Vero challenges Clery's argument: he *is* a cultured villain, whose corruption by city life and social convention is demonstrated not only through his attempts to seduce Elvira, but through his complacent awareness that "women of the most fashionable notoriety in the highest circles" (1:105) are sexually interested in him. Yet he is still awed by, and attracted to, rural beauty and private life. The relationship between Del Vero's taste and his morality offers the reader the possibility of uncoupling "virtue" from "privacy."

14 Mary Robinson, *Vancenza: or, the Dangers of Credulity. A Moral Tale*, 2 vols. (London: John Bell, 1792), 1:14. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

15 Mary Robinson, *The Widow* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1794), 3: "I have just had a glimpse of the surrounding *beauties of nature*, and am already sickening at their view."

16 Clery, *Women's Gothic*, 61.

Robinson goes on to subvert the idea that *female* public appearance is innately immoral. At Almanza's tournament in Madrid, Elvira spectates, wearing white, but with a black veil "of the thinnest texture" (1:109). As a young unmarried woman and presumptive virgin, her white gown meets social convention, but her black veil breaks it: the colour was associated with widowhood, itself a condition of sexual knowledge no longer linked to, or under the protection of, any one man. Elvira's veil also meets conventions of female physical modesty, but Robinson's insistence on the veil's texture offers a startlingly erotic image of fine material clinging to the contours of the face, theoretically modest but practically revealing. Is Robinson suggesting here that Elvira is becoming corrupted by Madrid life in some way? Or is her plausibly deniable immodesty legitimized by the strength of her innocence? This moment of sartorial and physical self-revelation mirrors an earlier incident back in Vancenza Castle, in which she removed her veil to bind Almanza's wounded arm. After using her veil as a bandage, Elvira "recollect[s] the impropriety she [has] been guilty of […] burst[s] into tears, and retire[s]" (1:24). In the secluded environment, she readily understands her "guilt;" in the public eye, she is praised for simplicity – and thus virtue – but after the tournament, she is subjected to social mockery and manipulation by Madrid courtiers to which she does not know how to respond. Her confusion suggests that her innocence is far greater than her worldliness, but the luxurious textile descriptions and the erotic charge of her "thin" veil disrupt the clarity of the binary between public and private, virgin and seductress. If these distinctions are unclear, Robinson implies, how can we be sure about the correct distribution of protection and sympathy? If we cannot be sure that our metrics for virtue or vice are correctly calibrated, what of our understanding of equality, or of justice? The conventions of law, inheritance, patronage and marriage that will first shelter and then victimize Elvira are based on assumptions about what is right, natural and knowable that can be troubled by a single garment.

II

Vancenza is set in fifteenth-century Spain, with which British Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth century was particularly fascinated. Spanish settings provided an opportunity to indulge anti-Catholic sentiment, which was strong in Britain after the constant threat of French-backed Jacobite rebellion and Spain's 1779 attempted invasion of England. Just as importantly, portraying Southern Europe as equally under the sway of feudal tyranny and noble pride of birth provided a contrast to emerging British values of egalitarianism and representative government. The English historical imagination associated Spain with the Inquisition's violent

religious persecution, easily co-opted for secular purposes; early Gothic writers found Spain a productive environment in which to stage dramas of Protestant-coded innocence overcoming Catholic-coded tyranny.[17]

Robinson begins, however, by connecting the medieval Spanish architecture that she describes not with oppression or cruelty but with shelter. Her lexical choices emphasize *Vancenza*'s obsessions with female safety and vulnerability from the first page. Dale Townshend's work on architecture in Ann Radcliffe's novels offers context for those choices. In Radcliffe's first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), a "good" castle is more physically accessible and open, as well as containing a more virtuous family; a "bad" one is too high up for easy access, rocky, and forbidding, and the home of villains.[18] The architecture of the castle in *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) is innately gendered as representing patriarchal authority: the heroine Julia Mazzini's forced flight from it reveals the failure of her father to protect and shelter her. In the same way, Julia's discovery of the castle's "haunting" by her presumed-dead mother – in fact kept imprisoned by Julia's father for years – is an exposure both of a building's architectural secrets, and of "the cruel workings of patriarchal power."[19] Robinson adapts this technique, indexing the status of women in *Vancenza* by their relationship to the castle. The novel's opening not only foregrounds strength, safety and isolation in landscape and architecture descriptions, but makes those qualities reliant upon each other:

> Upon the side of a beautiful forest, sheltered from the northern blasts by a chain of mountains, bordered with trees, the growth of many centuries […] the gilded vanes of Vancenza glistened to the eye of the far-distant traveller […]. [The castle's] structure consisted of a spacious courtyard, encircled with a vast pile of architecture of the most exquisite order […], the front faceing [*sic*] the lake was raised upon an invulnerable rampart.
>
> (1:1-3)

The castle is also tied to the condition of Count Vancenza, Elvira's guardian, and similar lexical associations are made in the introduction to his character: his initial description includes the words "tranquillity," "paradise," "repose," "retrospect," "unsullied" and "asylum" (1:4-6). The Count makes a fatal error when they travel to Madrid: he "[leaves] the females unguarded" (1:148), allowing

17 Angela Wright, "Spain in Gothic Fiction," in *Spain in British Romanticism 1800-1840*, ed. Diego Saglia and Ian Haywood (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 175-79 and 183-84.

18 Dale Townshend, *Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance, and the Architectural Imagination, 1760-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 137.

19 Townshend, *Gothic Antiquity*, 141.

an unscrupulous courtier to attempt an abduction of Carline.[20] He stages a heroic rescue, which succeeds but results in his death. His fate is foreshadowed by an early description of his character that emphasizes his chivalric idealism: "he judged mankind," we are told, "by his idea of what they *ought* to be, rather than yielding to a conviction of what they *are*" (1:9-10). Robinson demonstrates in the Count the limitations of the chivalry praised by Edmund Burke as "the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize [*sic*]."[21] The Count's sentiments and enterprises are too credulous – of the universality of his values; of the likely behaviour of others – to survive contact with the realities of power, violence and desire. From this moment, the situation of the women in his household and the rhetoric describing them both alter. The phrases "unprotected," "the departure of your protector," and "[Elvira's] adored Protector" all occur within two pages of each other after his murder (1:151-53). The final words of Volume I are "lost protector;" they are printed in italics, the better to draw our attention (1:163).

Volume II opens with a portrait of a wintry landscape populated by starving animals: "every thing [*sic*] rapacious, and nothing satisfied" (2:2). This is what happens to bodies when they lack sufficient resources, as the three ladies very soon will. After the Count's death, the castle's atmosphere becomes increasingly desolate: the women spend less and less time together, birds nest in untended parts of the building, even the dog becomes less tame (2:79-80). The loss of a caretaker affects the building just as it affects the women, analogizing its fabric with their emotions, reputations, and bodies.

Robinson has actually been seeding doubt about Vancenza Castle almost from the start. It may be perceived, by both reader and characters, as safe and domestic in the early parts of the novel, but its protection was never more than thin, and it is threatened well before the family travels to Madrid. The rakish Del Vero begins his romantic pursuit of Elvira while both are at the castle, because he believes her social and financial position render her vulnerable: "[She] was still considered by [him] as an obscure orphan, the fruit of an illicit connection." Later, a peasant woman describes Elvira in terms that highlight this vulnerability, as "an Orphan, who is supported at the Castle of Vancenza by the bounty of the old Count" (1:83, 96). Clearly, the haven of the novel's early pages is less complete than it first appeared. When the women return to the castle and perceive it as dangerous, oppressive and gloomy, the change in atmosphere reflects their changed circumstances, but it also

[20] Robinson shared this experience: in her youth, an acquaintance of her husband attempted to abduct her from Vauxhall Gardens. See Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself: A New Edition with an Introduction* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930), 66-68.

[21] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 113.

functions as a revelation of truth. The loss of the Count may be painful, but it underscores what was always the case: safety is contingent on the whims and circumstances of patriarchal power. In fact, Vancenza's murder is preceded by the murder of Carline's father, killed in a duel before the novel opens (1:13-14). These deaths form a pattern of violent acts whose consequences include the revelation of female vulnerability. Madame de Vallorie, forced by her husband's death to seek the protection of her brother, is now bereaved again, this time alongside members of a younger generation of women, and there are no more male protectors to be sought. The castle, both as a building and as a symbol of power, was never dependable. By highlighting its provisionality as shelter, Robinson suggests that patriarchal power as a shield for the vulnerable is also provisional.

In Elvira's and Almanza's impending marriage, there is a promise of regeneration, both spiritual (in the renewed liveliness of the surrounding countryside and the opening of the castle gates) and physical (in the sense of their union leading to procreation). The decoration of the castle for the wedding, supervised by Carline, involves the removal of "ancient adornments" such as suits of armour and portraits of ancestors, on the grounds that they are inappropriate: their "hideous paraphernalia and solemn frowns would damp the pleasures of the day" (2:109). Her aim is explicitly to repudiate the Gothic, the medieval and the old-fashioned. She declares that the "gothic recess at the end of the gallery shall be stripped of its rusty trophies and formidable armour – and converted into an orchestra" (2:110). The word orchestra here is used architecturally, to indicate a place where musicians perform, and perhaps also to intentionally connote its theatrical meaning, the semi-circular space in front of a Greek or Roman theatre's stage.[22] While not, therefore, an anachronistic *idea* – Carline describes one interior feature that would have existed in the "present day" of her setting and implies one that pre-dates it – the projected act of conversion serves to remind the reader of the novel's representation of and relationship to historical time. The present day in which the reader encounters this novel will soon be someone's past, and will constitute another set of outdated traditions that a younger generation will be eager to sweep away.

The removal of those archaic objects leads directly to a discovery: "Taking down a large frame, containing the portrait of a beautiful woman, Elvira's eye was instantly struck with the *pannel* [*sic*] it had concealed" (2:111). This contains the lock to which Elvira holds a key, gifted to her by Count Vancenza. The panel holds a casket in which Madeline, Elvira's mother, has deposited papers that reveal a family secret: Prince Almanza is the son by another woman of the man who

[22] "orchestra (n.)," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed 15 August 2025, http://www.oed.com.

seduced Madeline and fathered Elvira, meaning that Elvira is in love with and about to marry her own half-brother. The shock and horror of this revelation are fatal: "She made an effort to rise – her strength failed – *she sunk into the arms of* DEATH!" (2:149)

The attempt to erase the past, in other words, is precisely the act by which the past intrudes fatally into the present. That attempt at erasure takes the form of an attempt to change the physical fabric of a Gothic building, which Robinson has already symbolically linked to the physical vulnerability of women in a system that places them under the financial and social power of men. *Vancenza* is quite clear about the potential cost of facing the truth: it costs Elvira her life. Elvira's mother has attempted an impossible middle ground – recording her daughter's history, but concealing that record – without which the tragedy might have been avoided. Deceiving ourselves and others about historical reality is the ultimate danger in *Vancenza*, not the act of revelation itself. For Robinson, historical reality is the legal and financial serfdom of the women of England. Dependent on fathers, husbands, and brothers, their precarity – and the precarity of the seemingly unassailable institutions under which they live – is revealed. The representative, egalitarian superiority of Britain, so often described in politically radical writings of the 1790s, has no relevance for British women if their lives can be recognizably traced in that of a fictional medieval Spaniard.

III

In this context, Stephanie Russo's deeply pessimistic reading of *Vancenza* is tempting. She argues that Robinson represents the almost unbearable narrowness of the conditions of safety for those who are "stain[ed by] female transgression,"[23] an interpretation that any reader of *Vancenza* would find hard to deny, but also that Robinson here presents all attempts to challenge and overthrow those constraints as doomed. Another interpretation, though, is possible: Robinson never shows us that radical change is *futile*, merely that it is *destructive*. Carline's determination to sweep the past away does not account for the truth, which is that inherited custom is real and causing problems in the present and must be faced, not evaded. The novel does not argue for a continuation of tradition; rather, Robinson demonstrates that the process of facing the past may end in damage, even death, but that not to do so means abandoning any hope of true egalitarianism, true morality, true justice.

[23] Stephanie Russo, "'Where Virtue Struggles Midst a Maze of Snares:' Mary Robinson's *Vancenza* (1792) and the Gothic Novel," *Women's Writing* 20, no. 4 (2013): 588.

The latter two conditions were required of *Vancenza*'s ending by the moral demands of fiction in this era. As Marilyn Butler writes of late-eighteenth-century popular novelists,

> They knew that their heroes and heroines were supposed to offer a moral pattern. The outcome of the action, since it would be just, would betray a sense of values […]. No plea that their stories merely set out to entertain could absolve them from the burden of their implicit meaning.[24]

No possibility is open to Robinson's characters other than the heartbreak of revelation. If Elvira knows Almanza is her half-brother and marries him anyway, she consciously commits an act of incest. If she does not know, and marries him in ignorance, the incest is not the less committed for being unintentional. Neither choice offers a heroine an acceptable life. Elvira's inheritance has consequences; to remedy them, she must know them. Despite its distortions and extremities, *Vancenza* mirrors its readers' situations, arguing that to reorganize a cruel and hypocritical society, one must first be willing to recognize it.

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