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Jane Austen's World

This blog brings Jane Austen, her novels, and the Regency Period alive through food, dress, social customs, and other 19th C. historical details.

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Mary Darby Robinson's Wedding

July 10, 2007 by [Vic](#)



[The Marriage Act of 1753](#) made it increasingly difficult for upper class men to “marry down,” and for women to marry men outside their rank. In fact, the Act stipulated that:

Marriage must take place with banns and an officially purchased marriage license (the banns being read publicly in church three consecutive Sundays prior to the wedding), the two parties must receive parental permission if under age (under 21), the wedding must be recorded in the Marriage Register with the signatures of both parties, witnesses, and the minister, and it must occur before witnesses and an authorized clergyman. (From [The English Bride: Legal Advice.](#))

[Mary Darby Robinson](#) was a beautiful actress who came from a humble background, and who in her acting heyday moved among elite circles, including the Prince Regent's set. She received her first proposal at thirteen, but in 1774 she married Thomas Robinson, a gambler and a wastrel who pretended to come from a good family. Mary's sad account of her arranged marriage is typical, in that so many brides of her era scarcely knew the men they married. In fact, any a young woman in her situation must have felt as bewildered and unhappy as Mary did.



Harmony Before Matrimony by James Gillray

By the time Mary's family discovered Tom had lied, she had become pregnant. The following excerpt is her account of their wedding in her [Memoir, published posthumously in 1801](#). From it you get a real sense of what the 'duties' of a bride mean and that Mary barely knew her husband.

As soon as the day of my wedding was fixed, it was deemed necessary that a total revolution should take place in my external appearance. I had till that period worn the habit of a child, and the dress of a woman so suddenly assumed sat rather awkwardly upon me. Still, so juvenile was my appearance, that even two years after my union with Mr. Robinson I was always accosted with the appellation of Miss whenever I entered a shop or was in company with strangers. My manners were no less childish than my appearance; only three months before I became a wife I had dressed a doll, and such was my dislike to the idea of a matrimonial alliance that the only circumstance which induced me to marry was that of being still permitted to reside with my mother, and to live separated, at least for some time, from my husband.

My heart, even when I knelt at the altar, was as free from any tender impression as it had been at the moment of my birth. I knew not the sensation of any sentiment beyond that of esteem; love was still a stranger to my bosom. I had never, then, seen the being who was destined to inspire a thought which might influence my fancy or excite an interest in my mind, and I well remember that even while I was pronouncing the marriage vow my fancy involuntarily wandered to that scene where I had hoped to support myself with

éclat and reputation.



Rowlandson's satiric wedding scene

The ceremony was performed by Dr. Saunders, the venerable vicar of St. Martin's, who, at the conclusion of the ceremony, declared that he had never before performed the office for so young a bride. The clerk officiated as father; my mother and the woman who opened the pews were the only witnesses to the union. I was dressed in the habit of a Quaker—a society to which, in early youth, I was particularly partial. From the church we repaired to the house of a female friend, where a splendid breakfast was waiting; I changed my dress to one of white muslin, a chip hat adorned with white ribbons, a white sarsnet scarf-cloak, and slippers of white satin embroidered with silver. I mention these trifling circumstances because they lead to some others of more importance.

From the house of my mother's friend we set out for the inn at Maidenhead Bridge, Mr. Robinson and myself in a phaeton, my mother in a post-chaise; we were also accompanied by a gentleman by the name of Balack, a very intimate acquaintance and schoolfellow of my husband, who was not apprised of our wedding, but who nevertheless considered Mr. Robinson as my avowed suitor. *On his first seeing me, he remarked that I was "dressed like a bride."*



Painting: [Pamela is Married, Joseph Highmore](#)

The observation overwhelmed me with confusion. During the day I was more than pensive—I was melancholy; I considered all that had passed as a vision, and would scarcely persuade myself that the union which I had permitted to be solemnised was indissoluble. My mother frequently remarked my evident chagrin; and in the evening, while we strolled together in the garden which was opposite the inn, I told her, with a torrent of tears, the vouchers of my sincerity, that I was the most wretched of mortals ! that I felt the most perfect esteem for Mr. Robinson, but that, according to my ideas of domestic happiness, there should be a warm and powerful union of soul, to which I was yet totally a stranger.



Idealized wedding scene from the Jane Austen Centre

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If you would like to share a new site, or point out an error, please email me. (Yes, I am fallible. I'll own up to my mistakes and will make the corrections with a polite smile on my face.) Write me at



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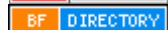
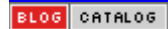
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