



Lesley Thulin // Centuries before “fake news” became a hashtag, a servant in Surrey, England emerged as a household name for convincing doctors that she had given birth to a litter of rabbits. Three months after the news broke in September of 1726, Mary Toft confessed to fabricating the story. Although Toft gained notoriety for devising one of the most famous medical hoaxes of the eighteenth century—a scheme that seems altogether antithetical to the scientific method and the production of knowledge—her legacy in the print marketplace paradoxically illuminates the mutually constitutive relationship between science and literary knowledge, which Tita Chico theorizes in her recent monograph, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (2018).

According to Chico, eighteenth-century science contains literary qualities, such as figurative language, to describe the world and scientists’ roles within it. Eighteenth-century British literature, on the other hand, features “countless references to early science, whether as themes, tropes, or characters” (Chico 1). Literature and science, then, do not represent incongruous ways of thinking: as Chico argues, both literary authors and scientists in the eighteenth century demonstrate an “*experimental imagination*,” a cognitive process that unites the rational and aesthetic faculties (1). Although Chico focuses on natural philosophy, or an “experimental or observational science” that includes, for instance, astronomy and Newtonian physics, it seems that we can extend her argument to the realm of eighteenth-century medicine (6). In other words, the literary attributes of eighteenth-century medical texts also seem to inform the epistemological attributes of literariness, and vice versa.

Chico touches on eighteenth-century medicine in her discussion of Alexander Pope's figuration of the Cave of Spleen in *The Rape of the Lock* (1717), wherein the malady of the spleen manifests as gendered melancholia. For Chico, Pope anticipates Freud's psychoanalytic discourse, while turning bodies into "metaphors for something else altogether" (145). Although splenetic symptoms signify Freud's broader "theory of female sexuality," Chico writes, the splenetic bodies in Pope serve as metonyms for "a disorder well beyond bodily impairment" (144, 145). In another instance of medical figuration, Chico points to the *Spectator's* "Visionary Dissection" of the coquette, wherein Mr. Spectator associates "the many Labyrinths and Recesses" within the coquette's heart, as well as its "extremely slippery" and cold surface, with her supposed "heartlessness" (Addison n.p., n.p., Chico 68).

Beyond Pope and Addison, Chico's argument can apply to more conventional medical texts, which is to say eighteenth-century texts that engage with actual medical cases. The news reports, medical reports, and satire surrounding Toft, known as the "Rabbit-Woman of Godalming," exemplify the literary and scientific features of the "experimental imagination" Chico describes. After Toft convinced a local midwife, Mr. Howard, that she had given birth to a litter of rabbits, a rabbit's head, and the legs of a cat, the *Weekly Journal* publicized the news, sparking public interest in the unusual event and attracting the attention of Nathaniel St. Andre, King George I's personal anatomist and surgeon (Magee 1065). King George later dispatched German surgeon Cyriacus Ahlers to investigate Toft's case alongside Howard, with the former awarding her a guinea after witnessing another apparently genuine birth. Requesting further examination, the King appointed the doctor Sir Richard Manningham to the case, relocating Toft to London for observation. Toft eventually confessed to the hoax as "an attempt to obtain a good livelihood" and was jailed at Bridewell Prison (1065). Unsurprisingly, the imposture occasioned a proliferation of satire within the print marketplace, with William Hogarth's drawing, "Cuniculari or The Wise Men of Godlamin," emerging as perhaps its most famous rejoinder.

Although critics often read Toft's case within the context of "the growing authority of (masculine) medical authority" over reproduction or as a manifestation of "the prodigious," it makes legible the conjunction between the literary and the scientific (Harvey 35). Demonstrating a fictional incursion into the medical realm, Toft authors her own seduction plot. As Chico might argue, she fashions herself as a coquette—one of the two literary characters Chico presents in her study as "immodest witnesses," or characters that enable writers to test the boundaries of empiricism (Chico 44). Like the coquette, Toft elicits the male (and medical) gaze out of self-interest: she desires to surmount gender- and class-coded obstacles that restrict her access to "a good livelihood." On the other hand, Toft's series of three confessions, transcribed by the anatomist and midwife Dr. James Douglas, evokes the genre of autobiography, calling to mind the "empirical mode" that some literature enables (4). In her confessions, Toft appeals to the empirical mode, providing a rational explanation for the hoax: she admits to inserting parts of animal corpses into her vagina in order to deceive obstetricians.

In this case, one does not have to look far to find the scientific in the literary. If Chico argues for a capacious understanding of literature—one that not only pertains to creative literature and

literacy, but also to an orientation toward the world that is both creative *and* intellectual—then the satirical commentary the hoax inspired (including a pamphlet by Jonathan Swift posing as Lemuel Gulliver, as well as at least three anonymous poems) demonstrates “the period’s investment in seeing the literary as a way of ascertaining truth about the world” (5). One of the anonymous poems responding to Toft’s case, titled “The Discovery: or, The Squire turn’d Ferret. An Excellent New Ballad” (1727), advances the following principle: “MOST true it is, I dare to say,/ E’er since the Days of *Eve*,/ The weakest Woman sometimes may,/ The wisest Man deceive” (Anonymous 1-4). Although the author facetiously asserts a fundamental truth about human nature, he undermines the supposed authority that a doctor—the “wisest Man”—assumes, critiquing his credulity. As a witty response to Toft’s hoax, the poem enacts satire’s function: to present what Swift calls “a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body’s Face but their Own” (Swift 95). Figured as a “glass,” the poem not only reflects an uncomfortable truth about the world, but also literature’s own epistemological value.

Works Cited

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List of Illustrations

William Hogarth

Cuniculari or The Wise Men of Godlamin

(London: 1726)

Etching on paper, 189 mm x 250 mm

British Museum

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_assetId=130536001&objectId=1419628&partId=1

