



BOOK REVIEW

## Megan Matchinske, ed. *The Carleton Bigamy Trial*

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*The Carleton Bigamy Trial* is a collection of seven of the sixteen texts published within seven weeks of what may have been the first “tabloid-news” scandal in the English-speaking world. Mary Carleton (née Moders), of lower-class Canterbury origins, arrived in London in 1663 claiming to be Maria von Wolway, a German “princess.” She instantly attracted the fortune-hunting young law student John Carleton, who married her at Great St. Bartholomew’s church on April 21, 1663. When no money or plate arrived from Germany, he had her indicted and tried for bigamy. Conviction meant execution, but she performed her von Wolway identity at the June 4 Old Bailey trial persuasively enough for the jury to acquit her. Narratives about the scandal were authored by both plaintiff and defendant as well as London hacks who produced trial reports, a poem, and a play. After her “five minutes of fame,” Carleton lived for another ten years during which time she became a professional thief and, after multiple arrests, was put on order for transportation to Barbados. We do not know for certain whether she ever lived in the Caribbean but we do know she returned to London, breaking the “condition of her transportation”—indentured servitude—to reprise the role that had made her “famous.” In 1672, she reportedly stole watches from a London goldsmith and remained undetected until she was caught with a stolen silver cup and spoon. An unredeemed recidivist, she was sentenced to hang at Tyburn and died January 22, 1673.

Megan Matchinske’s edition begins with a timeline of Carleton’s life that gives both her own and her detractors’ dating of significant events as well as publication dates for major works about Carleton. In a long introduction (43 pages), Matchinske frames the Carleton bigamy trial and its pamphlet coverage through the idea of “truth wars” (1). During the Civil Wars, all was tumult as John Milton predicted. Truth with a capital T had been dethroned with the king; and the people had to sink or swim in streams of living water—Milton’s metaphor for Truth in *Areopagitica* (1644). But the English people, as a group, disappointed him. Like sheep, they returned to the monarchical fold in 1660 and participated in the collective pretense that the war never happened. There were, however, individuals like Mary Carleton whose behavior expressed the Miltonic idea of Truth as a current of energy or a life force manifested in the “passages of moment” which, in her autobiographical defense, she calls “these novels of my life.”

Beyond the framing work done in the Introductory chapter, Matchinske includes introductions to each of the seven documents, which, while helpful, could include more instruction on key topics, such as class, work, and, most importantly, the law and legal process. Her discussion of women’s subject position, limited as it was to coverture and the absence of property rights, neglects the ways women intervened in politics and the public sphere during the Civil Wars and the new mobility continental exile afforded them. Since the focus of the edition is a bigamy trial, there ought to be more discussion of the law and trial

procedure that actually gave public platforms to intelligent and resourceful women convicts. Contradictions in legal theory and practice opened loopholes that Carleton deployed daringly to assert her humanity against the laws of property. The Law did not “see” a married woman as an agent in her own right because she was covered by her husband’s identity. Yet, married women did commit crimes, and in order to indict them for criminal behavior, court officials had to list all of their names: married, maiden, and sometimes, as in Carleton’s case, strings of aliases. The “married spinster” legal fiction gave women a serial identity as it tacitly admitted that they did, in fact, have agency and identities of their own. To help readers grasp the ways Carleton claims agency, her autobiography needs to be historicized more fully in the context of the Old Bailey trial. Performance is a key theme in Mary Carleton’s story, and the edition includes T.P. Gent’s play, “A Witty Combat,” possibly the one in which Carleton played her own role. Was the 1660 statute that required actresses play the women’s roles enabling? If so, how might we account for Carleton’s surprising failure as a stage performer?

The choice to frame the collection through the idea of “Truth Wars” seems pitched to address the ongoing war on Truth waged in America by a popular demagogue who dismisses criticism categorically with the invented category of “fake news.” If Matchinske hoped readers would apply aspects of the Carleton case to the epistemological crisis of our own historical moment, a more nuanced mapping of the scholarly interpretations would have been helpful. For example, Matchinske uses facts and frameworks from Mary Jo Kietzman’s biography of Carleton, *The Self-Fashioning of an Early Modern Englishwoman: Mary Carleton’s Many Lives* (2004) but does not explain her interpretation of Carleton as an activist who claimed a property in herself, her history, and her competencies.

While I applaud the impulse to make Carleton’s life more widely known, I think her whole life and death must be taken into account. The bigamy trial has been a scholarly focus for several decades, as indicated in a lengthy note (41 n147), and scholars have easy access to these narratives through Early English Books Online (EEBO) and from two previous editions, Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing’s *Counterfeit Ladies* (1995) and Mihoko Suzuki’s *Mary Carleton: Printed Writings 1641–1700* (2006). So many more interesting questions may be asked when we consider what she was doing between 1664 and 1673. Are Carleton’s personae connected? What is the relationship between Maria von Wolway, Maria Darnton, Mary Blacke, and Maria Lyon? Why did she break the conditions of her transportation in 1672 to return to London and reprise the German Princess role that had made her famous? Carleton makes repeated pleas for female solidarity: she writes to the women of England in her autobiography and she addresses them from the gallows. A new generation of women, adept at defining themselves through image manipulation but struggling to find meaningful work, would likely identify with Carleton’s plight and plea. We need the unabridged life presented through a more fulsome collection of documents to grasp the power of one consistent message that emerges from the various passages of Carleton’s life: that freedom always involves prioritizing self-possession over every material thing the word “property” can denote.