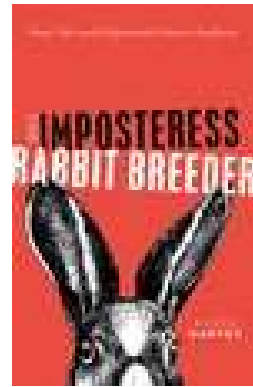


The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England

Karen Harvey

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Potter's Peter, Milne's Rabbit, Wolf's Roger, Carroll's White Rabbit, and Harris's Pantoufle. Rabbits have held a certain appeal in literature and other media over time. Rarely are stories about rabbits the basis on which to question social, professional and local hierarchies though, as well providing a lens through which to scrutinise the rapid development of medical professions and understandings of justice in the eighteenth century. Karen Harvey's *The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England* (2020) shows us a story that does just that, excavating the paper trail of an extraordinary tale. The 'Toft Affair', as it is often referred to, is the story of a young labouring rank woman Mary Toft (née Denyer) who, late in 1726, appeared to be giving birth to rabbits. Harvey traces these events and surrounding investigations through their geographic and social movements, from Godalming to Guildford, and finally to London where the facts of this sensationalist account came to light.

Though Toft's hoax is already well-trodden territory for scholars of medical history and literature and medicine, what Harvey offers is a new and valuable perspective from which scholars with interests in histories of midwifery, medicine, and gender will gain a great deal. While much existing scholarship concerning these rabbit 'births' has concentrated on the intrinsic connection the tale had to the eighteenth-century scientific debates, most prominently the power of 'maternal imagination' as having a physiological impact on pregnancy and foetal formation, Harvey takes an alternative route. Placing 'the case in the wider social, economic, cultural, and political contexts of eighteenth-century England', she recontextualises this extraordinary story by exploring the everyday life that surrounded it (p.2). The book is divided into three sections: Surrey, London, and The Press. Though the latter of these categories may at first appear incongruous, to apply these labels is to situate these 'births' and the ensuing investigations accurately in the primary sites of debate and discussion in which they originated. Through this structure, Harvey offers a refreshingly different perspective on a familiar story of how a woman of low birth and status enticed King and country into believing that the impossible had occurred.

Part One 'Surrey' offers detailed depictions of Toft's time in Godalming and Guildford from just before the 'delivery' of the first rabbit occurred up until her removal from the home of local doctor John Howard to London. It is here, in these early descriptions, that Harvey's careful archival research and considered interpretation reveals the reality behind the spectacle: as she later puts it, 'Mary Toft —literally—embodied economic and social injustice' (p.155). Gender relations also make up an integral part of this analysis. Harvey highlights the complexities of women's social structures that had the potential to be a mutually supportive network for managing family and working commitments as well as emotional challenges. She also points

out, however, that it would be an overly idealised and revisionist version of history not to account for the fact that women could also be 'antagonists and adversaries' (p.34). The role of Toft's mother-in-law, Ann, is subsequently brought under particular scrutiny for how she may have manipulated her family relationships, placing pressure on Mary to instigate and uphold the charade.

Part Two, 'London', uncovers the rapid escalation of curiosity and attention that were fixated on Toft from all corners of society as she was relocated to Roger Lacy's bagnio, or bathing-house, in Leicester-Fields (Leicester Square) for further examination. Harvey's study brings to life the sometimes chaotic scenes within the bagnio, leading to Toft's confession and her subsequent imprisonment in the Westminster Bridewell. The interaction between Toft, those medical practitioners already involved and external interested parties is here at its most dynamic. Harvey highlights that it was at the alleged request of King George I that Toft found herself in London at all (p.57) and that multiple notifications of these remarkable 'deliveries' were sent to medics, including the famed physician Sir Hans Sloane, though no record has been found to evidence that he engaged with Toft's case in person (p.61). Of a cast of many, the role of man-midwife Richard Manningham is particularly interesting in terms of his early scepticism and efforts to discover the true meaning of what he witnessed. Harvey further draws attention to the intriguing, though ambiguous, setting of the bagnio as an establishment to improve health and wellbeing, to positive effect. Her work begs many further questions, such as how the bagnio factored into cultures of health-related sociability, indicating the need for scholars to conduct further research in this area.

Part Three, 'The Press', highlights the powerful yet underexplored relationship between the development of medical discourse and print culture. Despite the eventual decision that Toft should be released without charge, the enacting of an inauthentic birth was 'simply not a crime' (p.150), Harvey finds that Toft was forced nonetheless to bear the longer-lasting sentencing and punishment of public view and comment. This section introduces the most intriguing range of material that kept the story of the 'rabbit breeder' alive well beyond Toft's own lifetime but is perhaps that which is most likely to have readers asking for more. Newspapers, letters, ballads, pamphlets, medical treatises, and artworks are brought together to reveal how this remarkable story was utilised to political effect. Such a tantalising array of sources means that each is dealt with in necessarily brief terms. One cannot help but wonder about how these sources interacted with wider public understandings of reproduction and childbirth in the eighteenth century. These additional questions are somewhat peripheral to Harvey's study however, and the need for brevity in a book of this nature is understandable. Harvey's deliberate and well-calculated focus on questions of town and country, man and woman, practitioner and patient is a key strength of this book, and one which changes our perspective on a story we thought we knew well. Accessible and enjoyable for scholars, students, and the public, this book is a valuable and insightful addition to any bookshelf.

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