

Into the Public: The Sexual Heroine in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy* and Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*

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Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy; or the Ruin on the Rock* (1795) and Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter, with Portraits of the Leadenhead Family* (1799) present sexually informed heroines who challenge familial and cultural mandates of gendered behaviour that require innocence as the emblem of virtue. According to Roxanne Eberle, most novels of this period feature a heroine who "‘purchases’ the status of wife with her well maintained chastity and the promise to obey a complex set of behavioral rules."¹ *Secresy*'s Sibella and *The Natural Daughter*'s Martha, however, develop a critical subjectivity which allows them to reject commonplaces that conflate sexual and moral innocence and identify hypocrisy in those who do. Both women are tested by nefarious fathers and sexual partners whose restrictive codes of feminine deportment demand that they act, as *Secresy* puts it, like "docile and grateful creature[s]."² By foregrounding each heroine's rational sincerity—and providing each woman with a female friend for support—*Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* arm Sibella and Martha with resources that may potentially rescue them from their families' narrow views of female sexuality and gendered behaviour: Sibella tries to convince her uncle Mr Valmont to allow her to marry his illegitimate son Clement, and Martha endeavours to support herself financially and care for a young ward after her husband accuses her of infidelity and expels her from their home.

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- 1 Roxanne Eberle, *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792–1897: Interrupting the Harlot's Progress* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 3.
 - 2 Eliza Fenwick, *Secresy; or the Ruin on the Rock*, ed. Isobel Grundy (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), 42. References are to this edition.

Fenwick and Robinson set out to establish the cultural legitimacy of the sexually experienced woman. But even though Sibella and Martha both challenge normative standards of female sexual behaviour, they do not meet the same fate. Isobel Grundy's introduction to her edition of *Secresy* posits that it "remains arguably a reformist rather than a revolutionary text" because Sibella fails to affect positive change and dies heartbroken at the end of the novel in spite of her close relationship with the liberated Caroline (28). I would argue that *The Natural Daughter*, published four years after *Secresy* by Fenwick's good friend Robinson, builds upon the earlier novel and transforms it from reformist to revolutionary by rewriting its principal plot and expanding its private family tragedy into the public sphere. Moving from the closed structure of the epistolary novel into a third-person narrative, Robinson successfully positions Martha so that she may interact with large numbers of people and institutions and have the possibility of effecting positive personal change. This essay explores how *The Natural Daughter* rewrites *Secresy*'s central project by placing its isolated family drama in a broad public context and enabling its heroine to move beyond the constraints of her family, professionalize as a writer, and develop a sense of intellectual and sexual independence that resists her family's limiting gender ideology. What distinguishes these texts from other protofeminist novels of the period (by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and others) is their radical endings—endings depicting powerful bonds between women that supersede relationships with parents and siblings and eclipse the ambiguous promise of romantic love.

Fenwick, Robinson, and Textual Transgression in the 1790s

In London in the 1790s, Fenwick and Robinson were friends who moved in the same circles. They were acquainted through Mary Wollstonecraft, whose protofeminist philosophy heavily influenced both women's work. They also both turned to novels, at least in part, as a means to earn an income (Fenwick's husband John was at that time an unreliable source of income, and Robinson's failure to collect the Prince of Wales's promised annuity after their affair ended fuelled her career as a professional writer).³ Grundy's statement about

3 Grundy reports that John was an alcoholic who drank away the family fortune (7–8). Robinson's inability to collect the promised annuity from the Prince caused great financial distress, even partnered with the income from her writing. On 30 May 1800, she wrote to Godwin, "the arrears now due on my annuity from the Prince of Wales would doubly pay the sum for which I am arrested. I have written to the Prince, and his answer is that there

Fenwick also holds true for Robinson: “it is clear ... she saw herself as a radical who aimed at lasting literary fame” (7). Both women were intimate with established radicals like Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and William Godwin; Fenwick was associated, through John, with the London Corresponding Society; Robinson’s novel *Walsingham: or the Pupil of Nature* (1797) was treated by the press as a celebration of dangerous Revolutionary ideas.⁴ Fenwick and Robinson shared a personal friendship as well as common political beliefs. Robinson mentions her admiration for Fenwick in a letter written to Samuel Jackson Pratt in the last months of her life. “I have had my Cottage perpetually full of visitors ever since I came to it, and some charming literary characters,—” she writes, “I have had Mrs. Fenwick, the Elegant authoress of ‘Secresy’ & her daughter here, this month past.”⁵ That Fenwick was willing to travel to Surrey with her daughter in tow so that she might visit Robinson indicates a strong attachment between the two women. Robinson also composed a poem to Fenwick’s young son Orlando, titled “Lines Addressed to a Beautiful Infant Inscribed to Mrs. Fenwick,” which appeared in the *Morning Post* on Tuesday, 29 July 1800 and to which the fond Fenwick referred as “very beautiful.”⁶ In a letter to Hays, Fenwick displays a similar warmth for Robinson during the aforementioned visit: “I must congratulate myself

is no money at Carlton House—that he is very sorry for my situation, but that his own is equally distressing! You will smile at such paltry excuses, as I do. But I am determined to persist in my demand.” Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799) [online], (College Park: University of Maryland, 1999), Romantic Circles Electronic Edition, ed. Adriana Craciun, Anne Irmen Close, Megan Musgrave, and Orienne Smith [accessed 24 August 2004]. Available from Internet: <URL:http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/robinson/contents.htm>, see <URL:http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/robinson/mrgodwin.htm>.

- 4 See Adriana Craciun, “The New Cordays: Helen Craik and British Representations of Charlotte Corday, 1793–1800,” *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. Adriana Craciun and Kari E. Lokke (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 214. *Walsingham* was featured “beside Smith’s *The Young Philosopher* and Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* ... as a product of an unnatural French republican cornucopia.” Reviews of this novel also established Robinson as a sympathizer with France. The *Anti-Jacobin Review*, for example, claimed that “her experience ... must have taught her that, at least, equal profligacy obtains among *commoners and plebians* ... according to Robinson, Britain is the seat of ignorance, superstition, and tyranny, while other nations are enlightened.” *Anti-Jacobin Review* 1 (August 1798), 163.
- 5 Mary Robinson, “To Samuel Jackson Pratt” (31 August 1800), available from Internet [accessed 24 August 2004]: <URL:http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/robinson/mrprattfst.htm>.
- 6 *The Fate of the Fenwicks: Letters to Mary Hays (1798–1828)*, ed. A.F. Wedd (London: Methuen, 1927), 27.

on being the guest of a woman whose powers of pleasing, ever varied & graceful, are united to quick feeling & generosity of temper.”⁷ Though little of Robinson’s correspondence survives—and little work has been initiated that would align her with Fenwick—it is evident that she knew and respected Fenwick and was familiar with *Secresy*.

It is not surprising that Robinson used *Secresy* as inspiration for *The Natural Daughter*. Robinson’s history of imitating and revising other people’s work is well known: her 1790 poem *Ainsi Va Le Monde*, for example, appropriates the effusive Della Cruscan style she employed in her poetic correspondence with Robert Merry. *Hubert de Sevrac, a Romance of the Eighteenth Century* (1796) was recognized by Wollstonecraft and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as an imitation of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).⁸ Her protofeminist political tract *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799) adapts and revises the discourse put forth by Wollstonecraft and Hays. *Lyrical Tales* (1800) deliberately plays on the title and content of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).⁹ When considered together, the similarities and marked differences between *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* are also striking. Both novels embrace radical politics and appropriate Gothic narratives to explore the consequences of institutionalized gender prejudice; both also feature sexually experienced heroines who resist cultural expectations dictating passivity and docility in women.

Certainly, *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* were not the only novels published in the 1790s that attempted to emancipate their heroines from the destructive gender ideology that equated chastity with narrative worthiness. Other such works include Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791), Charlotte Smith’s *Desmond* (1792), Wollstonecraft’s *The*

7 Wedd, 10.

8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, review of Mary Robinson, *Hubert de Sevrac, a Romance of the Eighteenth Century* in *Critical Review* 23 (1798), 472; and Mary Wollstonecraft, review of Mary Robinson, *Hubert de Sevrac* in *Analytical Review* 25 (May 1797), 523. Wollstonecraft notices that “in writing her present romance Mrs. Radcliffe seems to be her model; and she deserves to rank as one of her most successful imitators.”

9 For scholarship on Robinson’s imitation and revision of her contemporaries’ work, see Adriana Craciun, “Violence against Difference: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson,” *Bucknell Review* 42:1 (1998), 111–41; Jerome McGann, “Mary Robinson and the Myth of Sappho,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 56:1 (March 1995), 55–76; Judith Pascoe, “Mary Robinson and the Literary Marketplace,” *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 252–68; and Lisa Vargo, “Tabitha Bramble and the *Lyrical Tales*,” *Women’s Writing* 9:1 (2002), 37–52.

Wrongs of Woman (1798), Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), and Amelia Opie's *Father and Daughter* (1801). These novels are sympathetic in their depiction of virtuous, sexually active heroines ranging from *Desmond's* Geraldine, who falls in love with the title character even though she is (unhappily) married, to Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman*, who yields to her sexual passion for Darnford and commits adultery. In her insightful study of transgressive sexuality in women's writing, Eberle investigates why these women writers strove to remould the role of the sexually active heroine by "interrupting the harlot's progress":

the "harlot's progress" narrative preoccupies progressive women writers because it allows them to address what they see as a dangerous conflation of the female "body" and "mind"; whereas the more conservative writers tend to argue that moral rectitude can be read through the body (unchaste women are immoral and hence dangerous members of society), radical women writers want to locate morality within the mind (and occasionally the heart).¹⁰

Hays's Mary Raymond, for example, is raped, orphaned, and made to suffer at the hands of cruel villains and repressive institutions in spite of her intelligence and virtue. "The sensibilities of my heart have been turned to bitterness," she laments, "the powers of my mind wasted, my projects rendered abortive, my virtues and my sufferings alike unrewarded, *I have lived in vain!* unless the story of my sorrows should kindle in the heart of man, in behalf of my oppressed sex, the sacred claims of humanity and justice."¹¹ Many novels that treat sexually transgressive women—*Secresy* included—end similarly, with the sad realization that contemporary society cannot tolerate or include such women. Therefore, the connection between *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* is especially important because Robinson is clearly rewriting her friend's reformist text in such a way that the central female friendship assumes a more powerful role and contributes to the heroine's narrative success (including her financial independence and sexual satisfaction).

Martha's happy ending in *The Natural Daughter* is linked to Robinson's choice of format. While Fenwick uses an epistolary plan to highlight the multiplicity of agendas that repress Sibella, Robinson employs a traditional third-person narrative to balance her heroine's actions and the demands of her culture. Nicola Watson notes that *Secresy* "is remarkable for a peculiar aesthetic and political deadlock,

10 Eberle, 6.

11 Mary Hays, *The Victim of Prejudice*, ed. Eleanor Ty (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), 174.

which displays the crippling effect of the epistolary mode upon the urgent feminist project of distinguishing between sensibility as a debilitating conservative ideology and as the powerhouse of a new feminist vision.” She goes on to argue that “the tension of the narrative hinges upon the conflict between the letter, identified closely with the heroine, and the plot, associated with Valmont.”¹² Sibella’s voice is quickly lost amidst the cacophony of letters to and from her friend Caroline, her uncle, Clement, Murden, and others. Robinson removes this tension by rewriting Sibella’s struggle within a straightforward omniscient narrative, thus moving the sexually active heroine from the private, closed structure of the epistolary novel to the open framework of a public plot. In *The Natural Daughter*, this strategy helps transform *Secresy*’s tragedy into a success.

Nor is it a coincidence that Fenwick and Robinson chose to frame *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* as Gothic texts. Even though using Gothic elements in Jacobin or sentimental novels may be characterized as a mere marketing ploy, Fenwick and Robinson carefully exploit and revise the Gothic novel’s central tenets, manipulating its popular framework to challenge the culturally sanctioned gender scripts upon which the genre is based. The Gothic presupposes a virtuous, innocent heroine, who is beset by real and imaginary threats to her chastity and well-being. According to Anne Williams, she faces the daunting task of “learning to read (or rather, not to *misread*) appearances.”¹³ Sibella and Martha successfully internalize this mission, but, instead of simply learning to guard their virtue from lecherous men, they come to understand that moral worth is not dependent upon sexual innocence—Sibella, for example, uses sex, in part, to escape her uncle’s influence, and Lady Susan realizes that sleeping with Morley is a small price to pay for saving her life. If the usual plot of a female Gothic text “[affirms] the power of the Symbolic” and “celebrates (as Wordsworth would have said) a marriage of mind and nature, though from the female perspective, the successful ‘marriage’ is a wedding to culture,” neither Robinson’s nor Fenwick’s novel concludes with the heroine’s swift reconciliation to patriarchal order.¹⁴ Sibella dies and leaves Caroline to mourn, and

12 Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790–1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 41, 42.

13 Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 144.

14 Williams, 103.

Martha creates a family according to her own values. Both *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter* rewrite the Gothic heroine at the same time as they legitimize the sexually active woman.

Secresy, Isolation, and Sibella's "Fatal Contract"

Secresy combines the Jacobin novel's focus on sexual inequality with popular Gothic conventions that stress the heroine's undeserved suffering and emphasize the power of the villain.¹⁵ In addition to confronting the evils resulting from unchecked parental authority and featuring an imprisoned heroine, *Secresy* has other obvious Gothic elements: multiple villains, the possibility of supernatural events, and kidnapping plots. When Caroline first sees Valmont Castle, she reports, "what a freezing sensation crept in my veins, as we waited for the raising of your uncle's draw-bridges" (54). Fenwick also includes battlements, a moat (which Sibella attempts to swim across to escape), and picturesque ruins in the architecture of Valmont's estate—as if to insist on her novel's status as a Gothic text. Its heroine, Sibella, is divided between her naive ideals about human nature and her uncle's and friend Caroline's attempts to control her. At every turn, Sibella is thwarted by characters who are more experienced and savvy than she. Fenwick takes great pains to accentuate her passivity: at one point, Arthur and Caroline attempt to liberate her from Valmont Castle, only to have her intercepted by Lord Filmar, who decides to deposit her at Caroline's house in London. There, Sibella realizes that her beloved Clement has betrayed her by marrying Mrs Ashburn, Caroline's mother, and Sibella subsequently dies. Fenwick's reworking of Gothic romance for political ends hinges upon her passive heroine—Sibella is manipulated by enemies and friends alike and has no worldly experience to bolster her sense of independence

15 Julia M. Wright argues that "in *Secresy*, Fenwick proliferates these textual classes ... in a gothic variation of the education plot." "'I am Ill Fitted': Conflicts of Genre in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*," *Romanticism, History, and the Possibility of Genre*, ed. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 152. Other critics of *Secresy* have also mentioned Fenwick's determination to capitalize upon the success of Gothic fiction. In Janet Todd's introduction to her edition of *Secresy*, she points out that "*Secresy* is subtitled *The Ruin on the Rock*, which clearly conjures up a Gothic location. The Gothic novel was becoming extremely popular by 1795 and such a setting would immediately suggest some interest in the problem of the mind's construction, a staple of Gothic fiction, as well as indicating an interaction between a powerful and frightening male environment and a naive young heroine." Todd, introduction, *Secresy* (London: Pandora, 1989), viii. E.J. Clery identifies Fenwick as one of the "many novelists [who] began to follow Radcliffe's lead" during the 1790s. *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108.

in spite of her unconventional attitude towards sex and marriage.

Throughout the novel, Fenwick presents Sibella and Caroline as foils who struggle with the expression of their independence and sexuality. *Secresy* begins by isolating Sibella from Caroline, who opens the novel with a letter to Valmont requesting that she be allowed to correspond with his niece. Caroline quickly notes Valmont's "contempt for the female character" (40) and impresses Sibella with her readiness to challenge her uncle's authority. Under Caroline's guidance, Sibella reports, "I feel every day bolder and bolder ... I was born to think:—and I will think" (43). Caroline's example contrasts sharply with Valmont's influence and causes Sibella significant anxiety. The latter implores her friend, "teach me your art to soften his power, to unloose the grasp of his authority, and I will love you as—I believe I cannot love you better than I do; for have you not cast a ray of cheering light upon my dungeon?" (41). Valmont has raised Sibella to be quiet and submissive, and he openly resents her feeble attempts to resist his will: "always reasoning," he sighs to Sibella, "I tell you, child, you cannot, you shall not reason. Repine in secret as much as you please, but no reasonings. No matter how sullen the submission, if it is submission" (43). Such speeches are frequent and designed to secure his niece's acquiescence to his will, including her acceptance of the false belief that she is dependent upon him for money (though, legally, he is only the temporary guardian of the fortune left to her in her father's will).

Regrettably, Sibella's assertion of her sexual and personal independence ends in disaster. Fenwick links Sibella's tragedy to her lack of worldly experience and her inability to be informed by people other than Caroline, Valmont, and the weak-natured Clement, whom Sibella has loved since childhood. They form a secret union—which Sibella considers as a sacred marriage but Clement does not—and consummate their desires. Sibella's love for Clement partnered with Caroline's influence inspires her to confront her uncle, who will not, apparently, allow them to marry. As Janet Todd points out, Sibella fulfils Fenwick's plan to

consider what might happen if a woman were given a "natural" education away from social corruption, what could occur when feminine sensibility was encouraged by a training that avoided the strengthening of the reasoning faculties, what might befall a woman who rebelled against such an education, and what might result if she followed her sensitive and compassionate feelings into forbidden sexual activity.¹⁶

The result is not a happy one. Enraged with Sibella's temerity, Valmont reminds her, "I have chosen a part for you: and nothing is required of you but obedience" (59). Statements like this one, however, belie Valmont's true intention of marrying Sibella (who will inherit his estate) to his illegitimate son Clement so that he might inherit the property through her. That Valmont intentionally keeps this plan a secret as part of his resistance to Sibella's faltering attempts at independence ensures Sibella's eventual death and the failure of all of his plans. Since secrecy and isolation are key elements of this design, he alienates Clement and Sibella and sets in motion the dark events of the novel. Sibella laments, "he never enlightened my understanding, nor conciliated my affections; and he demands only the obedience of a fettered slave. I am held in the bondage of slavery" (73).

Secrecy, isolation, and lack of experience beyond her own home conspire to prevent Sibella from developing an informed sense of judgment and embracing the resources available to liberate her from Valmont's tyranny and Clement's neglect. As a counterexample, Caroline, who has extensive worldly experience (in the form of travel and exposure to society), is able to recognize Valmont as a misogynist who does not have his niece's best interests at heart and correctly identify Clement as an insipid scoundrel who cares for money and pleasure more than he cares for Sibella. Indeed, Sibella's inability to extricate herself from the secrecy and isolation that have defined her life secures her demise. Though, near the beginning of the novel, Sibella declares, "I am not weak enough to descend to artifice" (104) and "I have nothing to do with falsehoods" (122), she later intentionally keeps her "marriage" and subsequent pregnancy a secret. Caroline calls "secrecy ... that canker-worm of virtue" (139), but Sibella cannot envision an alternative. Her innocence and isolation prevent her from developing the power to liberate herself from her uncle's grasp. Believing that the promise she and Clement made in secret is more significant than the social contract that would validate and legalize their union, she allows herself to be exploited. Sarah Emsley phrases this dilemma usefully: "Sibella Valmont thinks of marriage as a natural, emotional and physical bond that unites two lovers more genuinely and more effectively than the social bond of the marriage ceremony."¹⁷ The success of this private union would depend on Clement's integrity and his willingness to remain committed while he had no legal reason to do so. Thus, the result of Sibella's education in ignorance—an education

17 Sarah Emsley, "Radical Marriage," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11:4 (July 1999), 477.

that cultivated her untested sensibility and thwarted the development of her reason—is her inability to properly perceive the unreliability of a man to whom she entrusts her entire future. Her inability to reject both Clement and Valmont prevents her from following Caroline’s example: their friendship, ultimately, cannot rescue her.

Since Sibella has not managed to recognize Clement’s unreliability—she admits that “of the customs of your world, Caroline, I am ignorant” (250)—she is doomed to remain a victim who grows increasingly silent and passive. She acknowledges the damage done to her by her uncle/father figure, but she cannot comprehend the similar disregard for her well-being displayed by her lover Clement. Sibella’s last letter to Caroline, which comes almost ninety pages before the end of the novel, begs for some confirmation of Clement’s constancy and bids farewell to her dear friend (257); she is certain that she possesses neither the spirit nor the motivation to survive her child’s birth. Upon her deathbed, she cries, “my uncle’s secrets could have done me but a temporary harm, it was mine own secrets destroyed me—Oh! that fatal contract” (358). She has been liberated from her uncle’s castle, but she cannot live with the knowledge of Clement’s treachery and the collapse of romantic love. Sibella’s tragedy represents the amplified fate of the other characters in the novel, characters who cannot overcome their own limitations and prejudices to save Sibella or themselves. According to Wright, “at the end of the novel, all of the characters are silenced by the shock of being unable to imagine how to continue the narratives of their lives in the face of a world that does not operate as they expect and is filled with figures who do not fit their models.”¹⁸ The conclusion of the novel finds Sibella, her child, and Arthur (who harboured an unrequited love for Sibella) dead, Valmont disgraced, Clement locked in a ridiculous marriage, and Filmar and Caroline at loose ends.

In spite of this grim finale, *Secresy* challenges the Gothic commonplace that proclaims innocence as the highest virtue a woman may possess and offers sexually experienced heroines who challenge the limiting gender ideology of their culture. *Secresy* contests the idea that a woman’s sexual innocence determines her worth. For example, Caroline feels that her acquaintance Peggy should not have agreed to marriage to cover up an unplanned pregnancy; marriage was, to Caroline, “a foolish and impotent remedy ... removing a partial evil, most probably to begin a lasting one” (114). This unconventional attitude towards Peggy’s difficult circumstances has been noted by

18 Wright, 171.

Grundy, who writes, “it is most unorthodox of Caroline not to see marriage as full reparation.”¹⁹ Caroline also supports her friend Davenport, his mistress, and their child (financially and emotionally) and does not judge Sibella for her sexual activities. “With such an education as he has given you,” she writes to Sibella, “unless you had been a mere block without ideas, it was impossible you should not become a romantic enthusiast in whatever species of passion first engaged your feelings: and Mr. Valmont took care to make that first passion *Love*” (140). Even the misguided Clement divorces moral worth from sexual activity—he refers to Sibella as “pure as angels, notwithstanding Clement has been admitted into her embraces” (154). And while Sibella’s imprudent “marriage” to Clement reveals her naïveté and misjudgment of his character, it also displays her belief that sexual love does not need to be connected to the social institution of marriage or the approval of her family. Sibella’s ill-advised choices lead to her demise, but Caroline refuses to let her frustrated love of a man who does not return her feelings destroy her: she writes to Arthur, “I confess I have loved you! yet, because I could not possess myself of the strong holds in your heart, shall I sink down and die?—No!” (284–85). Caroline resists Sibella’s “fatal contract” because she values her autonomy more than her beloved’s esteem. Similar resistance to normative standards of female passivity and sexual inexperience is found in Robinson’s novel.

The Natural Daughter and the Solution of Public Life

In *The Natural Daughter*, Martha faces many of the obstacles that beset Sibella, and, like her counterpart, does not equate female virtue with sexual innocence. Martha is unjustly accused of Sibella’s transgression (engaging in a sexual relationship outside of wedlock and becoming pregnant). While Sibella remains a virtual prisoner in her uncle’s home, Martha is turned out of hers and must learn to support herself; while Sibella composes frustrated letters to her only friend Caroline, Martha publishes poetry and a best-selling novel; and while Sibella languishes and eventually dies as a result of the perfidy of others, Martha learns to adapt to and survive in a corrupt world with her virtue—and life—intact. Eberle comments that such narratives often “disrupt the conventional plot line, or the story, of transgressive female sexuality through a range of structural and discursive strategies, including ... the delineation of a sexualized heroine capable of surviving the

19 Grundy, 114.

fatal plot of the unmarried sexual woman.”²⁰ In *The Natural Daughter*, Martha, whose husband rejects her, and Lady Susan, who bears a child out of wedlock, are presented as two women who adapt and survive this “fatal plot.” The novel moves Martha from private to public life, where her informed sexual and political subjectivity helps her outlast and overcome the amplified suffering that overwhelmed Sibella, allowing Martha to found a family based on her own values.

Robinson’s novel blends Jacobin and Gothic conventions—as Fenwick’s does—in order to dramatize the heroines’ suffering and magnify the offences of those who persecute them. *The Natural Daughter* features two heroines, a property-hungry villain who pursues them, mistaken identities, kidnapping plots, and imprisonment. Although this novel contains neither ghosts nor ruined castles, *The Natural Daughter* presents everyday British society as a Gothic nightmare worthy of Fenwick (or Ann Radcliffe) because it bestows power and prestige upon those who own property and entitles them to exercise their influence over those who do not. Martha’s husband Morley is a villain who strongly resembles Valmont in his desire to govern a woman he considers to be his property. He “was rigidly tenacious of an husband’s authority; extremely correct in religious duties; a jealous admirer of subordination; and a most decided enemy to every thing that could possibly degrade the dignity of his ancestry,” who had married Martha “with the hope of controlling all her actions.”²¹ Like Sibella, Martha makes the catastrophic mistake of trusting a romantic partner who is selfish and unfaithful; like Sibella, she must also bear the consequences. Morley forces her from their home when he believes her to have mothered an illegitimate child named Fanny (who is later proven to be his child with Lady Susan), and Martha must spend the remainder of the novel trying to support herself, protect Fanny and Lady Susan, and avoid Morley’s persecution.

Like *Secresy*, *The Natural Daughter* resists the cultural ideology that insists on married sexual love as the primary goal of a woman’s life. The novel is clearly critical of the Bradford marriage (Martha’s parents) from the opening pages: on 1:8, for example, Mr Bradford tells his wife, “I wish you had my gout, and we should then see whose temper is the most fretful ... you have no business ever to speak.” Furthermore, Martha does not hesitate to leave her husband when she has been treated unfairly and does not take him back until he apologizes and

20 Eberle, 10.

21 Mary Robinson, *The Natural Daughter, with Portraits of the Leadenhead Family* (London: Longman and Rees, 1799), 1:71–72, 2:161. References are to this edition.

repents—she refuses to connect her well-being or self-worth to her marriage or to what others think of her. When her friend Lady Susan confesses to Martha that she was tricked into a false “revolutionary marriage” to save her life, became pregnant, and abandoned the child who turns out to be Fanny, Martha expresses only sympathy and works with her to support and protect Fanny. Julie Shaffer points out that Martha is believed to have committed an offence similar to Lady Susan’s (and Sibella’s), but “premarital sexuality Martha considers more as error than sin”; Robinson’s deliberate comparison of the two women’s actions implies that “both are relatively innocent and thus undeserving of their suffering.”²² Moreover, Martha continues her friendship with Francis Sherville, even though she (unaware that he is Lady Susan’s brother) mistakenly believes him to be Fanny’s father, and does not hesitate to marry him after Morley’s death.

Martha’s success in outlasting the threats that affront her lies in her ability to accumulate experience, expand her judgment, and participate fully in public life—possibilities denied Sibella in *Secresy*. Though Robinson bases Martha’s experiences on Sibella’s, she imbues her with Caroline’s independent spirit and strength of mind. This allows Martha to endure challenges that overpower Sibella, who does not move beyond the traditionally feminine province of the home. Martha’s sister Julia was schooled at home (and becomes a hypocritical villain), but Martha was sent out to school; as a result, she “was giddy, wild, buxom, good-natured, and bluntly sincere in the tenor of her conversation” (1:6). Martha is portrayed as an active agent from the novel’s opening pages: she is the only member of her family who volunteers to help a wounded soldier, for instance, and she insists that her father obey his doctor’s orders when the rest of her family would prefer to let him eat and drink himself to death. These qualities serve her well when she is turned from her home, reputation ruined, and must attempt to support herself as an actress, governess, companion, and writer in the “busy metropolis” of London (2:32). Despite the resistance she encounters everywhere (she is abandoned by her mother, betrayed by her sister, imprisoned in a madhouse by Morley, and forced out of positions as a companion and actress), Martha does not allow her husband’s strict morality or the accusation of extramarital sexual impropriety to prevent her from actively pursuing her self-interest.

Martha’s experiences provide her with the resources to survive her

22 Julie Shaffer, “Illegitimate Sexualities in Romantic-Era Woman-Penned Novels in *Corvey*,” *Corvey Journal* 5:2–3 (1993), 49.

husband's cruelty, economic distress, and the widespread belief in her sexual misconduct. She refuses to be a victim like Sibella. Even though "a female without protection, or even the power to apply for character to her own relatives—a being, who seemed alone even in the midst of multitudes, had little to hope for from a world selfish and prejudging" (2:32–33), she makes use of the resources offered by the city and finds fulfilling careers as a writer and an actress. She initially finds success on the stage, where her natural sensibility and sincerity fully reveal themselves. Even when playing a role, "she was the pupil of Nature; her feelings were spontaneous, her ideas expanded, and her judgment correct" (1:245). Martha, like Sibella before her "marriage," is a stranger to hypocrisy and pretence, even as an actress. Though her reputation suffers and she is often denied employment, Martha continues to mix in society, form friendships with other women, and insist on her innocence. She refuses to submit to the slander and malevolence that have been used against her; when she has the opportunity to seek revenge on Pen Pryor for badmouthing her, she refuses, stating, "I cannot enter into the modern system of tormenting my own sex" (2:172–73).

Unlike Sibella, Martha envisions a wide audience who can support her—turning to, variously, publishers, the legal system, family, friends, and other women for assistance. She acts on a public stage with her good friend until Morley forces her out. Then, instead of writing private letters to a friend who is ultimately powerless to help her, Martha composes and publishes poetry and a novel in hopes of earning an income and achieving independence. She approaches the corrupt Mr Index to publish her novel and appeals to her friends and acquaintances to publish her poems by subscription, a practice that she refers to as a "genteel form of begging" (2:96). These efforts usually result in further distress (her novel, we learn, goes through six editions but earns Martha a mere ten pounds) and she continues to suffer throughout the novel. Nevertheless, Martha survives and ultimately achieves sexual fulfilment because she develops an awareness of cultural hypocrisy: her experiences in public life quickly teach her that "the aristocracy of wealth had little to do with the aristocracy of genius" and that "to *seem* and not to be was the all-powerful clue to private praise and public reputation" (1:249, 2:67).

Martha, like Sibella before her, learns to distinguish appearances from reality and identify duplicity in those who are closest to her. Yet Martha fully internalizes the Gothic heroine's mission in a way that Sibella (along with most other Gothic heroines) does not, recognizing the artificiality of sexual mores, male privilege, and romantic love as they exist in her culture. She marries Morley for the

wrong reasons (security and release from her parents), suffers dramatically for her mistake, and eventually remarries because of her deep respect, love, and attraction for Francis Sherville. Through her experiences in public life, Martha understands that she may pursue her own happiness and security independent of a man, that Morley will not be redeemed, that her alliance with Lady Susan is more valuable than her marriage. Sibella's isolation and naïveté, on the other hand, preclude her taking advantage of the resources that might prevent her death. Her unwillingness to live with Clement's betrayal, her failure to emulate her independent friend Caroline, and her inability to recognize public life as a potential solution to her situation limit her narrative possibilities to one outcome: death.

Despite their different resolutions, *The Natural Daughter* and *Secresy* propose the idea that their heroines could create female-centred families that defy the cultural emphasis placed on heterosexual marriage and patriarchal order. Sibella briefly imagines the possibility that she would be happy living with Caroline apart from Clement, but this hope precedes her complete understanding of Clement's betrayal: "love and gratitude also for my Caroline," she writes, "happy, happy world! I will live in it with you forever" (344). Sibella's relationship with Caroline is the most balanced and satisfying relationship depicted in the novel, and they "find their happiest moments in writing to each other and in openly expressing an affection that seems impossible in any other relationship."²³ Even though Caroline is attached romantically to Arthur, she loves Sibella equally well. After their deaths, she declares that Arthur and Sibella "shall be entombed together—the dearer parts of my existence.—I have loved them both, as I never loved man nor woman beside" (359). Her words close the novel. In *The Natural Daughter*, the possibility that two women may live together according to their own values is effectively realized by Martha and Lady Susan, who work together to support Fanny and earn livings as actresses. The end of the novel establishes a family built on Martha's values of gender equality and justice: Morley dies after he admits to all of his crimes (including fathering Fanny, torturing Martha, conspiring with Marat, and having an affair with Martha's sister Julia) and leaves his fortune to Martha, who shares it with Lady Susan and later marries her brother. Sharon Setzer argues that "Lord Francis is, of course, the nominal head of this family, but Frances, the natural daughter, is its centre. As such, she is the ideological centre of a powerful maternal

identity shared by fictional women like Martha and [Lady Susan] as well as by real women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Mary Shelley.”²⁴

Eliza Fenwick and Mary Robinson were part of such a network. Both women composed novels that challenged gender scripts and were intimately connected to contemporary debates about politics, culture, and literature. Robinson composed *The Natural Daughter*, in part, as a response to her friend’s despairing conclusions in *Secresy*. In contrast to *Secresy*’s Valmont, Robinson imagines public life as the answer to, not the cause of, the difficult situation of women in the 1790s. Sibella’s shortsighted uncle believes that, by removing Sibella from society and circumscribing her experience, he will ensure her tractability and safety; instead, he inspires her disastrous idolatry of Clement and ensures her early death. Similarly, Martha’s limited experience within her own dysfunctional family leads her to make the hasty decision to marry Morley. Her observation of her parents’ miserable marriage prompts her to conclude “that love, which is not founded in esteem, cannot be of long duration” and she subsequently marries a man she wrongly believes she can respect (1:67). Through her exposure to public life after she is expelled from her home, she learns how to mobilize her resources and network with individuals and institutions that have the power to save her from Sibella’s unjust fate. Acting, writing, and forming friendships with Lady Susan and her brother Sir Francis eventually liberate Martha from Morley’s grasp and secure her sexual and personal satisfaction.

The Reception of *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter*

Robinson based many of Martha’s experiences on her own. Like her heroine, she participated fully in public life—in her lifetime, Robinson worked as an actress, courtesan, speechwriter, editor, and writer of a variety of genres. Historians have labelled some of her behaviour as sexually notorious: she left her husband; she pursued affairs with the Prince, Charles Fox, and Banastre Tarleton (among others); and she deliberately distanced herself from traditional social values.²⁵ *The Natural Daughter* was her seventh and final novel; in many

24 Sharon Setzer, “Romancing the Reign of Terror: Sexual Politics in Mary Robinson’s *Natural Daughter*,” *Criticism* 39:4 (Fall 1997), 548.

25 For further discussion, see (among others) Tim Fulford, “The Electrifying Mrs Robinson,” *Women’s Writing* 9:1 (2002), 23–35; Anne K. Mellor, “Making an Exhibition of Herself: Mary ‘Perdita’ Robinson and Nineteenth-Century Scripts of Female Sexuality,” *Nineteenth-Century*

ways, it embodied the culmination of a decade of reflection about novels, women, and women's right to lead a fully realized professional and sexual existence. In *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, published a few months before *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson returns to many of the issues she addressed first in her fiction (including the ridiculous emphasis on female chastity explored in *Vancenza; or the Dangers of Credulity* [1792], the artificiality of gender roles and the possibilities of cross-dressing investigated by *Walsingham*, and so on). She begins her political tract by explicitly arguing a theme that she tackles in her novels: "let WOMAN once assert her proper sphere, unshackled by prejudice, and unsophisticated by vanity; and pride, (the noblest species of pride) will establish her claims to the participation of power, both mentally and corporeally."²⁶

Perhaps the contrast between Robinson's revolutionary rescripting of sexual mores and Fenwick's muted pleas for reform accounts for the differences in the immediate reception of each novel. While Fenwick's tentative Gothic novel met with mixed reviews—escalating from the *British Critic's* wary observation that the story was "worthy enough of modern France, but far removed (we trust) from the approbation of Englishmen"²⁷ to the *Monthly Magazine's* glowing declaration that "the characters, sentiments, and reflections, bespeak a more philosophic attention to the phenomena of the human mind than is generally sought for, or discovered, in this lighter species of literary composition"²⁸—the more strident profeminism and Revolutionary sympathies expressed in *The Natural Daughter* earned it unilaterally hostile reviews. The *European Magazine*, for example, alleges that "in the present performance, every characteristic of a moral Novel is wanting. The title is a misprision of treason against common sense; for every page of the work demonstrates that it ought to have been *The Un-natural Wife, Daughter, and Sister*" and concludes by stating, "we

Contexts 22:3 (2000), 271–304; and Pascoe.

26 Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England*, 2. Setzer makes an explicit connection between *Letter to the Women of England* and *The Natural Daughter*, indicating that, as it progresses, "*The Natural Daughter* becomes a fictional extension of Robinson's argument in *A Letter to the Women of England*." Setzer, introduction, *A Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter*, by Mary Robinson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 27.

27 Review of *Secresy*, by Eliza Fenwick, *British Critic* 6 (1795), 545.

28 Review of *Secresy*, by Eliza Fenwick, *Monthly Magazine* 18 (September 1795), 351. Mary Hays is reported as the author of this review (see Grundy, 9).

regret that the author will not confine her labours to poetry.”²⁹

This difference in reception may also be attributed to each woman’s public reputation: though Fenwick was an established radical who eventually separated from her husband in 1800, she was not connected to the degree of sexual impropriety accorded to Robinson; neither was Fenwick associated with the history of writing Jacobin and popular Gothic fiction that Robinson steadily produced throughout the 1790s, which culminated in an explicit protofeminist tract. And though both women were accused of sympathizing with the French Revolution, Robinson (a sexually compromised woman) was also charged with circulating immorality and trash. The negative reaction to these novels was likely one of the major factors that kept them out of print for two hundred years and discouraged scholars from connecting Fenwick and Robinson as friends who worked towards mutual objectives. With both novels newly available in Broadview Press teaching editions, however, *Secresy* and *The Natural Daughter*—and Fenwick and Robinson—may re-engage in the dialogues about the Gothic, women’s education, and female sexuality that they initiated in the 1790s and, ultimately, deepen our understanding of how women writers used each other’s work in the service of a common political agenda.

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29 Review of *The Natural Daughter*, by Mary Robinson, *European Magazine* 37 (February 1800), 138, 139.