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The Power of the Puff: Mary Robinson's Celebrity and the Success of *Walsingham*

By the time *Walsingham* appeared on Paternoster-row in December 1797, Mary Robinson had successfully refashioned herself from “Perdita” — the infamous actress, courtesan, and socialite — into “the English Sappho” — the renowned poet and novelist. She understood the demands of the literary market and how to capitalize on her fame in order to compete in it. By all indications, Robinson's previous three novels — *The Widow*, *Angelina*, and *Hubert de Sevrac* — failed to meet the success that she had anticipated. As a result, she took advantage of every means available to ensure the same success for her fifth novel that she had experienced with *Vincenza*, her first. She began by writing the most controversial and politically charged novel that she had written thus far, filling it with contemporary characters, scandals, and commentary. “[I]n this AGE OF PERSONALITY, this age of literary and political *Gossiping*,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge later commented, “the most vapid Satires have become the objects of a keen public Interest purely from the number of contemporary characters *named* in the patch-work Notes” (150). In order to attract the public's “keen interest” — to make this novel the talk of the *beau monde* and the public — Robinson utilized what may be called the power of the puff to capitalize on her celebrity, manipulate audiences, and make *Walsingham* competitive on the market. During the three months that preceded the printing and the three months that followed, over eighty puffs appeared in *The Oracle* and *The Morning Post* in the forms of notes, extracts, tributes, advertisements, and health reports. Examining the context and content of these puffs reveals not only how Mary Robinson related to the public through the newspapers, but also how she used that relationship to promote her work.

Robinson understood the benefits of using the periodical press as a marketing tool: on 11 February 1797, *The Telegraph* listed Robinson among forty-two others “who pay to have themselves puffed in the Newspapers” — an accusation that many recent critics believe. Kristin Flieger Samuelian surmises from recent scholarship that Robinson “managed her public image and calculated the public's reception of her from at least the beginning of her acting career” (28). Claire Brock contends that Robinson's “shrewd manipulation of eighteenth century publicity allowed her actively to exploit secure knowledge of her public's regard and, ultimately, display confidence in her own contemporary fame to sell her texts” (99). Certainly, Robinson used the press to foster a relationship with her

public: she extended the discourse found in her poetry and novels that Tom Mole dubs “the hermeneutic of intimacy” to the puffs in the dailies, permitting readers to “form an asymmetrical, mediated relationship with the celebrated individual” (190). Essentially, newspapers permitted the English Sappho to take advantage of the “symbolic asset” her personality had become and to circulate that identity among readers who knew more about her “ostensible private life than . . . her work” (Goldsmith 27). According to David Higgins, “[c]hanges in literary production and consumption, perhaps most crucially the growth of the periodical press, encouraged the emergence of a culture of literary celebrity in which certain writers (most notably Byron) became of interest to the public as much for their personal appearance and private lives as for their works” (42). No other newspapers drew more attention to Robinson’s private life and puffed her celebrity more than *The Oracle* and *The Morning Post*—especially during the months surrounding the publication of *Walsingham*. Robinson, Peter Stuart, and Daniel Stuart all benefited from the exposure of her name and her work: the dailies sold her novel, and her name sold the dailies.

Beginning in the spring of 1797, references to Robinson’s newest novel appeared interspersed in the social columns with reports of her health and her private affairs. In one 18 April puff, *The Oracle’s* readers learned that she had departed “for Bath, for the spring season” with her daughter. In another printed directly below, they learned that a new novel was imminent: “Mrs. ROBINSON has nearly completed a Work for the Press next Winter; a Domestic Story, in three volumes.” On 8 May, these readers learned that her health had prevented her from reaching her destination: “Mrs. ROBINSON has been confined, with a violent fever, on the Bath Road, but is considerably recovered.” At the end of that month, they learned that she had once again parted ways with Banastre Tarleton: “General TARLETON has lost his mother; if we mistake not this is not the *only loss* he has recently sustained, in that which comes nearest the heart—cherished by many years of social intercourse” (*Oracle* 30 May 1797). All of the notes pertaining to Robinson’s private life and literary production permitted the public to develop a relationship with her—or at least their perception of her. Mole explains, “The extensive circulation of her name and image had to be accompanied by a discourse that convinced her audience that, when they encountered her performed or mediated identity, they were entering into a form of relationship with her authentic self; that when they read her writings, they were coming to know her as a person” (190). Like her poems, like her novels, the puffs in *The Oracle* and *The Morning Post* served to establish a relationship with the public, and at no other point in her career did Robinson exploit that relationship as she did during the period surrounding the publication of *Walsingham*.

The puffs preceding the publication manipulated her audience’s perceived relationship: not only could they come to know Robinson—the liter-

ary celebrity—through her texts, but they could also come to know what she—the notorious *demimondaine* and member of the *beau monde*—knew. Puffs aimed at whetting the public's appetite for an insider's perspective soon appeared: "The popularity of Mrs. ROBINSON'S '*Angelina*,' has set her pen at work on another Novel, which, with all the characters drawn from life, will appear next Winter" (*Oracle* 11 July 1797). In an "age of literary and political *Gossiping*," puffing the novel's "characters drawn from life" likely garnered a keen interest from Robinson's public. The 6 September puff added typographical emphasis to entice readers further: "A *Novel* is also finished, in four volumes, by the same Lady: All *characters* are said to be drawn from *life*" (*Oracle* 6 Sept. 1797). To further tantalize the social column readers, another puff printed two days later implied that others found the imminence of such a novel unsettling: "Mrs. ROBINSON'S new *Novel* being founded on *facts*, is earnestly expected in the fashionable world" (*Oracle* 8 Sept. 1797). Affirming that "[t]he characters are now living" and that they were "well known in the higher circles," the following week's puffs increased anticipations, as well as concerns (*Oracle* 15 Sept. 1797; *Oracle* 18 Sept. 1797).

Robinson's relationship with her readers was further exploited by the reports of her health that began appearing in October. On the 17th, *The Oracle* sullenly reported, "The work which Mrs. ROBINSON is now finishing will probably be her *last*. Her health declines rapidly." *The Morning Post*'s report is equally disconsolate: "Mrs. ROBINSON'S ill state of health, menaces a period to the effusions of a muse, which has acquired the proudest celebrity, and which will build a lofty monument to her memory, in spite of envy, persecution and ingratitude" (17 Oct. 1797). Other than the statement that "all the virtues of filial affection cannot stop the progress of declining health" printed in *The Oracle* on 24 October, no other health reports appeared in either newspaper until 15 January 1798—the same day that *The Oracle* announced the publication of the second edition of *Walsingham*, the day before *The Morning Post* announced a second edition of *Angelina*. Considered in light of the September puffs, the October health reports insinuated that Robinson would finally divulge all that she knew with her intimate audience: it would, after all, "probably be her last."

While the majority of the health reports that resume in January continue along this vein—informing readers of the celebrity's declining health, predicting this novel to be her last—others focus on the "depression of spirits" from which she suffered: "Mrs. ROBINSON has been confined to her bed these ten days past with a nervous fever, which threatens the most serious consequences. The vein of melancholy which pervades the pages of *Walsingham*, bespeaks an inquietude of *mind*, which in some measure proclaims the *cause* of her present indisposition" (*Oracle* 25 Jan. 1798). That same day *The Morning Post* printed: "Mrs. ROBINSON (to whom the literati of the age has given the title of *the English Sappho*) is still in a state

of health that menaces the most alarming consequences. Her illness is said to proceed from *mental* irritation, added to the incessant *labours* of her *pen*. The latter posterity will honour; the former will leave an indelible impression, where it ought to be felt and regretted." That "indelible impression" appears on the leaves of *Walsingham*, connecting readers with the celebrated writer through "the hermeneutic of intimacy" – through an "asymmetrical, mediated relationship" that elicited feeling and regret from them (Mole 190). Just as the October health reports relate to Robinson revealing what she knows, the January reports relate to Robinson revealing who she is and what she feels. In both cases, they manipulate the public's desire to form or maintain a relationship with the celebrity. By February, the desired effect had obviously been achieved: her "nervous complaint" was reported as "considerably abated" on the 15th, and, by the 28th, she had "sufficiently recovered from her late illness, to resume her literary occupations" (*Oracle* 15 February 1798; *Morning Post* 28 February 1798).

Admittedly, Robinson had used her celebrity in this way before: "It must be confessed, this production [*Vincenza*] owed its popularity to the celebrity of the author's name, and the favourable impression of her talents given to the public by her poetical compositions, rather than to its intrinsic merit" (Robinson, *Memoirs* 127-28). As she had done for her first novel, Robinson relied on "the favourable impression of her talents" to generate interest in *Walsingham*. Puffs of this nature began appearing in *The Oracle* on 17 October: "Mrs. ROBINSON'S works will live. They are translated both into French and German, and are very popular in those languages. Her *Walsingham* will be in four volumes, with original Poetry." Strategically placed beneath the first health report, this puff not only asserts the immortality of Robinson's work, but it also underscores the inclusion of "original poetry" – the form which initially secured her fame. On 24 November, *The Morning Post* focused specifically on that fame: "A Treasury Journal, with its usual generosity, says Mrs. ROBINSON is the author of '*An Escape into Prison*,' and will perform the principal part herself. The only prison into which she will escape is the Temple of Fame. There her reputation as a Woman of Genius will remain, when her calumniators are no more remembered." Touting Robinson's fame and genius, as well as the continental popularity of her work, ensured the demand for her newest novel before its publication; after its public release on 6 December 1797, it became an effort to validate her talent as a justification for her literary celebrity.

Reporting that "the sale yesterday was extensive," puffs in *The Morning Post* began substantiating what those sales indicated – as did others in *The Oracle* but with significantly less frequency (7 Dec. 1797). On 8 December, a puff attempted to circumvent any negative criticism: "Her reputation, as a POET and a NOVELIST, is now too high for the thunders of retaliating Criticism to reach it. She may repeat the line long since applied to her writings by the Reviewers—'Exegi monumentum ære-perennius'" (*Morning*

Post 8 Dec. 1797). Including the quotation from Horace's "Carmina" found in *The Analytical's* review of *Poems* (1791), "And now 'tis done: more durable than brass," aligned Robinson's work with the indelible Classics. Such exaltation continued in January: "We have seldom heard of a work so universally commended as *Walsingham*; Mrs. ROBINSON now ranks in the first line of Novelists. — As a POET she has long since established her reputation: The ORACLE had the first offering which this Lady made at the Shrine of the Muses" (*Oracle* 16 Jan.1797). Although the newspapers acclaimed her talents as *both* poet and novelist, the extracts selected for publication seem to indicate the preference for her poetry over her prose—a preference also expressed by reviewers. Of the eleven extracts published in *The Morning Post*, two were prosaic, eight were poetic, and one was both; all three published in *The Oracle* were poetic. Robinson specifically used the "the favourable impression of her talents given to the public by her poetical compositions" to market her novel.

In fact, poetic extracts began appearing in *The Morning Post* before the novel was even available to the public. On 2 December, a lengthy puff that precedes "Penelope's Epitaph" and "Stanzas on Jealousy" provided insight into the novel's initial dissemination:

Some hundreds of copies of WALSINGHAM are now circulated, though a sufficient number are not y t [sic] prepared to answer the public demand. Probably they will be issued early next week. This work is one of the most entertaining ever published: it is full of interest, full of anecdote of fashionable life, and of satire upon the *titled Gamblers*. It should have been dedicated to LORD KENYON. Mrs. ROBINSON has often delighted and instructed by her pen, but she never before rendered so essential a service to society. We shall take opportunities of occasionally giving Extracts from this excellent work. The two following pieces of Poetry command an immediate place.

While the puff makes reference to "fashionable life" and "titled Gamblers" — those "facts" of "life" Robinson knew and could possibly reveal to readers — the poems exude the melancholy that reportedly pervades the novel and affected Robinson as she wrote it. "Penelope's Epitaph" begins, "O THOU! whose cold and senseless heart / Ne'er knew affection's struggling sigh, / Pass on, nor vaunt the Stole's art, / Nor mock this grave with tearless eye." "Stanzas on Jealousy" concludes, "Nor, when the bosom's wasted fires / Are all extinct, is anguish o'er; / For *Jealousy*, that ne'er expires, / Still wounds, when *Passion* lives no more." Taken out of the novel's context, these poems reflect the struggles and anguish in the writer's life of which the public became privy through notes in the newspapers. In light of all that preceded their publication, selecting these poems as the first glimpse into the new novel proved strategic and wise.

Subsequent extracts continued to emphasize the connection between the writer and the writing, and subsequent puffs continued to revel in

the novel's popularity and infamy. The "beautiful Lines, in the imitation of Spenser," the various "Stanzas," and "The Doublet of Grey" all maintain the melancholy exemplified in the first two poetic extracts. The prose extracts, however, relate to something altogether different: "The dangers of deception, the miseries which must attend a mind conscious of unjust persecution, and the overbearing insolence of rank and wealth," *The Morning Post* contends, "are painted in colours too strong to be mistaken" (13 Dec. 1797). The first prose extract to appear begins, "The voice of truth is expelled from the chambers of our rulers" (*Morning Post* 18 Dec. 1797). These words were certain to attract readers curious about the novel puffed to have "literally set the fashionable world in an uproar" by upholding its claims to include "characters well known in the higher circles" (*Oracle* 8 Dec. 1797; *Oracle* 18 Sep. 1797). For the same reasons, readers were likely to find the second prose extract just as appealing: "The cold respect of friendship is an insult to the memory of love" (*Morning Post* 15 Jan. 1798). Reading the extracts in this context permitted a direct connection to Robinson through her text—and an ability to discern the identity of those within it—in a way that reading the passages in the novel may not have allowed. On the pages of the newspapers, readers were not distracted by the novel's plot, conflict, setting, or characters: they were simply able to focus on what was printed before them just as they had for every note, puff, and health report—exactly as Robinson and the Stuarts intended.

At the end of *Memoirs*, Robinson's daughter wrote, "her genius, her talents, the fertility of her imagination and the powers of her mind, are displayed in her productions, the popularity of which at least affords a presumption of their merit" (170). Considering the manner in which the puffs in the newspapers clearly support this contention, as well as the manner in which she strategically deflates critical authority in *Walsingham*, Robinson gauged her success by her popularity of her works, by her connection to her readers. She was one of those women "whose books present types of good sense, and whose title to applause will flourish amidst the leaves of Parnassus" (*Walsingham* 2:276). The public privy to who she was, who she knew, what she knew, and how she felt would certainly see—and buy—that.

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