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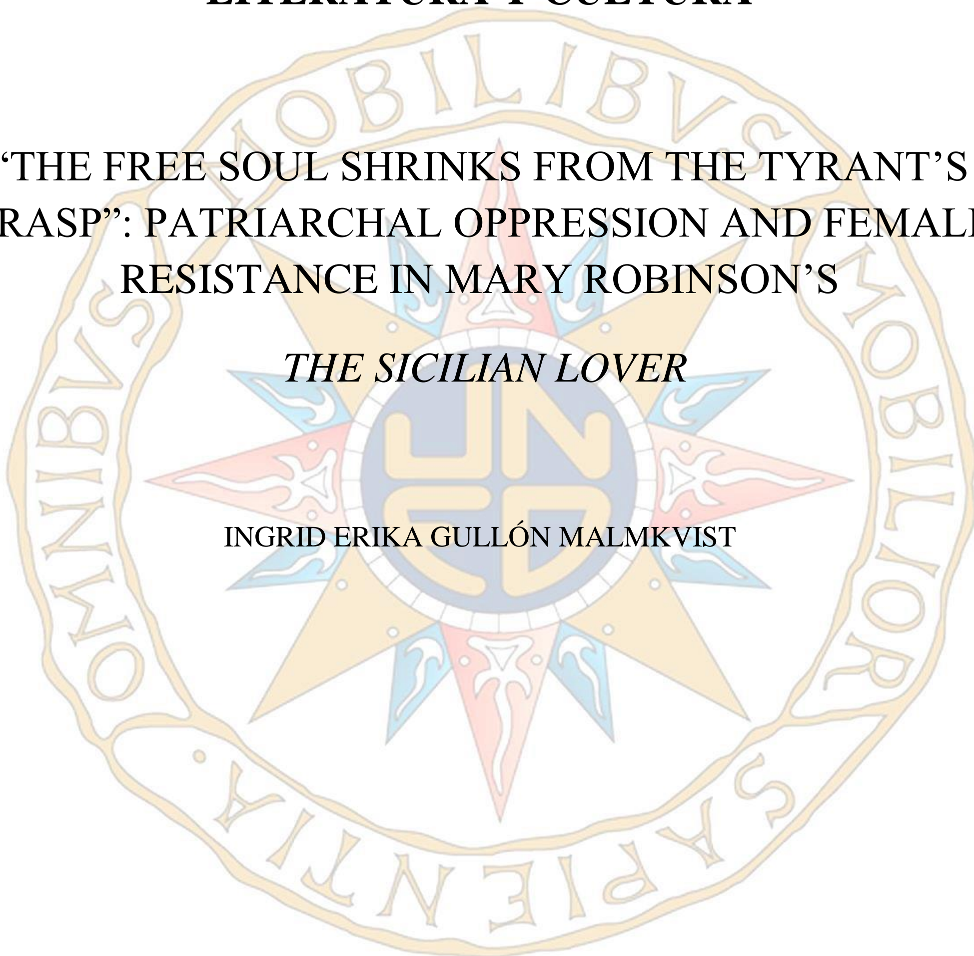

"THE FREE SOUL SHRINKS FROM THE TYRANT'S GRASP": PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION AND FEMALE RESISTANCE IN MARY ROBINSON'S *THE SICILIAN LOVER*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ways in which Mary Robinson’s tragedy *The Sicilian Lover, A Dramatic Poem* challenges patriarchal oppression and calls for female resistance in eighteenth-century England. The aim of the work is to analyse the play from a historical feminist perspective by comparing it to two proto-feminist texts of the same period which are also examined here: Mary Wollstonecraft´s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) and Mary Robinson´s *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination, with Anecdotes* (1799). The strategies of close reading, inductive reasoning and comparative analysis are used to reveal the underlying proto-feminist ideology of the play. The findings are reported accordingly and hope to prove useful for further related studies.

KEYWORDS: patriarchal oppression, female resistance, Mary Robinson, *The Sicilian Lover*, Mary Wollstonecraft, historical feminist analysis, Gothic

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT: CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

The idea for this dissertation stems from my humble desire to contribute to the feminist cause as well as from my passion for English literature, in particular for texts dating from the Romantic period. Initially my plan was to focus on one of the canonical male Romantic poets and to examine whether he engaged with proto-feminist ideas of the period or not, but I soon came to realize that it might be more innovative to investigate the lesser-known work of a female Romantic poet. I thus set out in search of a text which could serve my purpose and after extensive research I came upon Mary Robinson's *The Sicilian Lover*. Though the play is set in sixteenth-century Lombardy, my first impression upon reading it was that Robinson did not simply want to partake in the eighteenth-century passion for the Gothic, but that her main intention was to expose the oppressive treatment of women in her age. I therefore resolved to delve into the intricacies of this dramatic poem and to make it the centre point of my dissertation.

1.2. GENERAL OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper is to analyse Mary Robinson´s *The Sicilian Lover, A Dramatic Poem* (1796)[1] from a feminist perspective, placing it within its historical and literary context, in order to show how it engages with Mary Wollstonecraft´s early advocacy of women´s equality and rationality in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)[2], and also relates to Mary Robinson´s proto-feminist ideas in her work *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799), first published under the pseudonym Anne Frances Randall.

By doing so, I would like to contribute, albeit in a minor way, to feminist criticism and, as stated in Peter Barry´s *Beginning Theory (128)*:

[1] *The Sicilian Lover* was first printed in 1796, but I will be analysing the 1806 version. (See Works Cited.)
[2] *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was first published in 1792, but for this dissertation I will be using the 1796 edition. (See Works Cited.)

1. …rediscover[y]…[this] text written by a woman
2. Revalue women´s experience
3. Examine representations of women in literature
4. Challenge representations of women as ‘Other’, as ‘lack’, as part of ‘nature’
5. Examine power relations which obtain in text and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and ‘natural’
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are ‘essentially’ different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.

1.3. HYPOTHESIS

The present dissertation sets out to reveal that *The Sicilian Lover* challenges patriarchal oppression and calls for female resistance overtly as well as covertly, and that it does so through its themes and motifs, its characters, their speeches and the denouement.

1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

The project is divided into two main parts: first, a presentation of the conceptual framework used, including analyses of the two proto-feminist essays mentioned in section 1.2 and an introduction to the play, and second, a detailed examination of the play´s themes, characters and denouement in relation to the ideas referred to in said essays.

2. STATE OF THE ART

Mary Robinson has only begun to attain significant recognition again in the twenty-first century after nearly two hundred years as a minor literary figure. Several biographies were published in the 2000s[3], as well as a *Selected Poems* (2000, edited by Judith Pascoe) and a collected works: *The Works of Mary Robinson* (2 vols. 2009; 2010). Many articles have also been written about her life and have discussed most of her poems, novels, plays and *Memoirs*, often in

[3] For instance, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (2004) by Paula Byrne and *The Prince's Mistress: A Life of Mary Robinson* (2004) by Hester Davenport.

relation to early modern feminism and the Gothic[4]. As Elizabeth O'Reilly states "Robinson´s life and works are of particular interest to feminist critics, for she strongly challenged the patriarchal values of her time" (2). However, her Gothic tragedy *The Sicilian Lover* has until now been overlooked by critics and has only been superficially analysed in the above-mentioned *The Works of Mary Robinson*. Robinson´s play has therefore, as far as I am aware, never been studied by comparing it to Mary Wollstonecraft´s *Vindication* nor to Robinson´s *Letter*.

3. MAIN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE INVESTIGATION

The conceptual framework I will be using to analyse the play is that of early feminism and in particular some of the key ideas underlying the two previously-mentioned proto-feminist texts. An introduction to the play, an overview of the historical and literary context in which it was written, and a summary of the plot are also included in this section for the purpose of clarity.

3.1. A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE ORIGINS OF FEMINISM

The feminist movement as we know it today is generally thought to have originated around the time of the French Revolution (1789-1799) and to be greatly indebted to the writings of several British women in the 1790s who - inspired by the revolution´s call for liberty, equality and the right to resist oppression - began to envision possibilities of change and thus set out to campaign for the equality of women (Riley and Pearce 5).

Eighteenth-century Britain was a patriarchal society in which women had no political rights, only had access to limited educational and work opportunities

[4] To name just a few examples: "Violence against Difference: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson" in *Bucknell Review* 42.1 (1998) by Adriana Craciun*; Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie* (1998) by Eleanor Ty; "Notorious: Mary Robinson and the Gothic" in *Gothic Studies* 6.2 (2004) by Anne Close; *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (2011) by Daniel Robinson; "Mary Robinson and the Dramatic Art of the Comeback" in *Studies in Romanticism* 48.2 (2009) by Michael Gamer and Terry F. Robinson; "'Where Virtue Struggles Midst a Maze of Snares': Mary Robinson's *Vancenza* (1792) and The Gothic Novel" in *Women´s Writing* 20.4 (2013) or "'Who Has Not Wak'd': Mary Robinson and Cartesian Poetry" in *Philosophy and Literature* 41.2 (2017) by Phillip Barron.

and were denied all legal rights after marriage (Greenblatt 9). As Sandrine Bergès asserts, they "could be separated from their children […], could be locked up, and certainly could be raped or beaten with impunity by their husband, father or brothers" (89). It could thus be argued that they were "little more than slaves as far as society and the law were concerned" (Bergès 89), for "they could not choose how to live their lives, whom to live it with, or even whom not to live it with" (90). The dominant ideology of the time viewed them as naturally inferior, both physically and mentally, and they were thus taught to accept their subjugation to men on this supposed natural basis.

However, rejecting to be regarded as weak, subordinate and passive creatures, a number of women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson decided to stand up and fight for women´s equality and rationality by publishing works in which they "began to articulate a sustained critique of the political and social deployment of sexual difference" (Binhammer 669). As Katherine Binhammer goes on to assert, "Although specific ideas varied considerably within this group of female authors, all entertained the philosophical position that the distinction between the sexes was the result of mistaken customs and not natural differences" (669).

In a world in which – as Wollstonecraft complained in her pioneering text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – "all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance" (212), these first concerted expressions of feminist thought in modern European culture were conspicuously radical at the time.

3.2. *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN, WITH STRICTURES ON POLITICAL AND MORAL SUBJECTS (1792)*

Mary Wollstonecraft´s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is considered by many to be one of the first treatises of modern feminism[5]. According to Greenblatt, "Her book was […] unprecedented in its first-hand observations of

[5] Several of the authors I have reviewed affirm this, for instance, Vincent B. Leitch in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (493); Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce in *Feminism and Women´s Writing* (5); or Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory (*116).

the disabilities and indignities suffered by women and in the articulateness and passion with which it exposed and decried this injustice" (209).

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is "first and foremost a treatise on education, on women´s right to be educated, and on the need for them to be educated if they are to claim rights for themselves" (Bergès 26). Nevertheless, two impressive features of her book, which I wish to focus on here, are firstly, her clear-sighted analysis of the oppressive social conditions of women at the time, and secondly, her strong determination to refute the arguments designed to justify women´s subordination to men, with the desire of building a more egalitarian future.

From the very beginning of her work, Wollstonecraft laments the contemporary state of women, who "are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes" (1), causes which originate from the historical partiality of society towards men. Women continue to be dominated by men, she asserts, because men constantly use "the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so" (92). Referring to the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the "prevailing opinion that woman was created for man" (48), Wollstonecraft believes it shows that "[m]an, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion" (48). She decries that "[t]he *rights* of humanity have been thus confined to the male line from Adam downwards" (194). In other words, habit or custom to the "language of men" (112), to patriarchal discourse, is what keeps women subjugated.

Men have not only always used their alleged physical superiority to proclaim their "natural" power over women, but have also – and perhaps more importantly - asserted that male pre-eminence is based on their sex´s ability to reason, which the female sex supposedly lacks. But, as Wollstonecraft angrily asks, "who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?" (ix). Her answer is men. And in order to demand "JUSTICE for one half of the human race" (xiv), she sets out to demonstrate that women *do* possess the faculty of reasoning and thus deserve to be treated like rational creatures too. "Reason is […] the simple power of improvement" and it "must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity" (111). In other words, reason

cannot be gendered because it is a divine attribute modelled after God, who is neither male nor female (Bergès 46). If God created human beings with a soul, in order for them to aim at perfection and immortality, then it is unlikely that God would have created half of them incapable of improvement. Not giving women the ability to reason would result in the failure of the project of human perfection (Bergès 46).

In Wollstonecraft´s opinion, it is true that women in her time are generally weaker than men, both physically and mentally, but this is only because they are not encouraged to exercise their bodies and their minds. They are in fact persuaded to believe that weakness empowers them, for it "excites tenderness" and "gratif[ies] the arrogant pride of man" (55), allowing them to gain the protection of man, and "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (122). Weakness is deemed attractive and fashionable for women, and they are encouraged to develop it in order to attempt to govern men. However, this "amiable weakness" (132), "delicacy of sentiment" (6) or "sweet docility of manners" (7) actually makes them entirely dependent on men.

This dependency on the male sex contributes to keeping women always "in a state of perpetual childhood" (6), with a "scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety" (33), Wollstonecraft declares, and she adds that "in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them" (90). Women´s angel-like "innocence", however, prevents them from maturing and maintains them in a childlike and subordinate position.

One of the few things they *are* "taught from their infancy [is] that beauty is a woman´s sceptre" (90), so they become "slaves to their bodies" (88) and end up being mere "objects of desire" (9), "toys of men"(66), "beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile obedience, to gratify the senses of man" (33). They are educated to please and blindly submit to male authority, believing this to be their natural duty in life, not realizing that they are "treated like queens" in "the noon of beauty´s power" (118) only to be "confined […] in cages" (118) when their "short lived bloom of beauty is over" (9).

This blind obedience, as Wollstonecraft observes, "is ever sought for by power" (44-45), since tyrants "only want slaves" and sensualists want "a plaything" (45). Women are "chained […] by fate" (321), "like the poor African slaves, […] subject to prejudices that brutalize them" (330), while men are either like slave-masters who want "a meretricious slave to fondle, entirely dependent on [their] reason and bounty" (231), or like tyrant kings or aristocrats who keep the masses down, since they "*force* all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain […] groping in the dark" (ix). Women, thus degraded, utter "slaves of injustice" (439), are unable to "snap [their] chains" (227), and they will only be able to do so, Wollstonecraft believes, when they realize that they are being ruled over by the arbitrary, hereditary power of men. "The *divine right* of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is to be hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger" (83).

Parents, and in particular fathers, Wollstonecraft affirms, often tyrannize their children too, especially their daughters, who are brought up to be exceedingly submissive: "Females, […] in all countries, are too much under the dominion of their parents" (354). This "slavish bondage to parents" (354), this "absurd duty, too often inculcated, of obeying a parent only on account of his being a parent", Wollstonecraft states, "shackles the mind, and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason" (351). Like all the duties arbitrarily imposed on women, filial duty is expected from them "more out of respect for decorum than reason; and thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, they are prepared for the slavery of marriage" (355). However, she fears that "it will be a long time […] before the world is so enlightened that parents […] will let them choose companions for life themselves" (389).

Marriage, in her view, is the principal way that women have to rise in the world, and "to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted" (127-128). Wollstonecraft remarks that if marriage is to be "the cement of society", then men and women should have equal rights within the marriage institution, for if they do not, "the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship" (380). At the moment, she protests, "[t]he laws respecting woman make an absurd unit of a man and his wife and […] she is reduced to a cypher" (331). Wollstonecraft *does* recommend women to become

"chaste wives and sensible mothers" (200), but she also insists that "[a] proper education; or, to speak with more precision, a well stored mind, would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity" (63). Consequently, she does not reject singleness in women.

In short, Wollstonecraft firmly believes that it is "from the tyranny of man [that] the greater number of female follies proceed" (449), all of which originate from the state of ignorance in which they are kept or from the prejudices that they are exposed to, simply for being female. One of women´s main follies, she asserts, is their "overstretched sensibility" (131), that is, their "romantic twist of the mind" (425) and how they are "blown about by every gust of feeling" (129), becoming the prey of their senses. They often "waste their lives *imagining* how happy they should have been with a husband who would love them with a fervid increasing affection every day, and all day" (63), and by becoming the slaves of their own emotions, they are easily dominated by those of others (227). However, this is once more due to the fact that they are educated to obey only their senses, and their reason – "the useful fruit" (129) - is consequently and deliberately neglected in order for men to continue oppressing them. Unless they are educated to develop their rational abilities to the same extent and in the same way as men, Wollstonecraft asserts, they will continue being "creatures of sensation" (130) and "will never become either virtuous or free" (149). Wollstonecraft thus entreats her "dear contemporaries" to "endeavour to strengthen [their] minds by reflection, till [their] heads become a balance for [their] hearts" and to "not confine all [their] thoughts to the petty occurrences of the day, nor [their] knowledge to an acquaintance with [their] lovers' or husbands' hearts" (204).

In Wollstonecraft's opinion, "[i]t is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world" (119-120). Women must "acquire strength, both of mind and body" (6), to be able to contend for their rights, for freedom, independence and equality, although "reasonable men" must also "assist to emancipate their companion" (342). This may take "many generations" (168), she fears, and may even seem like a "Utopian dream" (72) right then, but some day, through "rational persuasion of

both oppressed and oppressor" (Bergès 95), "all *will be* right" (Wollstonecraft 22).

3.3. *A LETTER TO THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND ON THE INJUSTICE OF MENTAL SUBORDINATION, WITH ANECDOTES (1799)*

Mary Robinson´s "most overtly feminist work" (Pascoe 3), *A Letter to the Women of England*, was first published in 1799 under the pseudonym Anne Frances Randall, and was then reprinted in the same year as *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination,* revealing her true identity.

The pamphlet directly addresses the condition of women at the end of the eighteenth century and is undoubtedly influenced by Wollstonecraft´s earlier feminist polemics, as Robinson makes similar arguments and employs a defiant, confident and impassioned tone which resembles her fellow writer´s (Binhammer 4). She argues for the equality of the female mind, calls for female education and denounces male tyranny and its arbitrariness. Robinson herself acknowledges in her *Letter* that she is "of the same school" as the "illustrious British female" who wrote *The Rights of Woman* but that she "disdains the drudgery of servile imitation" (2). She means to argue the same subject albeit in a different way, for as she says: "It requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence" (2).

Like Wollstonecraft, Robinson condemns "the way in which women are artificially made subordinates of men in her society […]; the cultural construction of woman as the weak and frail being who must look to men for protection" (Ty 62):

> And yet, though it be readily allowed that the primary requisites for the ruling powers of man, are strong *mental* faculties; woman is to be denied the exercise of that intuitive privilege, and to remain inactive, as though she were the least enlightened of rational and thinking beings. What first established, and then ratified, this oppressive, this inhuman law? The tyranny of man; who saw the necessity of subjugating a being, whose natural gifts were equal, if not superior to his own. (Robinson 55)

The female mind, she asserts, has been placed in the "subordinate ranks of intellectual sociability" (1) from the earliest periods of antiquity, by the "barbarity

of custom's law" (4). However, Robinson argues that "the present era has given indisputable proofs, that WOMAN is a thinking and an enlightened being!" (12), and as evidence, she includes a "List of British Female Literary Characters Living in the Eighteenth Century" (99). In addition, to support her argument that "in activity of mind, [woman] is [man's] equal" (17), throughout her work she also cites numerous examples of women from ancient history to modern times who are celebrated for their learning and wisdom. And, perhaps to convince those readers still in doubt, she mentions that the great philosopher "Cicero did not confine the attribute of Reason to sex" (16), implying that the ability to reason is universal and that therefore women´s mental faculties must be exactly the same as men´s.

Many of Robinson's assertions are directed to challenge the idea that woman is the "*weaker* creature" (18) or the "*helpless* sex" (20), and that men are naturally stronger, and she gives several examples of cases in which women have demonstrated more fortitude than men in both mental and physical endeavours. For example, she mentions that she has seen many "stout girls" who are "employed in the most fatiguing and laborious avocations" (19), "rustic or domestic amazons" (20), who carry heavy loads on their heads or even follow the plough. She also makes reference to the "Spartan fortitude" (27) and "heroic energies" (28) that many women displayed during the French Revolution, as well as to the courage and "invincible resolution" (45) of several British soldier heroines. On the other hand, she writes of "shadows of mankind who exhibit the effeminacy of women" (18), men who are employed in such idle professions as "measuring lace and ribands [sic]; folding gauzes; […] fancying feathers" (19) and men who are "commiserated as the injured party" (79) in cases of divorce when they "prove" that they are subjugated to the "degradations of human frailty" (81). Those men who *do* seem to exhibit bravery, for instance by going to war, only do so out of interest or ambition, she declares (44). Robinson thus makes it clear that men are not superior to women, neither physically or mentally.

Women are discriminated against, oppressed, "controuled [sic], perverted and debased" (4) by men, but they are to "endure neglect, infidelity and scorn […] patiently" (77) and "yield obedience" (78). More than once in the work Robinson

laments that women, unlike men, have no power of retribution: “even the laws of honour have been perverted to oppress her” (5). For her, this problem, “that woman is denied the first privilege of nature, the power of SELF-DEFENCE” is the “prominent subject” of the letter (73). Robinson is enraged: “The laws are made by man; and self-preservation is, *by them*, deemed the primary law of nature. Hence, woman is destined to be the passive creature” (78). Women, when it comes to claiming justice, are powerless, for they are not allowed to chastise or challenge their adversary if they are wronged. Simply because they are women and “the long established laws of custom have decreed [them] passive” (8), they must tolerate insults and injuries, and suffer being “scoffed at by the world; exposed to poverty; assailed by malice” (7). Woman, Robinson states, “is condemned to […] love where she abhors, to honour where she despises, and to obey, while she shudders at subordination” (11). Since she “is destined to pursue no path in which she does not find an enemy”, often her only escape or “asylum from the monsters who have destroyed her” is death (82).

In Robinson´s view, “Man is a despot by nature; he can bear no equal, he dreads the power of woman; because he knows that […] if she be permitted to demand an equal share in the regulations of social order, she will become omnipotent” (72-73). Women of enlightened understanding, she complains, are mocked at for their intellect and many end up having to live in obscurity or emigrating (64). The world´s “imperious rulers” (94) – that is, men - seem to believe that “WOMEN should not LEARNED be / For fear that, as they wiser grow, / More than their husbands they should know” and that they “would soon rebel […] and ne’er submit, / To bear the yoke, and champ the bit” (69). Men are like tyrants, and prefer to keep women as their “affianced vassals” (13), subdued to their convenience, and the easiest way to do it, Robinson implies, is to keep them in intellectual darkness, to make sure they continue being “strangers to the admonitions of truth” (11). If this mental subordination and sexual tyranny continues, she remarks, “in a few years, European husbands [will] imitate those beyond the Ganges” where “wives are to be purchased like slaves” (69). Constrained obedience is incompatible with affection, however, for “there is a resisting nerve in the heart of both man and woman, which repels compulsion” (73). In other words, Robinson believes that resistance is inevitable

if women are not considered “the partners, the equal associates of man” and continue being viewed as the “mere appendages of domestic life” (3).

In general, Robinson holds the custom and manners of society responsible for women´s “hereditary follies” and childish behaviour (Ty 33). Women are frequently made into frivolous beings because they are taught “that beauty is [their] first and most powerful attraction; [their] second, complacency of temper, and softness of manners” (89-90). Idolized for their personal attractions and initiated in all the arts of pleasing, they become “creatures of [men´s] pleasure” (13) who “display everything puerile and unessential” (11). Robinson does, however, also specifically criticize some of her “unenlightened country-women” (93) for dedicating so much time to their embellishment and practicing “sentimental insipidity” (90), that is, exaggerated sensibility which leads to dullness and the inability of reasoning properly. She reproaches them for their patriarchal complicity and urges them to “be less the slaves of vanity, and more the converts of Reflection” for only by exercising their reason will they rid themselves of the “trifling, glittering shackles” that constrain them (93).

Robinson´s great desire is to liberate women from their subordinate mental slavery and to achieve this goal she insists that education and self-confidence are fundamental:

> [K]now yourselves equal to greater, nobler, acquirements: and by prudence, temperance, firmness, and reflection, subdue that prejudice which has, for ages past, been your inveterate enemy. Let your daughters be liberally, classically, philosophically educated; let them speak and write their opinions freely; let them read and think like rational creatures […]; expand their minds […] by teaching them to feel their mental equality:” (94)

Women´s empowerment and freedom are possible, Robinson believes, but it will probably take some time before women are considered rational associates of man by all, for even “in this age of reason”, she decries, “women of superior mental acquirements” are still not selected as statesmen and orators (14).

3.4. AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE SICILIAN LOVER*

First published in 1796, *The Sicilian Lover* is a five-act, sixteen-scene tragedy written in blank verse. It is set in sixteenth-century Lombardy and is pervaded by a gloomy Gothic atmosphere.

According to the preface to *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson* (1806), Robinson aspired to see *The Sicilian Lover* performed but, frustrated by the managerial delay, she undertook to print it:

> In the autumn of 1795, Mrs. Robinson finished her tragedy of “The Sicilian Lover”, and presented it for representation. This, more proper named, *blank verse dramatic poem*, having been laid by, in that pandemonium of GENIUS AND DULNESS, the PROMPTER´S *closet*, for several months, was returned with a promise of representation early in the next season, but not before one of the most striking situations had been pilfered for *another tragedy*, which appeared shortly after. Disgusted with the delay, and universal *negative* which, for some unknown cause, she ever experienced from managers, she resolved to *print the tragedy*, and leave its merits and defects to the decision of the public. (Quoted in Brewer, 525)

The play was designed to take advantage of the monumental stages of the “Patent Theatres” (Drury Lane and Covent Garden) and “to indulge the late eighteenth-century appetite for theatrical spectacles” (Brewer 525). It features “a spacious court… splendidly decorated for tournament”, several fights with lances or swords, “a Gothic Hall, with a Gallery and Staircase”, and a funeral scene in which nuns assemble “round the chapel”.

The Sicilian Lover received differing reviews. One reviewer was clearly unimpressed[6], but another critic praised its poetry and “the variety of moral reflections with which it abounds”[7] (Brewer 566). The *Monthly Review`s* words were also relatively encouraging:

> The story altogether, as the reader will perceive, is fraught with horror, and abounds too much with slaughter and death. On the whole, however, he who can read its incidents without sympathy, and its imagery without delight, must have an unfeeling heart and a

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[6] *The Critical Review; or, Annals of Literature* wrote: ‘Whether this tragedy was ever offered to the stage, we know not; at least it has never been represented; we shall therefore dismiss it without criticism, persuaded that in doing so we are acting in the most lenient manner by the fair author” (Brewer 566).

[7] The *Analytical Review* stated: “HAVING more than once born honourable [sic] testimony to Mrs. Robinson´s poetical talents, we are happy to find our former opinion confirmed by the success with which, at least as far as poetry is concerned, this lady has executed the difficult task of writing a tragedy […] we can discover no objections against its being brought upon the stage, excepting those which certainly do not diminish its poetical merit, the variety of moral reflections with which it abounds, and its uniform elegance of diction and harmony of versification. The story is highly interesting, and well adapted to excite strong emotions of sympathy (Brewer 566).

> depraved taste. We congratulate Mrs. Robinson that she has discovered the true bent of her talents; and we advise her to apply herself in future to the improvement of them in the same walk. With powers such as hers, cultivation will soon produce excellence. (Quoted in Brewer, 566)

There is no specific reference in these reviews to the play's engagement with emerging feminist ideas, but this is not surprising if we take into account that, as R.M. Janes asserts, there was "a shift in the treatment of feminist works between 1792 and 1798 [that] indicates […] the solidifying opposition to works that seemed to threaten the established relations between the sexes" (302). As we will see, *The Sicilian Lover* challenges the dominant gender roles of the time and was perhaps therefore neither staged nor greatly acclaimed by the critics. Sales of the printed play did not go well either and Robinson´s career as a playwright ended with *The Sicilian Lover* (Brewer 586).

In 1806, *The Sicilian Lover* was published again posthumously in *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson: Including Many Pieces Never before Published. In Three Volumes* (London: Richard Phillips, 1806), and this is the version that I will be using for my analysis.

3.4.1. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Mary Robinson wrote *The Sicilian Lover* in the mid-1790s, a time when "overt radical sympathy, especially from women writers, was policed increasingly stringently by government-sponsored publications such as the *Anti-Jacobin*, because of the growing sense of horror at the bloodshed occasioned by the later stages of the French Revolution and the reactionary media campaign urging unquestioning patriotism in Britain" (McInnes 489). The ideals of liberty, equality and rights for the oppressed were undoubtedly still in the minds of many, among them Robinson, but by 1794, the conservative response in Britain to the Revolution was gaining control, and several writers turned to Gothic drama to represent the ideological struggles of the period (Cox 3) .

One of those contentions was for women´s rights, and Gothic drama allowed a space within which gender hierarchies could be denounced (Cox 4). Women in Gothic plays are often presented as victims of a tyrannical regime, subjected to patriarchal oppression and banished or confined, as is the case with the female

characters in *The Sicilian Lover.* The Gothic is a form "centrally concerned with problems of power, authority and institutional oppression", Elizabeth Napier states (quoted in Ty 61), and Robinson uses several of the conventions of this genre in her tragedy to examine the unequal relations between women and men: stock characters such as the virtue in distress, intimidating robbers and an aristocratic, patriarchal villain amid a picturesque Italianate landscape, and settings which include a towering castle, an old monastery, a solitary cave and a dark forest. By the late eighteenth century, "Gothic" had come to denote a dark, bygone, feudal time before the Enlightenment, symbolizing "that which was barbaric, disordered, irregular" (Kitson 331) and Robinson certainly deemed the social and political situation of women in her country to be quite primitive and unjust, as we have previously seen in her *Letter to the Women of England*. According to Stuart Curran, "within the ferment of women´s writings in the 1790s the assimilation of the Gothic by women writers is […] deeply informed by notions of female impotence and repression" (6). Critics often classify Gothic writing into a male mode and a female mode (Kitson 363). According to this grouping, female Gothic plots tend to focus on a motherless, vulnerable heroine, persecuted by patriarchal powers and subject to threats and imprisonment by older tyrannical males (363), which *The Sicilian Lover* indeed does. However, they usually culminate with reconciliation and marriage, and this is not the case with Robinson´s "dramatic poem", which ends – more similarly to male Gothic stories – with the death of its female protagonist. Robinson not only challenges patriarchal oppression in the actual plot of her play, as we will see in section 5, but also subverts eighteenth-century gender roles by using a typical male gothic ending instead of a female one.

Another struggle of the period was abolitionism, and several writers during this period, many of them women, denounced the transatlantic slave trade in their texts (Kitson 370.) Not everybody agreed with Wollstonecraft´s equation between women and slavery – mirrored in *The Sicilian Lover* - but her comparison does reveal a particularly acute female understanding of the slave trade, perhaps due to the fact that "the dictates of 'sensibility'" - the eighteenth-century movement that stressed the importance of the emotions and feelings in

human relationships – "allowed women to be possessed of finer feelings and more acute moral awareness than men" (370).

Nevertheless, by the 1790s, sensibility had become associated with radical and reformist politics, and it was soon considered that excessive sensibility in both women and men would lead to madness and chaos; that over-cultivation of the senses would result in the loss of reason and judgement (330). *The Sicilian Lover* also engages with this issue that Robinson would later deal with in her *Letter to the Women of England* as well.

In short, at the time when *The Sicilian Lover* was written, England was undergoing a series of political, social and cultural innovations, and the play reflects this upheaval, in particular in relation to women´s condition.

3.4.2. SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

The Sicilian Lover tells the story of Honoria, a young aristocratic maiden who is commanded by her father, Marquis Valmont, to marry a duke whom she despises. When her Sicilian lover, Count Alferenzi, unexpectedly arrives at their castle, both her father and her husband-to-be threaten to murder him, and Honoria resolves to meet Alferenzi outside the castle that night. However, the marquis instead mistakenly slays the duke - believing him to be his daughter´s lover – and flees his own castle in panic. Despite her certainty that her father has brutally stabbed her beloved Alferenzi to death, Honoria voluntarily accompanies him into exile, due to her strong sense of filial responsibility, and they disappear into the night. The following morning Alferenzi is shocked to find that his dear Honoria has vanished, and when Agnes, her nurse, informs him that she has discovered blood in both Honoria and Valmont's chambers, he becomes convinced that her father has killed her. Alferenzi thus sets off in search of Valmont to avenge his darling´s death, while Prince Montalva, - suspecting that his son Albert was murdered by Alferenzi – has sworn revenge on the Sicilian.

That evening, Honoria and her father find a cavern to rest in, but when he heads off to find some nourishment for them, she is assaulted by a group of

banditti. One of the robbers, however, defends her and promises not to harm her father either, should he encounter him. When Valmont returns, though, he is instead met by Alferenzi and their fight results in Valmont´s death. Honoria, at first thrilled to verify that her lover is still alive, is fraught with despair when her father perishes. Unable to contemplate a life with her father´s murderer, she leaves Alferenzi, insisting that they must never meet again.

Alferenzi, however, finds her the next morning in a hermitage, which Montalva and his old steward Francisco have also come upon during their hunt for Alferenzi. To Montalva´s surprise, Honoria reveals that it was not Alferenzi but actually her father Valmont who killed Albert and that Valmont is now dead.

Alferenzi begs Honoria to elope with him, promising her love and joy in the future, but she rejects him adamantly once again, convinced that only death can bring an end to all her suffering.

In the final act a feverish Honoria arrives at an old convent where she surprisingly discovers her long-absent mother Constantia, who reveals that she has been living among nuns for the past twenty years, banished from her home by her husband and Honoria´s father, Valmont. Mother and daughter are thus reunited, but when Alferenzi appears shortly afterwards, Honoria is lying lifeless on a bier. Alferenzi, fatally wounded by a robber´s poniard in the previous scene, succumbs to his death as well, and the tragedy closes with the nuns singing a dirge for the “freed souls of these ill-fated lovers”.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology I will follow to examine *The Sicilian Lover* will involve the strategies of close reading, inductive reasoning and comparative analysis. I will first focus on all the thematic elements of the play that can be read as correlating with women’s position in the late eighteenth-century, as criticism of patriarchal discourse or as an appeal to female resistance. I will then analyse the characters in depth, interpret their speeches and behaviour, and compare their features to the ideas underlying the proto-feminist texts examined in sections 3.2 and 3.3. Finally I will examine the denouement of the play and

show how it engages with Wollstonecraft and Robinson's conclusions in *A Vindication* and *A Letter*.

5. ANALYSIS OF *THE SICILIAN LOVER*

5.1. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN THEMES AND MOTIFS

One of the most relevant themes of the play is patriarchal oppression perpetrated by fathers, husbands and men in general. *The Sicilian Lover* dramatizes firstly the disastrous effects of a father´s desire to control his daughter´s life. His despotic behaviour eventually leads not only to her death and to his own, but to her husband-to-be´s and her lover's as well. The play thus implies that paternal tyranny inevitably results in tragedy, but moreover - considering that the father is also an abusive husband - that men´s power over women in general engenders a catastrophic society. Male violence pervades the play: female characters are deceivingly seduced, banished, confined, persecuted, threatened and nearly raped. They are treated insultingly by the male characters as weak, defenceless, and inferior beings; as children, slaves, and objects of beauty.

However, female resistance to overarching male power is also an important theme in this play and is made evident through the daughter's disobedience towards her father; her unwillingness to marry the man he has chosen for her; her rallying cry for liberty; her initial potential escape; and her final decision to leave all men behind and end her days surrounded by women only. Likewise, the mother's final decision to stay in the (all-female) convent when she could in fact return to the (symbolically male) castle when her husband has died also demonstrates female resistance to male domination.

The theme of filial duty is portrayed by the daughter´s decision to accompany her father into exile, but the fact that she only does so after challenging his authority and demanding freedom emphasizes women´s mental strength. Women´s expected passivity and blind obedience are countered by the heroine´s agency.

Conversely, weakness of mind due to excessive sensibility is also one of the subject matters in *The Sicilian Lover.* Both the heroine and her (male) lover fall prey to their overwhelming emotions, which emphasizes the absence of a biological sexual distinction as regards rationality. The ability to reason – or lose all reason – is a human characteristic common to both sexes.

Despite being a tragedy and articulating the injustices and wrongs suffered by women, the motif of hope permeates the play. As the heroine affirms after disobeying her father and rejecting her husband-to-be:

> There´s not a wretch that breathes but dares to hope.
>
> […]
>
> That pow’r instinctive braves the tyrant´s nod;
>
> Secure within itself, the conscious soul
>
> Still feeds on hope, and triumphs to the last! (1.3.83-92)

In other words, the desire for women´s emancipation – “that pow’r instinctive” – is so great that it will eventually prevail over patriarchal tyranny. The road to equality and liberty will be complicated: “A path, bestrew’d with thorns and roseate wreathes” (3.10.121). But as the heroine proclaims: “We journey on with hope, or lag with fear” (5.14.16) evidencing the play´s insistence that the struggle for female rights must be undertaken with optimism in order to advance.

5.2. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS

The five main characters of the play which are relevant to this paper are: Honoria, Constantia, the Marquis Valmont, Duke Albert, and Count Alferenzi.

Honoria, the female protagonist in *The Sicilian Lover*, is in many ways a quintessential Gothic heroine as well as the stereotype of what patriarchal ideology expects a woman to be like in the eighteenth century, as criticised in a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and in *A Letter to the Women of England*: beautiful, vulnerable, innately virtuous, and naïve.

To begin with, although she is twenty years old and is considered marriageable, Honoria is nonetheless treated as a child by most of the characters. Her father describes her as “a weak girl” (1.1.3), who has been taught “mild obedience” (1.1.5), and even her lover calls her “a peerless child” (1.4.38). Agnes, her nurse, says that Honoria´s “soften’d mind” is unable to “combat life´s perplexing thorns” (1.3.39-40). She is thus depicted as being frail, dependent and in need of constant protection. Alferenzi, for instance, insists on shielding her several times: “Let me conceal thee in some spot secure” (3.11.130), he pleads, and when she rejects his aid, he exclaims: “What! Leave thee to the mercy of banditti? Forsake thee, helpless, faint, forlorn and sad, to be the victim of wild rioters!” (3.11.152-154). However, even one of the robbers, pitying this “helpless woman”, swears that he will protect and defend her, contending that with him, she will be safe (3.10.135-140).

Honoria is also portrayed as an object of desire, simply there to gaze at: “Ev’ry eye should wonder to behold thee” (1.1.93), her father asserts, for she is her “father´s treasure” (1.6.38). Montalva calls her “the fair Honoria, rich Italia´s star” (1.1.25), and Leonardo states that she is a “gorgeous gem” (4.13.72). Likewise, Alferenzi declares that she was “the gem of this world´s wonders”, “too precious for this hated earth” (5.16.46-47) - his “beautiful Honoria” (5.16.57). Wollstonecraft complains in A Vindication that “male prejudice, […] deems beauty the perfection of woman—mere beauty of features and complexion” (150), and Honoria´s physical attractiveness is further emphasized by comparing her to a flower: she is a “sweet blossom” (1.1.20) and resembles “a lily […] flushed with the reflection of a rose” (1.1.51-52) when she blushes. The flower metaphor is thus also linked to her chastity: she´s a “spotless flow’r” (5.16.13) and Albert wonders whether there can be “from nature´s hand so rare a model of transcendent worth” (1.1.26-27) and refers to her “maiden modesty” (36). Her father says she has a “white and unpolluted soul” (1.7.60) and that she is the “sweet image of a chaste and injur’d saint” (3.11.81), while Alferenzi states that “Her bossom was the unpolluted temple / Where innate truth, majestically thron’d / Fear’d not the subtle glance of malice fell” (2.9.124-126).

Honoria’s beauty and innocence are further highlighted by referring to her as a heavenly sprite, a “sainted spirit” (3.11.63) with an “angel face” (5.15.60).

Alferenzi describes her in the final act as “a drooping angel, agonized with grief, more sweet than infant innocence, more pure than sainted spirits” (5.16.22-24), even “beautiful in death” (43).

However, Honoria is not as gentle and submissive as the male characters in the play expect her to be. For instance, when her despotic father declares that – despite the “insolent disdain” sitting on “her haughty brow” (1.1.55-56) – she will be “Duke Albert´s bride, or not [his] daughter” (59), she replies defiantly:

> Relentless pow’r may drag me to the altar;
>
> But the free soul shrinks from the tyrant´s grasp,
>
> And lords it o’er oppression! (1.1.61-63)

Valmont tries to silence her, and calls her a “rash” (1.1.64), “ungrateful girl” (1.1.74), but Honoria insists that she refuses to be sold like a slave to a man she loathes:

> I will encounter poverty or death
>
> Rather than sell my freedom!
>
> […]
>
> Does the vain suitor arrogantly hope
>
> To buy me like a slave? (1.1.78-83)

Honoria is reflecting one of the ideas in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* here: that since women are “capable of acting like rational creatures” (71) they should “not be treated like slaves” (71) and “legally prostituted” (128) in marriages of convenience. This issue is also present in *A Letter to the Women of England,* in which Robinson predicts that wives will be purchased like slaves if the unequal situation of women continues (69), and she therefore urges women to “shake off [their] shackles” (93). The equation between women’s condition and slavery is again depicted when Alferenzi accuses Valmont of being “a sordid wretch” who “bind[s] in golden chains a trembling slave” when he “traffic[s]” with his daughter “[to] sell that freedom Heav’n designed for all” (1.4.39-42).

Honoria´s disobedience clearly illustrates her strong resistance to patriarchy, for as Wollstonecraft states in her *Vindication*, “The father who is blindly obeyed, is

obeyed from sheer weakness, or from motives that degrade the human character" (352). Honoria opposes her "father´s right" (1.1.65) to wed her against her will, even though Valmont sternly affirms that her "disobedience covers [him] with shame" (1.1.100), and she thus proves Robinson´s point in her *Letter* that "the mind of WOMAN, when she feels a correct sense of honour […] can rise to the most intrepid defence of it" (25). The heroine does not passively endure her father´s manipulative power, as would be expected by the prevailing cultural codes of the time which demanded silence and innocence in women. On the contrary, she openly challenges him and the patriarchal ideology he represents which exhibits men as rational beings that should control women because they are supposedly irrational and inferior creatures. Her rebelliousness thus subverts the dominant gender hierarchy, for she disregards patriarchy's cultural expectations and angrily confronts her father and others who attempt to subject her, such as her husband-to-be.

> Let the fierce tempest of a father´s rage
>
> Dash my soul´s purpose, as the foaming waves
>
> Waste their vain fury on the flinty shore! (1.3.59-61)

Honoria's insubordination, however, results in her becoming "A pris'ner […] – in [her] father´s castle" (2.5.1). She compares herself to:

> The wither'd tenant of a dungeon's gloom,
>
> Who shut up from the face of heav'n
>
> Almost forgets the radiance of the sun! (1.3.84-86)

As Wollstonecraft criticizes in her *Vindication*, women are "confined in cages" (118) and oppressed by a patriarchal society which limits them to the domestic sphere in order to control them more easily. "Let WOMAN once assert her proper sphere, unshackled by prejudice," demands Robinson in her *Letter (2)*, calling for women's right to participate in a "proper" public life and not be restricted unfairly to their homes.

Despite defying her father and even referring to him as "monstrous and inhuman" (2.7.48) when he reveals that he has killed her lover, Honoria's strong sense of filial duty leads her to accompany Valmont into exile. The rather incomprehensible loyalty and "filial love" (50) that she demonstrates with this act

may be related to the fact that she was “depriv’d of a fond mother’s care” (2.5.34-35) when she was an infant. Her father has led her to believe that her mother died years before and has previously reminded her that “Had thy mother liv´d, her gentle heart / Had throbb’d with anguish at thy wayward scorn” (1.1.101-102). This resembles Robinson’s complaint in *A Letter*, namely that women have to “depend for support upon a being who is perpetually authorised to deceive” them (78). Valmont now continues to blackmail her emotionally, insisting that “a father’s life / Depends upon thy silence” (2.7.54-55). Already motherless, Honoria cannot bear to lose her father as well, but she makes it clear that it is her own decision to accompany him. “Thou shalt not leave me” (2.7.61), she firmly commands.

Nevertheless, from this point onwards, Honoria´s “wild ethereal spirit springs o’ver the confines of this world´s despair” (2.7.66-67) and her excessive sensibility will eventually drive her to death. Being over-emotional is problematic in Wollstonecraft´s view, for “overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind” (131) and “reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and […] sensibility is not reason” (137-138), she adds. Honoria correspondingly becomes unable to reason properly, passionately pleading her murderous father to lead her “where blank oblivion desolates the scene” (2.7.75) while at the same time strangely asserting that “all will be well” (81). Her words are “incoherent, wild, and sorrowful” (2.9.92). When Honoria later realizes that Alferenzi is alive but that he has murdered her father, her “weak brain burns with […] frenzy” (3.11.110-111) and she gives him “fierce reproaches” (3.11.103), while she simultaneously ponders upon their “radiant morn of love, and hope, and youth and tender joy” (3.11.164-165). These contradictory and extremely intense feelings result in her foreboding pronouncement that “Death is preparing in the silent tomb/ A lonely bed, where I shall sleep at peace” (3.11.168-169).

In conclusion, Honoria is, on the one hand, a victim of patriarchal oppression, succumbing to her excessive sensibility and dying in utter hopelessness, which mirrors *A Vindication* and *A Letter*’s pessimism regarding the condition of women and the lack of options available to them in eighteenth-century society.

On the other hand, she does, to a certain extent, resist male dominance by disobeying her father, refusing to marry her husband-to-be, and rejecting to elope with her lover. Furthermore, her resolution to end her days "in cold monastic gloom" (5.14.1) surrounded solely by women depicts her finally as a strong-willed female character who proves that "no spells can curb the mind" (1.1.112). This reflects Wollstonecraft and Robinson's prevalent idea that women´s apparent weakness is simply a social construct and it illustrates their absolute belief in female rationality as well as their protest against male prejudice and power.

The second female character I wish to analyse, albeit more briefly, is Constantia, Honoria´s long-lost mother who appears in the final act. Despite being "[a] chaste wife" (3.11.18), her husband nonetheless banished her twenty years earlier from her home when her daughter was merely a child, and she has spent half her days "sequester'd and unknown" (5.14.68) in a convent which she defines as "an asylum from oppressive woe" (5.14.59). Her forced exile and confinement are symbolic of women´s dreadful state, denounced in both *A Vindication* and *A Letter*, but at the same time her status as the "rev'rend mother" (5.14.36) renders her a wise and authoritative female figure. She represents what Robinson calls "a woman of enlightened understanding" (72) who is "too formidable in the circle of society to be endured, much less sanctioned" (72) because, as she goes on to say, "[m]an is a despot by nature; he can bear no equal, he dreads the power of woman" (72-73) and Valmont therefore undertakes to silence and obliterate Constantia by condemning her to ostracism.

As Anne Close states "Most Gothic heroines do not enjoy their mothers' survival into their adulthood" (178) and must face the grownup world of paternal oppression and menacing possibilities of forced marriage, imprisonment and numerous other male threats on their own. Similarly, in *The Sicilian Lover,* Constantia has been forcibly absent for most of her daughter´s life and has thus been unable to look after her, but the fact that she emerges at the end and is given the opportunity to tell her own melancholy story within the play echoes Robinson´s demand for female voices to be heard or read when she concludes *A Letter* with a list of names of her "illustrious [female] contemporaries" (96).

Male repression and tyranny are chiefly represented by the Marquis Valmont. He is, as mentioned previously, Honoria´s father and Constantia´s husband, and is described throughout the play as “a relentless parent” with a “stern mind” (1.3.24) and a “haughty spirit” (2.5.33). His “frowns” have always silenced Honoria when she has inquired about her absent mother (1.3.45-47), and his “stern […] rage” wrings her to the soul (2.9.13).

He is “firm to [his] purpose, tho’ the heavens should yawn, / And hurl their red bolts on [his] aged head” (1.1.9-10), unyielding in his decision to wed his daughter to Duke Albert – whose task it is to “combat and subdue her” (1.1.57), he insists - despite knowing that she has a “fix’d aversion” (1.1.7) to him. His soul “cannot brook denial” (1.1.75), that is, he will not tolerate Honoria´s refusal to marry the man he has chosen for her, for it is “a father´s right” (1.1.65). When she dares disobey him, he threatens to disown her: “Thou art Duke Albert´s bride, or not my daughter” (1.1.59).

Honoria compares him to “the fierce flame of a meridian sun” that “gilds the poor insect which it dooms to death” (1.1.94-95), and his aggressiveness is portrayed by the stage directions which include his “*grasping Honoria’s hand*” (1.1.74). His despotism, which stems from his ambition, is a “bold, oppressive, self-created pow’r” (1.1.107), she decries, that “[s]trikes at the root of reason, and confines / Nature itself in bondage!” (1.1.110-111). This reflects Wollstonecraft and Robinson´s idea that men´s alleged superiority has no intellectual basis; patriarchal discourse has been fashioned by men themselves in order to subjugate women, and is completely unreasonable. In addition, Wollstonecraft states that “tyrants of every denomination from the weak king to the weak father of a family; […] are all eager to crush reason; yet always assert that they usurp its throne only to be useful” (ix). Valmont is anxious to ignore the undeniable fact that his daughter does not love Albert, but insists that he is being rational, for her marriage “would augment the lustre of [her] days” (1.1.91). In truth it would raise his *own* status and wealth to have his daughter married to the son of a prince, which illustrates his view of Honoria as a saleable commodity, a mere slave that can be offered to the wealthiest buyer. He keeps her confined in her “prison chamber” (2.5.66) with a “stern guard” (2.5.45) watching over to make sure nobody steals his “treasure” (2.6.38).

Valmont is not only tyrannical towards his daughter but also towards his wife, who he cruelly banished when his "fickle sense was sated with her charms / and meaner beauties triumph'd in their turn" (3.11.19-20). That is, he lost interest in her and had extramarital relationships, perhaps with prostitutes. Robinson complains in her *Letter* that "the husband, the lord of the creation […] is permitted openly to indulge in every *dishonourable* propensity" (78-78) while if it were the wife who "chance[d] to overstep the boundaries of chastity […], CUSTOM, that pliant and convenient friend to man, [would] declare her infamous" (77). This inequality means that husbands can "violate [their] marriage vows" (10) and abandon their wives with impunity: "Man first degrades [his wife], and then deserts her" (81), and as Robinson inquires:

> What then is WOMAN to do? Where is she to hope for justice? Man who *professes* himself her champion, her protector, is the most subtle and unrelenting enemy she has to encounter: yet, if she determines on a life of celibacy and secludes herself wholly from his society, she becomes an object of universal ridicule (26).

It is essential therefore to:

> Let man confess that a wife […] is a thinking and a discriminating helpmate; not a bondswoman, whom custom subjects to his power, and subdues to his convenience (66).

Duke Albert is also characterized as being an unfeeling tyrant, for when Honoria swears that she will not marry him, he threatens to kill the man she loves and calls on "sweet revenge" (1.6.29) to "glut [his] soul with luxury of hate" (1.6.31). In *A Letter*, Robinson asks the reader to consider the following:

> Supposing that destiny, or interest, or chance, or what you will, has united a man, confessedly of a weak understanding, and corporeal debility, to a woman strong in all the powers of intellect, and capable of bearing the fatigues of busy life: is it not degrading to humanity that such a woman should be the passive, the obedient slave, of such an husband? Is it not repugnant to all the laws of nature, that her feelings, actions, and opinions, should be controuled [sic], perverted, and debased, by such an help-mate? (3-4)

Albert is not only portrayed as being spiteful but quite simpleminded. He mistakenly interprets Honoria´s tears as being due to her "maiden modesty" (1.1.36) when in fact they are "the silent herald of approaching woe" (1.1.34). His lack of physical strength is partly reflected in his defeat against Alferenzi and then by being slain by Valmont, an "aged man" (3.11.60). In short, in Robinson´s view it seems demeaning that Honoria should have to marry a man like Albert.

Count Alferenzi is, on the other hand, symbolic of how men –not only women - can exhibit excessive sensibility. When Honoria repudiates him for having murdered her father, he is hurled into despair. He nevertheless continues to persecute her, and his wild exclamations on the way are indicative of his feeble mental state:

> Horrors on horrors crowd so thick upon me,
>
> That pall'd imagination, sick'ning, spurns
>
> The sanity of reason! Man can but bear
>
> A certain portion of calamity;
>
> For when the pressure heap'd upon the brain
>
> O'erwhelms the active faculties of thought,
>
> The pang acute subsides, and leaves the mind
>
> A chaos wild of gorgeous desolation! (5.15.24-31)

Alferenzi´s speech points to Robinson´s steadfast refusal to accept that women are naturally the "weaker sex", for men can definitely also display debility and overreact at times.

Wollstonecraft similarly refers to this issue in her *Vindication:*

> Women are supposed to possess more sensibility, […], than men, and their strong attachments and instantaneous emotions of compassion are given as proofs;[…] But this kind of exclusive affection, though it degrade the individual, should not be brought forward as a proof of the inferiority of the sex, because it is the natural consequence of confined views […] (437)
>
> Miserable, indeed, must be that being whose cultivation of mind has only tended to inflame its passions! […] The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly!
>
> This observation should not be confined to the *fair* sex […] (130)

The main characters in *The Sicilian Lover* thereby attest to the deep-rooted prejudice against women in Robinson and Wollstonecraft´s society and, as a whole, symbolize the early feminist resistance to patriarchal narrow-mindedness.

5.3. ANALYSIS OF THE DENOUEMENT

The Sicilian Lover, as we have already seen, ends in tragedy with the death of the heroine, which points to women´s vulnerability in a patriarchal society. Honoria is doomed to a tragic ending, and this depicts the author´s pessimism as regards the current condition of women in her society. The fatal denouement is indicative of how extremely difficult it is for women to escape entrenched prejudice in a patriarchal world which has constructed them as the "weaker sex" and has taught them "overstretched sensibility", as Wollstonecraft and Robinson denounce.

The murders of the main male characters, however, signify that patriarchal power can be vanquished, which allows for a ray of hope to be glimpsed among the dark clouds of male tyranny. Similarly, while Honoria´s father – symbolic of patriarchy – perishes, her mother continues alive, and this hints at the author´s (and Wollstonecraft´s) more hopeful view of the future. Constantia decides to stay in the convent, surrounded by women, rather than go back to Valmont´s castle, a symbol of male power. She informs Honoria shortly before the latter dies: "My vows for ever bind me to this goal" (5.14.106). Within the world of the play, Constantia is referring to her religious vows as a nun, bound to God, but in the wider context of a male-dominated society, these lines echo Robinson and Wollstonecraft´s determination to pursue their objective: women´s equality.

5.4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The analyses of the main themes, characters and denouement of *The Sicilian Lover* lead me to conclude that Mary Robinson´s play does indeed engage with several of the issues that appear in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and in *A Letter to the Women of England.* Men´s arbitrary but long-standing power over women, filial duty and blind obedience, the consequences of excessive sensibility, reason as genderless, female mental strength and resistance, and the belief in a more egalitarian future are all major themes in the play. Despite its being set in the Italian Renaissance, the results of the analyses unveil that it is very likely that Robinson was in effect criticizing the eighteenth-century English society in which she lived. The characters' actions and their speeches

are symbolic of the widespread gender discrimination that existed in her age and seemingly point to cultural expectations pertaining to both men and women in those days. Nonetheless, it has also been demonstrated that - at certain points in the play – several of the characters undermine the existing gender norms, thus challenging the status quo. The ending indicates Robinson's negative view of her society as far as women's condition is concerned, but on the other hand it also suggests her firm resolve to persevere in the struggle for women's equality, and consequently a relative optimism as regards the future.

6. CONCLUSION

The historical feminist analysis of *The Sicilian Lover* which I have carried out, in conjunction with the prior studies of the two proto-feminist works by Wollstonecraft and Robinson, has exposed the various ways in which Mary Robinson´s Gothic tragedy challenges patriarchal oppression and calls for female resistance. The hypothesis of this dissertation has thus been proven correct through a close reading of the three above-mentioned texts and their subsequent analysis, interpretation and comparison.

By (re)discovering *The Sicilian Lover* and its involvement in the feminist polemics of its time, my hope is to have contributed to feminist literary criticism even if only in a very modest manner. The play highlights gender inequalities which not only existed in late eighteenth century England but which in various ways and countries still persist today. It is therefore essential for literary critics to continue examining gender power relations in literature worldwide, in past and present works, with the purpose of showing the trans-historical and global extent of patriarchy and of never ceasing to defy its dominion.

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