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Femme fakes Book chronicles 19th century women imposters

By Hope Belli Tinney
WSU Today



Debbie Lee always encourages students in her English literature classes to follow their interests and see where they lead. In her case, a short footnote about an imposter in an 1802 article by Samuel Coleridge caught her interest and led her through graveyards, paupers' prisons, orphanages and, at one point, into the Bristol cottage of a distant cousin of Princess Caraboo, one of the most famous fakes of the 19th century.

"It's interesting to have those research moments," she said, perched on an overstuffed armchair in her homey Avery Hall office. Such "finds" don't happen when your subject is part of the literary establishment, like Coleridge, for instance.

The story of Princess Caraboo, an illiterate beggar woman who recreated herself as Javanese royalty and became a celebrity, eventually became the focus of the sixth and final chapter in Lee's 2006 book, "Romantic Liars: Obscure Women Who Became Impostors and Challenged an Empire."

An imposter herself

Lee said her interest in imposters was first piqued by a footnote in which Coleridge complained of an imposter in his native Lake District, one John Taylor, nee Mary Ann Talbot, who had served — with distinction — for years in the British navy. Intrigued by the idea of identity, imposters and the search for authenticity during the Romantic Period, Lee gave a talk about Talbot at a Coleridge conference in Somerset.

After the talk, a representative of Palgrave Macmillan, an academic imprint of St. Martin's Press, approached her and asked, "Is that just a talk, or are you writing a book?"

A book, Lee answered, without hesitating. "I was kind of an imposter myself," she said and laughed. In any case, Lee wrote up a book proposal to trace the lives of 12 British imposters during the 18th and 19th centuries, both men and women, and Palgrave Macmillan accepted it. In addition, Lee was awarded a \$75,000

humanities grant to support her research.

In their footsteps

In 2002 Lee spent a year headquartered in a London apartment three blocks from the British Library, but really traveling the length and breadth of the island. Somewhat like a fabled British detective, she was looking for clues that would illuminate the lives of imposters who managed to move from the margins to some measure of notoriety, if only for a time.

As she wrote in the preface, "I've sat in the churches where they prayed, ate in the pubs they frequented, slept in their childhood homes, spoken to distant relatives, touched their tombstones...."

Although she researched both men and women, once she got home and started writing, she realized that she was really drawn to the stories of women imposters.

"The thing about women imposters," she said, "is that all of them were illiterate and very, very poor."

In a world with no safety net, especially for single women of no means, imposture provided some measure of escape, though they always ended up paying a high price once they were unmasked, Lee said.

Challenging conventions

In her book, Lee writes, "Impostors are so much a feature of human culture that there seems to be no time or place when and where they don't exist. Because they step over the boundaries dividing truth and lies, fact and fiction, they reveal the false nature of those boundaries."

For instance, the British certainly considered war the business of men. But if a woman (Mary Ann Talbot) pretending to be a man was a better military sailor than many men, then perhaps the stricture against women going to war was an artificial construct.

While Talbot challenged gender roles and warfare, other imposters chronicled by Lee challenged religious conventions, medicine and ethnography. And beyond that, she said, they raise questions about the nature of identity itself.

"Imposture is a performance," Lee said. "You are performing your identity. These impostors bring up the possibility that we are always performing our identity, and we always have open the possibility of changing our identity."

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