

Scholarly Editing and Digital Approach 2021/2022

**Review of *A Letter to the Women of England  
on the Injustice of Mental Subordination***

**Abstract**

*A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* is a diplomatic facsimile edition of Mary Robinson's work with the same name, published in February 1799, and can be found in Romantic Circles scholarly Website. The copy text is the first edition of Robinson's *Letter* (identified with the code C142b13), which is now part of the collection of the British Library. The facsimile edition has been published in Romantic Circles in 1998 and is enriched by some additional texts: two other poems of Mary Robinson; one Review of the *Letter*; three more reviews of other works by the same author and three letters of Robinson, presented in order to clarify the atmosphere of her literary circle.

The aim of this review is to analyse the *Letter to the Women of England* by means of the so-called digital paradigm - which focuses on its content, features and editorial work - and thus to determine whether it can be considered a *Scholarly Digital Edition (SDE)* or not.

**The Reviewer**

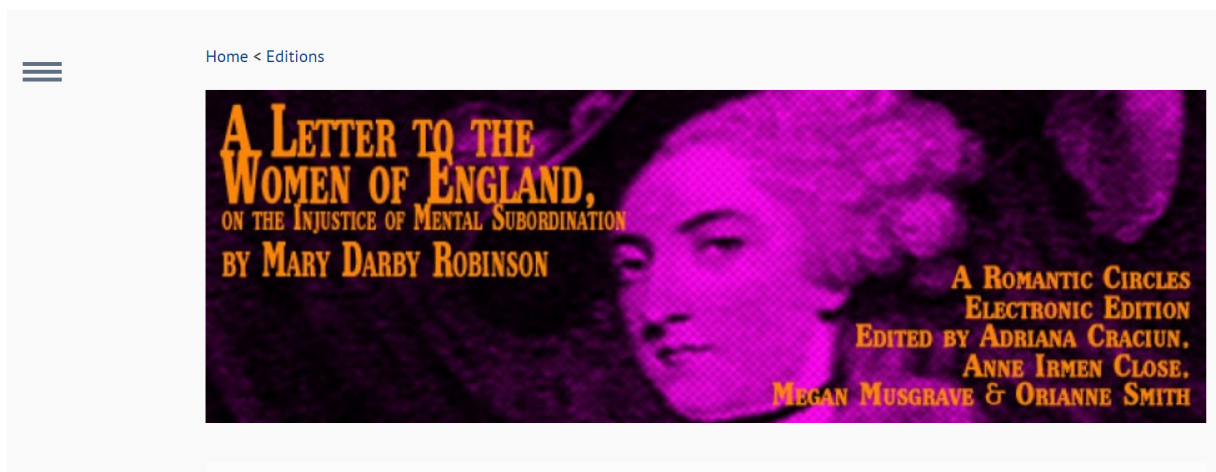
The reviewer is currently studying at the University of Bologna Master's Degree in Digital Humanities and Digital Knowledge, and has previously studied in the same University, obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in Humanities, in the Lettere Moderne faculty.

This review has been made reflecting her research interests, which mainly focus on the literary field, the women rights and the Anglo-American field, both from a cultural and a linguistic point of view, thanks also to her study experience in the United Kingdom.

## Bibliographic identification of the Scholarly Digital Edition

All the information about the Scholarly Digital Edition can be easily accessed from the home page of the former, which can be found at the following link: <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/robinson/index.html> .

The title of the Digital Edition is, as mentioned above, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*. The responsible editors of the aforementioned are Adriana Craciun, Anne Irmen Close, Megan Musgrave, Orianne Smith, listed in the initial banner of the Website:



The contributors are listed, instead, in the Introduction and Note on the Text section and are: Steven Jones, Bob Kraft, John Bigane, Judith Reymond, Mike Duvall, Alan Marshall, Doucet Devin Fischer, Judith Pascoe and the collaboration of the British Library.

The publication date, May 1998, can be found in the footnote, in addition to the editors' and the author's names, the original work's publication date, and some other metadata, such as Persons names, tags and country, which, as suggested by the title of the text itself, is England.

## Introduction

*A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* is contained in the Romantic Circles scholarly Website, which is devoted to the study of Romantic-period literature and culture. It is a collaborative environment, which is still continuously updated. The Website is divided into sections: Praxis Series, a selection of peer-reviewed critical volumes about the Romantic Period;<sup>1</sup> Editions, a searchable archive of Romantic Period texts;<sup>2</sup> Pedagogies, a catalogue of teaching material;<sup>3</sup> Unbound, which contains a series of articles on contemporary, urgent topics;<sup>4</sup> Scholarly Resources, a collection of online research tools approved by the general editors of the Website;<sup>5</sup> Gallery, a gallery to stress the importance of visual art in the Romantic Period;<sup>6</sup> Audio, which contains recordings of lectures and interviews of Romantic Period's works;<sup>7</sup> Reviews & Receptions, with review of recent works and a forum for debate;<sup>8</sup> About RC, which describes the content of the Website.<sup>9</sup>

The former edition is a diplomatic facsimile edition of Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, published in February 1799. The copy text is the first edition of Robinson's work (identified with the code C142b13)<sup>10</sup> and is now part of the collection of the British Library. This edition thus has been possible thanks to the collaboration with the Library and has been published in Romantic Circles in 1998. The digital edition is enriched by some additional texts: two poems of Mary Robinson herself; one Review of the *Letter*, with three more reviews of other works by the same author; three letters of Robinson, to clarify the atmosphere of her literary circle and to give an idea of the context in which the work has been written.

## Subject and content of the edition

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<sup>1</sup> From the Section Praxis Series in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>2</sup> From the Section Electronic Editions in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>3</sup> From the Section Pedagogies in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>4</sup> From the Section Unbound in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>5</sup> From the Section Scholarly Resources in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>6</sup> From the Section Gallery in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>7</sup> From the Section Audio in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>8</sup> From the Section Reviews & Receptions in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>9</sup> From the Section About RC in *Romantic Circles*.

<sup>10</sup> Note on the Text, *A Letter to Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*.

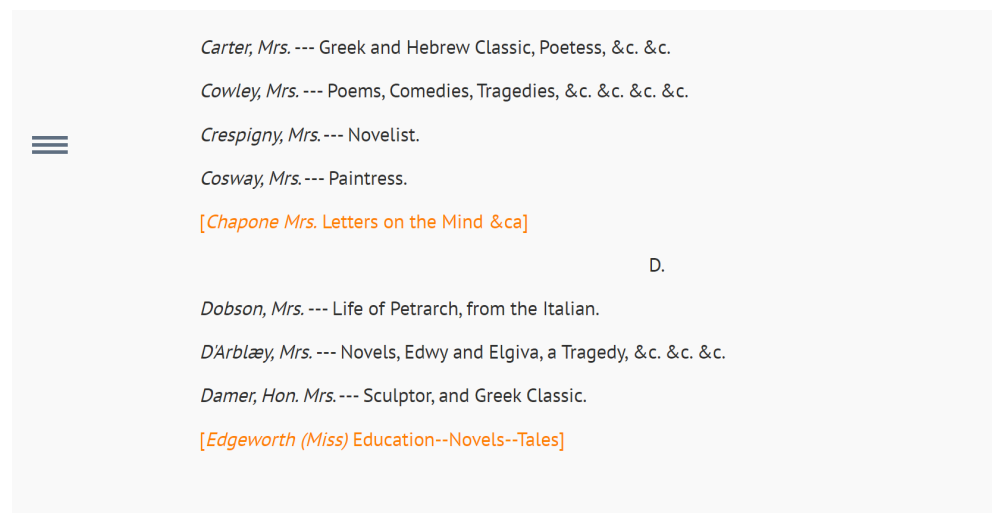
The whole edition presents full text transcriptions, with comments and context material. It is of great relevance, since it is the first facsimile edition of the first copy of *A Letter to the Women of England* which contains both Robinson's footnote and the editorial footnotes added by the editors of the edition themselves. In addition, it allows the reader to have an idea on one hand of the context of the time, presenting three instances of the author's personal correspondence, and on the other hand of her literary ideas, by including two versions of a poem, *Ainsi va le Monde*, one of which has been revised and published by Mary Robinson's daughter.

Robinson, known for her sensibility and her hard-life - she presents her life as "marked by the progressive evils of a too acute sensibility"<sup>11</sup> -

is also known for her interest in women rights and women's independence, as we can see in other works of hers and in her private life, too, having herself an independent career as an actress.<sup>12</sup>

In the original copy of the *Letter*, there was a "List of British Female Literary Characters", containing a list of names of women who, in her opinion, were important to mention for their achievements in the intellectual and cultural field of the time.

The original copy is now property of the British Library, but originally was owned by Elizabeth Rose, who continued to add names to the former List, maintaining Robinson's endeavour. In the edition, these additions can be found in coral-colored text enclosed in brackets.<sup>13</sup>



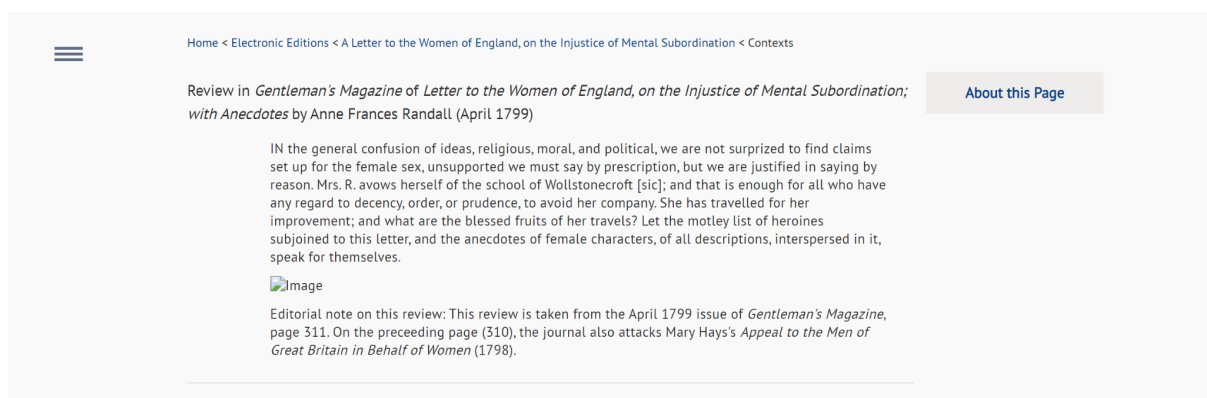
<sup>11</sup> Mary Darby Robinson, *The Memoirs of Mary Robinson*, p. 8, in A celebration of Women Writers <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/robinson/biography.html#winter>> .

<sup>12</sup> Poetry Foundation <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-robinson>> visited 28.12.21.

<sup>13</sup> Note on the Text, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*.

Screenshot showing Elizabeth Rose annotation, taken from the digital edition


In the edition the reader can also find a Review of the *Letter*, taken from the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It is dated 1799, right after the publishing of the work, and it is an attack on the author and the work itself.<sup>14</sup>



Home < Electronic Editions < A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination < Contexts

Review in *Gentleman's Magazine* of *Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*; with Anecdotes by Anne Frances Randall (April 1799)

IN the general confusion of ideas, religious, moral, and political, we are not surprized to find claims set up for the female sex, unsupported we must say by prescription, but we are justified in saying by reason. Mrs. R. avows herself of the school of Wollstonecroft [sic]; and that is enough for all who have any regard to decency, order, or prudence, to avoid her company. She has travelled for her improvement; and what are the blessed fruits of her travels? Let the motley list of heroines subjoined to this letter, and the anecdotes of female characters, of all descriptions, interspersed in it, speak for themselves.

Image

Editorial note on this review: This review is taken from the April 1799 issue of *Gentleman's Magazine*, page 311. On the preceeding page (310), the journal also attacks Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798).

### Review in the Gentleman's Magazine

As we can see from the previous screen-capture, the edition should offer the reader the possibility to visualise some images, too. Digital images are a great treasure for digital editions, since they have simplified a lot scholar's work.<sup>15</sup> But, unfortunately, in this case, they are not displayed throughout the whole Website.

There is also a section devoted to the edition Bibliography and to Related Websites, but again, not all of them can be browsed, giving an error in the searching of the content.<sup>16</sup>

## Aims and methods

The description of the aims and methods used in the edition is contained in the Introduction and Note to the Text section, which is a perfect summary of the whole edition.

<sup>14</sup> Context, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, pp. 1-137.

<sup>16</sup> Bibliography, Related Web Sites, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*.

Specific pieces of information are given: it is a hypertext,<sup>17</sup> which defines a **diplomatic, facsimile** edition. It is diplomatic, since it does copy from the original what is written, the way it is written. In the digital environment this edition is better defined as a documentary edition. It is a facsimile, since it reproduces in a digital way what is written in the original copy. The only difference from “conventional” facsimiles is that in this case we don’t have a visual reproduction, as a scan or a digital photograph, but a transcription of the text, the way it was presented in the printed copy.

The editors themselves declare that they “have reproduced Robinson's capitalization, spelling, and punctuation exactly, both in her *Letter* and in the poems included in this hypertext”, correcting only one probable typographical error made by Robinson in person, accompanied with a note to clarify the correction.

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<sup>17</sup> “text displayed on a computer display or other electronic devices with references (hyperlinks) to other text that the reader can immediately access”, from Wikipedia.

LETTER  
TO THE  
*WOMEN OF ENGLAND*  
ON THE INJUSTICE OF  
MENTAL SUBORDINATION  
WITH  
ANECDOTES.

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*BY ANNE FRANCES RANDALL.*

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Facsimile digital reproduction of the *Letter*

The edition, thus, does not want to correct or to apport any change in the original copy of *A Letter to the Women of England*, but its aim is to give the reader a clearer view of the work and the context in which the author was living and was writing. It has a document-centric point of view: everything starts from the author's works and writings.

There is indeed no mention about the ideal audience, making the edition available to a generic audience, which could approach the work both, from a scholarly and a simple reader point of view.

No specific description about the original copy is provided. The whole edition is based only on this testimony and it is given only the acronym which identifies it in the British Library.

### **Publication and presentation**

For what concerns the technical infrastructure, the technologies used in the edition are declared in the Note on the Text section. The text of the *Letter* has been converted into HTML and, after that, into a frame version, in order to allow the reader to easily visualize the content. The XML/TEI convention, which is the standard encoding for texts in the digital environment and a symbol of the new methodologies in the digital philology field,<sup>18</sup> is not used here. This may be due to the date of the edition: 1998. XML was at the beginning of its life and it was not so common yet.<sup>19</sup>

Talking about the interface, it is very simple and easy to access, and no preliminary reading or knowledge is required. The content is displayed in the home page, but a side menu is available to the user, too, in order to allow him to browse the contents of the edition without going back to the home page every time one of the following sections is accessed: Introduction, Texts, Context, Selected Poems, Selected Letters and Bibliography and Related Web Sites. There is also a secondary navigation, in the sidebar, which contains hyperlinks to Related Resources available to the user for browsing. Another level of browsing is available: it is the one of the Romantic Circle Website and it can be accessed from the navigation bar at the top of the page.

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<sup>18</sup> Paola Italia and Francesca Tomasi, *Filologia digitale. Fra teoria, metodologia e tecnica*, pp. 112-131.

<sup>19</sup> XML, from Wikipedia



## Table of Contents

### Introduction

#### Texts:

Letter to the Women  
of England,  
on the Injustice of Mental Subordination  
(1799, first edition)

List of British Female Literary Characters Living in the  
Eighteenth Century

Robinson's Advertisement to the second edition,  
titled *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice  
of Mental Subordination* (1799)

#### Contexts:

Review from *Gentleman's Magazine of A Letter to the Women of  
England* (April 1799)

Reviews, probably by Mary Wollstonecraft, of Mary Robinson's  
works

#### Mary Robinson, select poems on the French Revolution:

*Ainsi va le Monde,*  
*A Poem. Inscribed to Robert Merry, Esq. A.M.*  
(1790, second edition)

*Ainsi va le Monde,*  
*A Poem.*  
*Inscribed to a Friend.*  
(1806 edition, significantly revised)

#### Select Letters to and from Mary Robinson:

Mary Robinson to William Godwin, 30 May 1800

Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Robinson, [?1796-1797]

Mary Robinson to S. J. Pratt, 31 August 1800

#### Bibliography:

List of Works Incorporated in and Consulted for this Hypertext  
Edition

#### Related Web Sites

The interface of the single items in the edition is pretty similar to the general one. In the facsimile edition, the browsing is made available through the footnotes: the words to which they are referred are represented as hyperlinks, which are linked to the footnote, whether authorial or editorial, at the bottom of the page. The only problem here is the “back to the text” option, which is missing. This is one of the most common problems in the digital environment. A lot of editions, which declare themselves as digital, are on the contrary digitised<sup>20</sup> or they are actually digital, but incomplete, missing some core features of the digital paradigm, which requires a complete surfing experience available to the user. In this edition, indeed, the surfing experience is not complete. The reader can easily access the footnotes but, in order to go back to the text, he must scroll the page until he reaches the starting point again.

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Custom, from the earliest periods of antiquity, has endeavoured to place the female mind in the subordinate ranks of intellectual sociability. WOMAN has ever been considered as a lovely and fascinating part of the creation, but her claims to mental equality have not only been questioned, by envious and interested sceptics; but, by a barbarous policy in the other sex, considerably depressed, for want of liberal and classical cultivation. I will not expatiate largely on the doctrines of certain [philosophical sensualists](#), who have aided in this destructive oppression, because an [illustrious British](#)

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An example of the footnote browsing system. By clicking on the highlighted words, the user is redirected to the section in which the correspondent note is contained (in this example, we are dealing with an Editorial Note):

## Editorial Notes

[illustrious British female](#),: Probably the best-known and most influential feminist of the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a contemporary of Robinson's. The two women were acquainted through Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a feminist manifesto arguing in favor of equality between the sexes and women's cultivation of reason through education, deeply influenced Robinson ([link to Vindication](#)). Robinson obviously intends her *Letter* to speak to the same issues as Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*, though from a different angle. Robinson may have also intended this publication to help vindicate her friend's reputation and ideas when, after her death in 1797, Wollstonecraft's reputation declined due to the publication of *Memoirs* (written by Godwin) which provided the "scandalous" details of her affair with Gilbert Imlay and her suicide attempts.

The editorial note

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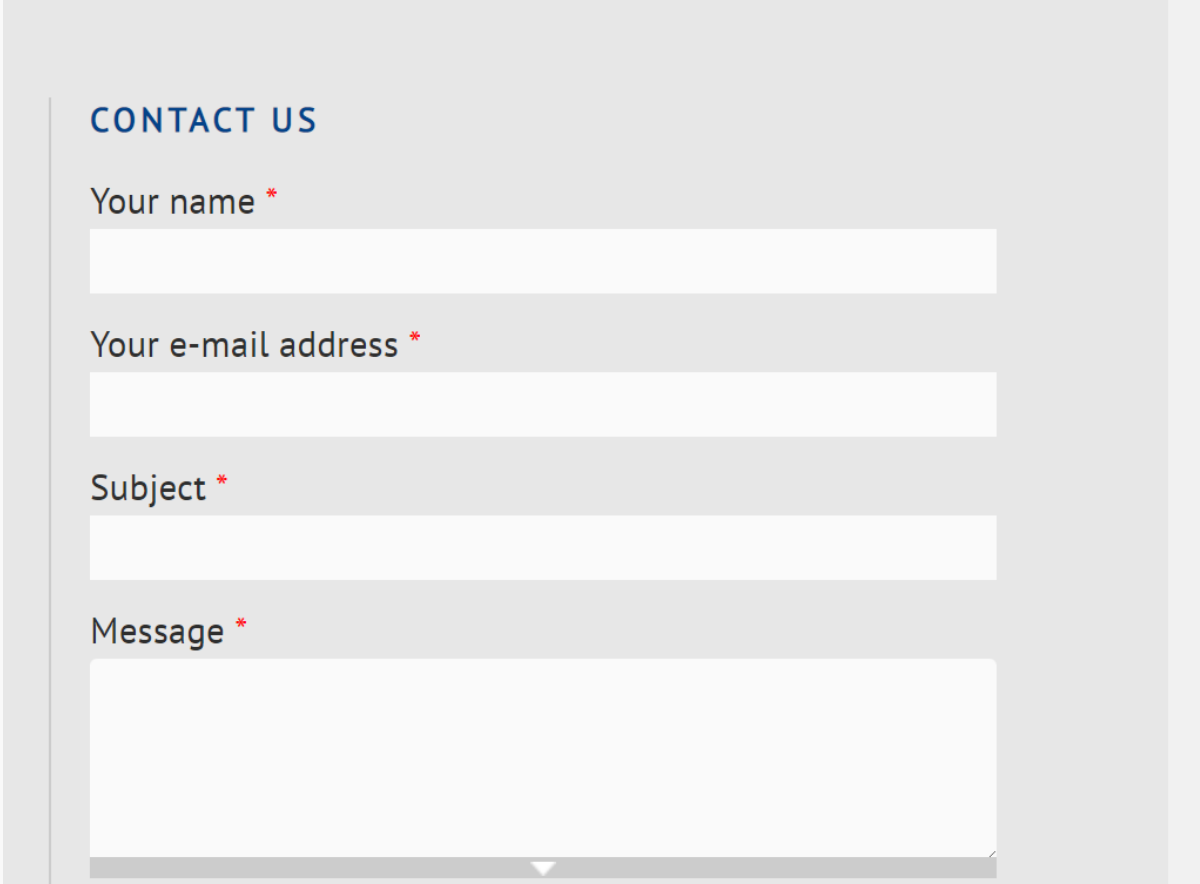
<sup>20</sup> Elena Pierazzo and Elise Leclerc, *L'edizione scientifica al tempo dell'editoria digitale*, pp. 180-193.

As mentioned before, there is a problem with the loading of the images. They should be available in the whole edition, but they are not displayed anywhere. It is an important lack, since with them the site would have been more entertaining and more easily browsable.

No export formats for the text are available to the user, but the edition is suited also to mobile devices, having a responsive and adaptive interface.

No further information about the rights and restrictions for the reuse of the information contained in the digital edition are given. The whole text can be copied and pasted, but no restrictions are given.

For the user is available a “Contact Us” text box in the footer of the page, which permits the reader to register and ask questions via email to the General Editors of the webpage. No further interaction environments are offered.



The image shows a screenshot of a 'CONTACT US' form. The form is titled 'CONTACT US' in blue capital letters. Below the title, there are four input fields, each with a red asterisk indicating a required field. The fields are: 'Your name \*', 'Your e-mail address \*', 'Subject \*', and 'Message \*'. The 'Message' field is a larger text area. The form is set against a light gray background.

The “Contact Us” text box

## Conclusion

The edition of *A Letter to the Women of England* can be classified as a *Scholarly Digital Edition*, since it matches Patrick Sahle definition of digital edition as “a critical representation of historic documents”.<sup>21</sup> This edition is critical because it specifies certain rules and follows their application, identifies its own structure, and decides the relevant additional material to offer to the reader. It is a representation, since it is a record of an original text, following the distinction made by Gabler between the ideal text, the real text and the material text: “the ideal text is an abstraction constructed on the basis of the real text, to which we have direct access through a material text, which is the materialisation of a text on a printed page or a screen”.<sup>22</sup> In this edition the ideal text is the facsimile reproduction of the real text, the text first written by Mary Robinson, which is made available to the reader as a material text in a digital form. To go back on Sahle definition, we are dealing with historic documents because the work presented, which is an instance, and thus a document, of Robinson’s literature and life, bridges a distance in time,<sup>23</sup> between the time it was written and the time it was edited. The edition fulfils the goals stated in the Introduction and Note to the Text initial section and offers as a final product a complete overview of Robinson’s *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* and of the context in which it has been written.

For what concerns its usability as an SDE, there are only two points to improve: first of all, the availability of digital images would enrich the digital edition and would allow the reader to interact more easily with the digital resources. Added to this, the footnote browsing should be improved, in order to allow the user to directly go back to the text without having to scroll the whole page.

Another suggestion for improvements would be to introduce some interaction channels or social media pages to consult and to stay updated on the edition topic, or the Romantic Circle Website activity.

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Sahle, *What is a scholarly digital edition?*, in Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, pp. 1-137.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, pp. 1-137.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Sahle, *What is a scholarly digital edition?*, in Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, pp. 1-137.

## Bibliography and Sitography

*A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*

<<https://romantic-circles.org/editions/robinson/index.html>>.

Driscoll, Matthew James and Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, OpenBookPublisher, 2016, pp. 1-137.

Italia, Paola and Francesca Tomasi, *Filologia digitale. Fra teoria, metodologia e tecnica*, in “Ecdotica”, 11 (2014), pp. 112-131.

Pierazzo, Elena and Elise Leclerc, *L’edizione scientifica al tempo dell’editoria digitale*, in “Ecdotica”, n. 12, (2015), pp. 180-193.

Poetry Foundation <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-robinson>>.

Robinson, Mary Darby, *The Memoirs of Mary Robinson*, p. 8, in A celebration of Women Writers <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/robinson/biography.html#winter>>.

Sahle, Patrick, *Criteria for Reviewing Scholarly Digital Editions*, in collaboration with Georg Vogeler and the members of the IDE; Version 1.1, June 2014.

*Wikipedia*, The Free Encyclopedia