

OUR COVER STORY

Mary 'Perdita' Robinson 1758-1800

A Royal Scandal

In Old Windsor churchyard lie the remains of the beautiful Mary Robinson, actress, writer, feminist, and first mistress of George IV. It was once said that "no woman could look upon *her* grave without a blush and a tear", but today we may feel that she was more a woman betrayed than a betrayer of her sex.

Born in Bristol of well-connected parents, John and Anne Darby*, she received a good education, developing a love of reading, writing, and reciting verse. But her difficulties in life began early: she was only nine years old when her father left England on a project to establish a whale fishery on the coast of Labrador. He returned with a mistress, and did little to support his family thereafter.

Mary completed her education at an establishment in London where the dancing master was also ballet master at Covent Garden. A theatrical career was suggested, and she was introduced to the greatest actor of the day, David Garrick. In her *Autobiography* she describes how he took her under his wing and planned to present her as Cordelia to his *Lear*.

Unfortunately, in those days men often came to the theatre just to ogle the actresses. Her mother panicked when she realised that even at fourteen Mary's good looks were attracting predatory males and she decided to get her daughter respectably married, falling for the charms of Thomas Robinson, an articled clerk. Only after Mary had been cajoled into marriage did they discover that he had falsely presented himself as heir to a fortune. Worse, he was a gambler and a rake, with dubious aristocratic companions who saw their friend's lovely young wife as fair game for their lecherous advances.

Perhaps unfortunately, Mary was introduced to a life of fashionable pleasures and reckless expense. She always remembered her fine outfits then, and she obviously enjoyed attention—even if it meant fending off unwanted admirers. A much-loved daughter, Maria Elizabeth, was born just before her sixteenth birthday, but soon afterwards Robinson was imprisoned for debt. Mary here showed her mettle by sharing prison life until his release. She also spent time writing verses, and her first book of poems was published. But poetry was not the route to riches, and she turned again to the theatre.

The playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan had taken over the management of Drury Lane theatre from Garrick. He arranged Mary's *début*, choosing to

present the young girl as Juliet. Typically she remembers her dress: it was "a pale pink satin, trimmed with crape, richly spangled with silver", while her head was "ornamented with feathers".

For three years Mary triumphed on the stage. Sheridan wrote the part of Maria in *The School for Scandal* for her, though she was unable to play it owing to her second pregnancy (to her grief the baby died). It was rumoured that he became her lover: if so, there is a nice irony in that—even if the marriage was of a later date—his second wife also lies in Old Windsor churchyard, the two women separated by the church building.

Enter a Prince. On 3 December 1779 King George III ordered a performance of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Amongst the royal party was George Prince of Wales,

seventeen years old. Mary, just twenty-one, played the shepherdess Perdita (really the lost daughter of a king) who is courted by Florizel, heir of the kingdom in which she was abandoned. While Mary was nervously waiting to go on stage the actor playing her father, King Leontes, exclaimed: "By Jove, Mrs Robinson, you will make a conquest of the Prince, for tonight you look handsomer than ever". He spoke in jest, but even while she stood in the wings in sight of the royal box Mary saw the Prince's gaze fixed on her; at curtain call "my eyes met those of the Prince of Wales...with a look that *I never shall forget*". A few days later a friend of the Prince called at her home and delivered her a love-note: it was signed *Florizel*.



FLORIZEL AND PERDITA

More such letters followed and the Prince sent Mary his portrait in miniature, accompanied by a small paper heart on which were written, on one side "Je ne change qu'en mourant", and on the other "Unalterable to my Perdita through life". Dazzled but cautious, she realised the risks of becoming the Prince's mistress, but perhaps she was in love with him as she always claimed—he *was* Prince Charming. After some resistance she agreed to secret meetings, the Prince sent a letter promising £20,000 when he reached his majority, and finally she yielded. From then on "The Perdita" became the target of the gossip columnists.

Her new position seems to have gone to her head. Used to being the centre of attention, she is said to have exhibited herself daily in Hyde Park in costumes of different character: one day *en paysanne*, another patched and powdered as a society belle, another in cravat and riding outfit. She indulged in a string of elegant carriages, one of which was blue and silver with an emblem on the side of a wreath of roses, above it a basket of flowers which from a distance looked like a coronet.