Chapter 3

The English Sappho and the Legitimate Sonnet

The obituary that appeared in the Sun on 31 December 1800, five days after her death, does not mention any of Mary Robinson’s compositions except for her poetry.

The late Mrs. Robinson certainly possessed great Poetical powers. Her imagination was vivid, and fraught with a variety of imagery.—Her language was rich and glowing. If she had obeyed the impulse of her own genius, her compositions would have displayed a beautiful simplicity, but she was unluckily ensnared by the DELLA CRUSCA School, and was often betrayed into a gaudy luxuriance of expression. Several of her Poems are, however, wholly undebased by this ornamental extravagance, and are indeed simple, interesting, and beautiful….It should be mentioned to her honour, that though she was ambitious of the title of the British Sappho, there is none of the wanton fervor in her Works which are supposed to have characterized the Lesbian Poetess, but on the contrary, her Muse is always employed in the cause of Morals, Sentiment, and Humanity.

The terms of the Sun’s approbation of Robinson’s poetry resonate with the conceptual framework and critical concerns of the study at hand. Probably authored by the paper’s editor-proprietor John Heriot or possibly by her friend Taylor, the obituary remembers Robinson as a talented poet who, by the end of the century, was working in a style that the columnist recognizes as antithetical to the popular style of the early 1790s. The aesthetic of simplicity that the memorialist admires is not something that came easily to Robinson, whose
poetry, as we have seen, delights in extravagant lyricism and virtuoso performance. She never loses these tendencies, but she hones her skills and comes to practice a poetics of discipline and rigor that for her is the ultimate assertion of her intellectual and cultural pre-eminence.

As this obituary shows, Robinson’s ambition was obvious. Although qualified, the praise admitted here is somewhat surprising as the progovernment *Sun*, owned by Heriot who also owned the Treasury-directed *True Briton*, was the inveterate enemy of the liberal *Morning Post* and its owner Daniel Stuart, Robinson’s employer at the time of her death. By the end of her career, the democratic—and thus deemed Jacobin and radical—politics of novels such as *Hubert de Sevrac* and *Walsingham* was notorious, so it is not surprising to find Robinson’s fiction beneath notice here. Particularly remarkable is the absence of any reference to her personal life combined with the recognition of virtuous principles to be found in her poetry, even if her politics were objectionable. The columnist here also finds faintly distasteful Robinson’s being “ambitious of the title of the British Sappho,” although he rather backhandedly commends her poetry for not expressing the “wanton fervor” supposedly characteristic of the original Sappho. Encoded here is vague approbation for Robinson’s having corrected the “wanton fervor” of her own personal life and its early history, as well as that of her affiliation with the “Della Crusca school” and its “ornamental extravagance.” Robinson’s obsession with poetic fame always involved the necessary and concomitant work of rehabilitating her image. But Robinson could never efface her history; she had to own up to her past in order to transcend it. She wanted, moreover, her public to witness her rejection of “wanton fervor” in favor of intellectual rigor and poetic discipline.

Her *Sappho and Phaon*. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets performs this rejection. Ambitious as she was of the laurel and the title of English Sappho, Robinson figuratively had to kill “the Lesbian Poetess,” along with all other competitors for the title, and assert her superiority. In other words, the last thing she wanted was to be thought of as merely a “poetess,” although she herself occasionally uses the term. I assert that Robinson practices a masculine poetics that distinguishes her poetry from that of her female contemporaries. No work demonstrates this better than her sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*. It was inevitable that Robinson would engage her literary namesake, Sappho; but when she does, it is through a complicated literary and intertextual network that is decidedly heteroerotic and poetically masculine. In *Sappho and Phaon*, she reappropriates the figure of Sappho through Petrarchan form in order to legitimize her