



Romanticism on the Net

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REVIEW

Debbie Lee. *Romantic Liars: Obscure Women who became Impostors and Challenged an Empire*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. ISBN: 0312294581. Price: \$75.

Author

Nick Groom
University of Exeter in Cornwall

- 1 Scholars and critics of literary forgery and fakery have lately turned their attention to investigating the world of impostors – Michael Keevak, for example, has written suggestively on the eighteenth-century Formosan, George Psalmanazar, in *The Pretended Asian* (2004). The Romantic period has no shortage of such characters, and figures such as the radical prophetess Joanna Southcott, Princess Caraboo (Mary Baker), and even John Hatfield (as Alexander Augustus Hope, seducer of the Maid of Buttermere) hold an enduring interest. All three feature in Debbie Lee's *Romantic Liars*, alongside several unjustly neglected cases: the cross-dressing sailor Mary Anne Talbot / John Taylor, Ann Moore the fasting woman, Mary Bateman the Witch of Leeds, and Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles. In presenting such diverse material, Lee skilfully weaves together biography and cultural history to bring out the social implications of imposture: why is the impostor a transgressive figure? why do they become celebrities? what function do they serve? She is not afraid to confront questions of identity, but admirably resists the temptation to produce over-sophisticated readings of Romantic subjectivity. This is an immensely readable study: there is no better guide to Romantic impostors than Debbie Lee's fascinating and forthright book.
- 2 Almost all of Lee's impostors are women who disguised themselves to create social opportunities, which they lacked through gender and class prejudice. Disguise – in many different guises – gave the chance of upward mobility, money, and independence. In other words, although impostors are in one sense mythic types (the trickster tradition is as old as Western literature), imposture is a particularly viable role for impoverished labouring class or rural women. It allows them to cross social borders. This adaptability not only challenges cultural myths of power, but perhaps more importantly is a way of reclaiming story-telling, of narrating the self. Imposture read in this way is a language

(or rather, a performative symptom) of female psychological trauma.

- 3 Mary Anne Talbot, for example, was forced into a masculine identity by her guardian (Capt. Essex Bowen). On his death, she remained a male, passing as a French soldier (“playing both the gender boundary and the national one,” 4). As John Taylor, s/he was given up to the British navy, then captured by the French, and spent 18 months imprisoned. Going back to the British navy, Talbot/Taylor served on a merchantman carrying, appropriately enough, textiles (“fabric made fabrication possible,” 5), and was promoted to a commission. In a bizarre twist, s/he was then press-ganged while on leave in London and obliged to reveal her sex to secure her release. She determined to settle down as a woman – training herself to feminine behaviour – but without success. Talbot/Taylor reverted to a masculine identity and consequently a life of beggary. By now, s/he was a sort of celebrity. Talbot/Taylor discovered that a potted account of his/her life had been printed, and then discovered another woman who claimed to be Mary Anne Talbot and John Taylor: “She had so effectively internalized her dual selves, male and female, that they formed a single character that was compelling, and surprisingly stable, enough to be the subject of identity theft” (9). Despite this, s/he continued a downward spiral until being rescued by the printer Robert Kirby (publisher of *Kirby’s Wonderful and Scientific Museum*, 1802-20), who employed Talbot/Taylor as a domestic servant. Kirby published his/her memoir after she died – a life that itself has since been hotly disputed as a hoax or delusion itself – a hoax of a hoax. How many li(v)es are there here?
- 4 Talbot/Taylor’s self-reinvention looks decidedly modest beside that of the prophetess Joanna Southcott. Lee reads Southcott’s familiar career (or plight) as an performance of female trauma – a form of displaced sexual fixation that helped to construct “one of history’s most authentic impostors” (78). Southcott’s mystical language of female psychology was one she wove from folk superstition and religious radicalism, and this presents Southcott in a curiously generous light. In particular, Lee’s reading gains considerable momentum from the experience of Ann Moore, a disciple of Southcott who became a renowned fasting woman – or what today might be more sympathetically thought of today as an abject victim of anorexia nervosa and Munchausen’s syndrome. Attempts to make sense of Moore’s self-starvation at the time went from the spectacular (making a waxwork of her) to the cruelly voyeuristic: she was placed under close surveillance and denied any form of nutrition – including fluids, with which she was occasionally refreshing herself. She almost died, saved only by a forced confession that she had “occasionally taken sustenance for the last six years” (65).
- 5 The pitiable story of Ann Moore indicates the gravity of Lee’s cases: imposture was a life-or-death affair. This is exemplified by a Lee braiding together in one chapter the stories of Mary Robinson the Maid of Buttermere and John Hatfield / Alexander Augustus Hope, with that of Mary Bateman, the Witch of Leeds. Bateman was a monster, exploiting lower class women through the language of female psychology initiated by Southcott (indeed, her crimes were used to try and discredit Southcottians). Bateman’s chilling strategy was to identify powerless women, and appear to offer them some form of empowerment, through such non-patriarchal traditions as folk medicine, superstition, and witchcraft. In practice, this meant that she blackmailed for charms and threatened with curses.
- 6 In the course of her despicable activities, Bateman’s acquisitiveness reached quite

absurd levels. In addition to a considerable sum of money, the inventory of goods she acquired from William and Rebecca Perigo included “a goose, two pairs of men’s shoes, a goose pie, a tea caddy, several shirts, a counterpane, a piece of woolen cloth, a silk handkerchief, a silk shawl, a light colored gown skirt, two pillow slips, a new waistcoat, six pounds of butter, seven strokes of meal, six strokes of malt, varying amounts of tea and sugar, two hundred or three hundred eggs, a pair of worsted stockings, a pair of black silk stockings, three yards of knaresbro’ linen, a piece of beef, three bottles of spirit, two table cloths, two barrels, and two napkins” – all this to assuage Rebecca’s heart problems. Behind such a simple trust placed in the Witch of Leeds lies real human pain – the desperation of the disenfranchised. And much worse was to come than mere penury. Mary Bateman laced her charms and curses with arsenic: her victims would assuredly perish if they broke the diabolical pact they had made with this nightmarish serial killer. When William Perigo began to question the traffic of goods sent to Mary Bateman, she poisoned him and his wife; William survived to press charges, Rebecca did not.

- 7 The story of Bateman’s vile crimes casts a macabre light on the seduction of Mary Robinson by John Hatfield. The Maid of Buttermere’s authenticity was intimately connected with her place in the “natural” landscape of Cumbria, but was itself constructed by her first admirer, Capt. Budworth, and the tourists he inspired to visit her – which ultimately of course numbered among them her nemesis. Hatfield was an engaging conman who had been in and out of different identities and different goals. He was certainly popular among the villagers of the Lake District, to whom in the character of the Honourable Alexander Augustus Hope MP, he seemed to represent a “hope” of serious ruling class attention. But his fake largesse literally destroyed him. Apart from bigamy with Mary Robinson and a series of bad debts, he had also been forging letter franks by using Hope’s parliamentary privilege. That was enough to get him hanged, and like Mary Bateman, he ended his life on the gallows.
- 8 In her final chapter, Lee turns to Mary Baker, née Willcocks, a.k.a. Princess Caraboo, contrasting her life with that of the governor of Java, Sir Stamford Raffles. Raffles, rather pointedly described as “fascinatingly mediocre” (140), was responsible for *The History of Java* (1817), a text riven with complications. Mary Baker’s life usefully sums up the issues of female emancipation and empowerment that characterize Lee’s argument – in her wanderings before her self-election to royalty she took on many roles, from virgin whore to gypsy to anorexic, before she adopted the character of a princess of Java, derived from Raffles’s book: “even though it was based on insincerity and double-dealing ... [Raffles’s Java] gave Mary Baker the Englishwoman an authentic identity for the first time in her life” (193).
- 9 Such contradictions are the stuff of this study as it charts the ebb and flow of transgressive identities on the ground, as it was manifested among the people themselves. This perspective from principally lower class female impostors should help to cast significant new light on the crises of identity suffered by male writers such as John Clare, as well as serving as an elegy for some of the forgotten women that *Romantic Liars* celebrates.

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