

Sarah Kramer

### A Woman's Take

Mary Robinson, née Darby, was an English celebrity known for her acting and writings. She published six books of poetry, eight novels, two socio-political texts, and three dramas, of which only two have been performed. Though she was a prolific writer, most do not know of her and if they do it is usually not for her writing. For a presentation in my Romantic Poetry class, I was allowed to work with a first edition of her last collection of poems, *Lyrical Tales*; which is housed in the 19th Century Collection at the Armstrong Browning Library. This book of poems is important to our study of Romantic poetry today because not only is it a near direct response to *Lyrical Ballads*, a book of poetry written by the now well-known William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge, but it also provides a glimpse at what women, or at the very least a particular woman, cared about during the Romantic period.

*Lyrical Tales* is Robinson's only major collection that was grouped based on a specific theme and with a formal focus; that focus being to respond to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. When drawing connections between *Lyrical Tales* and *Lyrical Ballads*, I focused mainly on Robinson's "Golfre" and "The Deserted Cottage" and compared them to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Michael" respectively. I found that both "Golfre" and "Mariner" shared a sense of the supernatural as well as a theme of punishment. "The Haunted Beach," which also appears in *Lyrical Tales*, is a more direct and obvious choice for a comparison between Coleridge's and Robinson's works. "The Deserted Cottage" and "Michael" deal with the destruction of families, though in vastly different ways. Wordsworth's poem focused on the destructive power of urbanization whereas Robinson's focused the way that war impacts a family. Another element that is present in both "The

Deserted Cottage” and “Michael” is the fact that buildings are symbolic. In “Michael,” the ruins of the sheepfold represents the family, their history of being tied to the land, as well as representing every other family like them. In “The Deserted Cottage,” the building epitomizes how war destroys families, both by killing and through grief.

Before doing more research I believed that, because she was responding to *Lyrical Ballads*, Robinson was not as prolific a writer as Wordsworth or Coleridge. The fact of the matter was that Robinson was the more popular writer in her time, and *Lyrical Tales* was not her trying to ride someone else’s coattails but her shedding light on other, slightly lesser-known, poets. As time passed, her writings fell by the wayside while Wordsworth and Coleridge’s gained more notoriety. So much to the point where students, like myself, often never hear of Mary Robinson until we take a class that focuses specifically on either female poets or poets of the Romantic period.

One way for professors to give students more to think critically about the poem’s content, expose them to a variety of poetic forms, raise the issue of gender in an analysis of point of view, and prepare students for having to compare and contrast works that are vastly different is to teach *Lyrical Ballads* and *Lyrical Tales* side by side. For example, Robinson’s poems in *Lyrical Tales* are clearly more political than either Coleridge or Wordsworth’s poems. Admittedly, Wordsworth’s “The Female Vagrant” alludes to the change in working conditions the industrial age brought on artisans and criticizes the horrors of war, but most of his poems are considerably non-political and focus more on nature and the peace that can be found there. Coleridge’s poetry focuses more on nature, the human mind, and God than anything else. On the other hand, there are many poems in *Lyrical Tales* like Robinson’s “The Negro Girl,” which blatantly condemns the slave-trade by demonstrating how lovers are separated and sold as slaves. Students could also

use Robinson's poems to draw connections to today's world because her poetry depicts themes like domestic violence, misogyny, violence against destitute characters, and political oppression. I firmly believe that students would enjoy the stories and the poetic language of *Lyrical Tales* and I know that the book would provide a lot of opportunity for writing effective analyses and comparison-contrast essays about poetic form, the poetic persona, nature, Gothic storytelling, and the socio-political condition of a range of rural, destitute characters.