BIOGRAPHY

Girls who were boys

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Debbie Lee
ROMANTIC LIARS
Obscure women who became impostors and challenged an empire
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In 1794, John Taylor, "drummer and sailor", was injured during the "Battle of the Glorious First of June", receiving grapeshot in his ankle and a musket ball to the thigh; he would be scarred for life. Taylor had been working on merchant boats and even a French privateer for some years, before enlisting on the fighting ship the *Brunswick*, which would be followed by the *Vesuvius* and finally the cargo boat *Ariel* in 1796. In fact, John Taylor was Mary Ann Talbot, and it was not until he became an officer and was mistakenly press-ganged in New York, that the secret was revealed. Talbot had been impersonating a man since she was fourteen, when her guardian had stolen her fund for education and made her his servant.

The stories told by Debbie Lee in *Romantic Liars* – of women who led fake lives and fooled a great many people – are extraordinary. Her subjects include a cross-dresser, a prophetess, a miraculous fasting woman and a pretend Oriental princess. The details of how they got away with their impersonations for as long as they did remain fascinating, and Lee is alive to the sensational aspects of many of these tales, which are told in an easy and informal style. Despite the animated, often unacademic tone of voice, the research is sound; Lee has clearly investigated these lives for herself, returning to primary sources and challenging the standard accounts.

Talbot/Taylor's story also teaches us about the fuller background of the Revolutionary Wars between Britain and France at the end of the eighteenth century, and what it was like to serve in the Navy at this time. Many of the lives discussed here incidentally reveal what the world was like for poor women at the time, and what little chance they had of improving their often desperate conditions. We have more sympathy with some of Lee's subjects than others; while Talbot was threatened with being sold into slavery if she didn't pretend to be a servant boy, others had more venal reasons for their behaviour. The "Witch of Leeds", as Mary Bateman became known, callously played on the feelings of desperate relatives who had to watch their loved ones sicken and die. Yet all of the women featured here – and some of the men, too – are in some sense victims of a rigidly unforgiving class structure that forced people into such impostures.

But if these were unusual performances, people understood that so, too, was gender itself. Talbot found it difficult to return to dressing and behaving in a feminine manner after her subterfuge was discovered; in her own words, she had forgotten "how to act" the female part, and, after her story was published, she had to prove that she was the "real" Mary Talbot when another woman pretended to be her. Talbot's experiences allow Lee to make wider points that are clearly relevant to today's culture. Recognized not as a single, strange instance but as part of a tradition of female sailors, and with her motives made comprehensible, Talbot becomes representative rather than odd: "The cross-dressing women stand out because they showcase the fact that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries no less than today, female identity involved a particular kind of performance, with all of the attendant meanings that a performance implies, such as masquerade, costume, disguise, role playing, and imposture".

Lee subjects her Romantic-period women to modern methods of psychological interpretation, in the hope of learning why people make up identities for themselves and what motivates the desire to deceive. She is interested in the complicity of the deceived, who are often "willing victims", in the act of deception. In part, this is because people tend to believe that others are telling the truth, but impostures are particularly successful, Lee points out, "because they tap into powerful cultural myths and because they have an uncanny ability to reflect our own personal fantasies back to us". In other words, we want to believe them. It seems that this was particularly the case with "John Hatfield". A man with social ambitions, he found that to persuade people that he was an upper-class gentleman he had only to act and talk like one. Despite a life spent using other people's money and abandoning his wives and children, he seems not to have met with the anger one might expect from those whom he deceived. He was finally tried and hanged for forgery; he had impersonated Augustus Hope, a Colonel and Member of Parliament. Before being caught, he had managed to court and marry the legendary "Beauty of Buttermere", Mary Robinson. She never publicly complained about her misfortune beyond writing a short factual account. Samuel Coleridge, who had met Hatfield, was amazed at the locals' continued support and defence of his actions.

Many of Lee's liars impress the reader with their dexterity and sheer effrontery. In the story of the Caraboo princess, which was the role adopted by the dark-complexioned Mary Wilcocks, her quick-wittedness outfoxed a number of eminent authorities on the subject of her supposed home, Java. Wearing her handkerchief as a turban, she listened closely to scholars discussing where she might have come from; as they described the differences in language and behaviour between Asian peoples, she learned to act in the correct manner, weaving together a "lingo" that was pronounced to be most certainly Javanese. Professional men figure largely in *Romantic Liars*: we see them asked to verify identity and to test claims, but their presence is often more sinister than reassuring. In the case of Ann Moore, diagnosed by Lee as an anorexic, the lengths that medical men went to in order to prove that her ability to fast was not miraculous make uncomfortable reading. The doctors eventually determined to set four-hourly watches on her, round the clock, and to refuse anyone else entrance; as they watched her, over the ensuing days, moving slowly and horribly towards death, they would not relent until she signed a testimony admitting that she had "attempted to deceive and impose upon" those around her.

Similarly, when the prophetess Joanna Southcott claimed, at the age of sixty-five, that she was going to give birth to "Shiloh", the son of God, she had to gain proof from the doctors. They duly examined her, and Southcott certainly does seem to have needed medical help; Lee highlights the acts of self-harm, the sexual confusion, the need for endorsement from the clergy and medical community, and the strange relationship that Southcott had with her father, as crucial factors in her psychological crisis. Lee's treatment of Southcott is particularly sympathetic, as she finds in her delusions evidence of a disordered and abused mind.

One conclusion prompted by this book is that the Romantic period, which is perhaps best known for its emphasis on truth, sincerity and authenticity, was awash with liars and cheats. Untruthful and unscrupulous they may be, but they remain, as Debbie Lee has shown in *Romantic Liars*, interesting because of those qualities: "Because they step over the boundaries dividing truth and lies, fact and fiction, they reveal the nature of those boundaries".