

The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England

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The case of Mary Toft—the woman who gave birth to rabbits in 1726—has an enduring appeal. I remember the first time I encountered her as a final year undergraduate, both fascinated and appalled by the details of the case. Since then, I have repeated her story to numerous undergraduates, watching the look of dawning horror as they think through the physical implications of the illusion created by Toft and those around her. Having asked ‘how’ (and regretted it), the immediate question is usually ‘why’ and it is this question that Karen Harvey’s latest book, *The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England*, addresses. Much has been written about Mary Toft, both in the 18th century and since. What sets this book apart is its focus, not on the medical establishment or the involvement of the King, but on the voice and experiences of Mary Toft herself. Using a combination of doctors’ notes, published pamphlets and Toft’s ‘confessions’—a remarkable thirty-six pages of rough notes scribbled by Doctor James Douglas once the hoax was revealed—Harvey reconstructs the tensions of Georgian society and the experiences of plebeian men and women in intricate and incredible detail.

Harvey starts her examination of Georgian society with a vivid description of Godalming, the town in Surrey that was central to the inception of the hoax. Using a variety of contemporary sources Harvey depicts the social and physical characteristics of 18th-century Godalming in detail. She highlights the extreme social distinctions that characterised this period, not just between the top and bottom of society, but within the cloth trade that dominated the town. Inequality and segregation was built into the physical and political structures of Godalming, making it almost impossible for what can be termed the persistent poor (of which Toft was one) to make their voices heard. Central to Harvey’s analysis are the increasing controls being imposed on the customary rights that had previously helped plebeian families to avoid starvation—rights such as wood-collecting and the hunting of game (including rabbits). These increasing controls were imposed by a social group described in the sources as the ‘chief inhabitants’ of the town—the office-holders, subscription raisers, and householders connected by marriage and friendship that formed a classic urban oligarchy. Yet Harvey emphasises the precarity of this social group and therefore the fragility of their authority. By the end of chapter one, it is clear that Godalming in 1726 was a powder-keg of social tension, resentment, and oppressive control. Chapter two explores the lives of women against this background of tension and poverty. Harvey emphasises the importance of the economy of makeshift and customary rights to women’s work and domestic roles, and to the survival of poor families. Changing economic

conditions, and their impact on agriculture and the textile trade upon which Godalming depended, had a pronounced impact on Toft and the women that surrounded her. It is no coincidence, Harvey argues, that the hoax began at harvest time, just before a lengthy period of potential unemployment for Toft and her contemporaries. Harvey also highlights the complexity of notions of female solidarity in Toft's confessions. When Toft first fell ill, the women around her 'workt with me their dinner hours that I might goe sooner' (p.27). In so doing, they ensured that Toft did not lose her payment of a penny for the work she had done. Yet, the women in the field with Toft were often paid to work as a team—the loss of a team member would affect everyone's pay. Female solidarity is therefore not the only explanation for their behaviour. Careful attention to detail allows Harvey to convincingly demonstrate the ways that Toft's birthing chamber recreated the social divisions and tensions of Godalming, and of 18th-century England more broadly. These divisions, she shows, ran not just between rich and poor, but also along fracture lines of age, experience, and status. Finally, this section of the book explores the births themselves, and the way in which Toft's physical experiences were shaped by shifts in control over her body—from authoritative women, to educated men. Despite suspicions being raised about the veracity of Toft's claims to be birthing rabbits, none of the medical men called to examine her in Godalming dismissed the hoax outright. This, Harvey suggests, is due to the developing emphasis in medical and scientific circles on observation and enquiry. It was not scientific to dismiss Toft's claims without investigating them first, even if doubts had been expressed. This was compounded by the opportunity that the hoax offered the fledgling medical establishment to observe the theory of maternal impression—a phenomenon that had hitherto been only theoretical.

Part II of the book follows Toft's removal to London, and the rapid discovery of the hoax. In a bagnio (a bath-house/lodging house) in what is now Leicester Square, Toft spent nine days under the constant surveillance of men that embodied patriarchal power: lawyers, scientists, medical men, and the aristocracy. Harvey emphasises the absolute powerlessness of Toft and her peers when dealing with these men, removed from localised structures of power such as family, kin, and neighbourhood. Harvey's careful treatment of Toft and her physical experiences is both heart-wrenching and unflinching. Toft's gender, her social status, and the opportunity she represented as an object of medical enquiry led to her humanity being entirely overlooked by the men brutally examining her body. The dispassionate attitude of the medical establishment towards Toft is highlighted by the tenderness described by Harvey in their letters to their wives. Toft's treatment was not due to a lack of emotional range on the part of these men, Harvey points out, but because she was not seen as deserving of—or capable of—emotion. Toft's pain was evidence, not an emotional state. Toft was approached in this way despite a heightened awareness of emotions and 'sensibility' across the period, particularly in relation to mothering. In London, a lack of access to rabbit parts and conversations overheard through the thin walls of the bagnio led to the discovery of the hoax. Toft stopped being an object of medical scrutiny, and became the focus of a criminal investigation. The precise and careful attention that Harvey pays to Toft's words in her 'confessions' allows her to identify persistent details in the accounts that point to two traumatic physical experiences: a prolonged miscarriage; and the rabbit births. Pain, Harvey notes, is prevalent throughout Toft's confessions in the loss of the pregnancy, in the insertion of the rabbit parts, and in the delivery of those rabbit parts and the subsequent examinations. Interwoven with that pain is a narrative of powerlessness. Toft's powerlessness in the face of the establishment throws into sharp relief the lack of agency of the poor in 18th-century England. If, Harvey argues, the hoax was a particularly female political response to poverty and social dislocation, using the body as a tool of political resistance, then the reaction to it spoke to a deep-seated fear and loathing of the poor amongst the social and political elites of 18th-century London. Poor women, in particular, were a definable social problem, for which Toft was a textbook example. She had essentially duped the elite, if fleetingly, into investigating her claims. That she had done so using an animal that was so central to ongoing violent conflicts over the nature of property made the hoax a dangerous example of the dispossessed expressing dissatisfaction with their lot. As a result, Toft endured four months in the Westminster Bridewell.

The final part of this book explores public attitudes towards the case using images, newspaper reports, plays, and performances. The timing of Toft's hoax made her, however briefly, an important figure in the establishment of medical science. As such, printed accounts of her experiences reveal a vibrant and dynamic

public sphere of rational debate and medical discovery. Yet Toft's story inspired other forms of print, underexplored by previous scholarship on the case. Satire, theatrical reconstructions, and newspaper reports all highlight what Harvey identifies as a 'pulsing current' of impoliteness underpinning Georgian culture that is at times hard to separate from the polite Enlightened discourse generally claimed by this period (p.108). Harvey highlights a really unsavoury appetite for Toft's case in the Georgian newspapers—allegedly 'in justice to the publick' but ultimately with the aim of shifting copy (p.111). The broad range of sources that Harvey surveys enables her to present Toft not just as a medical anomaly, or a criminal, but as an object of satire, and of titillation. This was not simply an appeal to popular audiences. Elite readers also consumed print of this nature. Laughing at Toft—at her poverty and her pain—served as a form of real and material power that kept the poor in their place. Despite her poverty and her powerlessness, Toft's body, and the rabbits that it delivered, were political, Harvey suggests. Toft represented disorder—in government, in society, and in the female body—and, as such, she was an ideal subject for political satirists. This was not a new phenomenon. The body had long stood for the health of the nation. Whilst the shift from humoral ways of thinking to Enlightened scientific enquiry had weakened the link between the human body and the political body, Toft's body remained political. It was unstable, unpredictable, and grotesque; and it was firmly associated with popular culture. Her capacity to fool the medical and scientific establishment cast doubt upon what had been presented as new and concrete knowledge. In a world that was being redefined by rational and enquiry-based approaches, Toft (and the poor more broadly) represented the power of the unseen and immaterial and were therefore real and tangible threats to social order.

Harvey concludes by exploring the afterlife of Toft's story, highlighting her enduring relevance over the centuries since she miscarried in a field. Toft's experiences have continued to provide a reflective surface into which writers, in particular, have seen recognisable elements of their own society; from the newspaper writers and editors that saw her as a curiosity, and a cautionary tale, to modern iterations of Toft as a proto-feminist. Harvey identifies two key reasons that Toft has remained relevant: firstly as the embodiment of economic and social injustice; and secondly as an exposé of the ways that ideas, beliefs, myths, and fear about and around the reproductive body get entangled. The link between parent and infant, and the impact of environmental stimuli on the foetus, remain the ongoing focus of medical research. As well, healthcare in general (and childbearing in particular) retains many behaviours and opinions that reflect past beliefs and traditions. In Mary Toft's story, Harvey concludes, 'we can also see traces of the experiences of many other women, then and now' (p.164).

By contextualising reproduction geographically, politically, and economically, as well as socially, Harvey has shown that birth and reproduction—even on an individual level—is tied to grand historical narratives. This book offers a detailed and insightful addition to our knowledge of the lives of the poor, always challenging, and particularly so in the 18th century. As scholars, this book encourages us to think about power structures, and the ways that 'ordinary' people interact with them. It exposes the 'politeness', and 'sensibility' of Georgian society and the Enlightened scientific approaches of 'reason' and 'enquiry' by overlaying them with Toft's pain and suffering. Yet I would also recommend this book to students, or to scholars from other disciplines that are seeking a text to introduce them to the complexity and contradictions of 18th-century England. Harvey's writing is clear and accessible—no prior knowledge of the period is required to engage with her arguments. She never loses sight of the fact that, at the very heart of this book, is the story of a woman that found herself at the centre of an incredible series of events. As such, this book also has a broad public audience. Under Harvey's careful and attentive scholarship, Mary Toft finally gets to tell her 'personal truth about her physical and subjective experiences' (p.78).

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