



TRIAL IN ABSENTIA?

CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS AND PUBLIC PERSONAE

Susannah Walker

ON 3RD MAY 1817, the radical publisher William Hone was arrested on the grounds of blasphemy and sedition. His “crimes” were to publish three pamphlets which used the forms of religious texts: *The Late John Wilkes Catechism of a Ministerial Member*, *The Political Litany Diligently Revised to be Said or Sung until some appointed change can come*, and *The Sinecurist’s Creed or Belief, as the same can or may be said*. Hone stood three trials for blasphemy on consecutive days, starting 18th December of the same year.¹ This grueling schedule could easily have broken his resolve. However, he was able to mount his defence using impressive logic arguing that he was not offending religion but using a religious form to critique the government.

The publisher was an anti-establishment underdog who defended his editorial opinions with humour and courage, and his trials are a landmark in press freedom. The trial was also a forum where culture was produced. Hone reclaimed the draconian and intimidating criminal proceedings as a performative space where he could reiterate his opinion, raise his profile, and potentially disseminate new arguments and imagery.² Imbued with

Susannah Walker has catalogued a range of political pamphlets in the British Museum’s Department of Prints and Drawings. All pamphlets cited are in the British Museum Prints and Drawings Collection, and there are detailed summaries of these and many more in the Museum’s online database. Copyright 2021 Susannah Walker.

¹ Philip W. Martin, *William Hone*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13659> (accessed 10th May 2019).

² See Martin for an account of Hone’s blasphemy trials of 1817.

ideals of fairness, the trial brings a non-abstract urgency to the notion of liberty. It is a space of argument and language and therefore resonates with the idealistic journalist's practice.

Queen Caroline's "trial" and The Bill of Pains and Penalties (and its forerunner, the so-called Delicate Investigation of 1806) were no less instrumental in the production of visual and vernacular culture spawning comment and caricature. Yet there was a crucial difference. Hone's trial had allowed him to display rhetorical skill and learning. The issue at stake had been fundamental to his vocation, the true meaning and intention of his words. As a result of her gender and the constraints of her public position, a striking feature of Queen Caroline's trial and the culture it produced was the elision of her voice and agency.

Caroline's body was at the centre of the allegations against her. It is unsurprising that she should appear as a primarily physical caricature in the scurrilous prints designed to undermine her reputation. Yet much of the print culture produced in her support also rendered the Queen as a literally two-dimensional figure. In *The Queen that Jack Found*, a pamphlet published by John Fairburn (1820), she is represented as a flat, iconic form similar to the allegorical figures of Britannia and Wisdom who appear on its title-page. This dignified representation of the Queen's body made legible by the attributes of crown and sceptre was an antidote to the unruly and sexualised image presented in such works as Theodore Lane's *Installation of a Knight Companion of the Bath* (fig. 1) and *Tent-ation* (fig. 2).

While the respectable representation of the Queen is a powerful corrective, it renders Caroline something of a vacant sign on to which different ideas could be projected. Indeed, *The Queen that Jack Found* is not dedicated directly to Caroline but to her supporter the MP and former Mayor of London, Alderman Matthew Wood, whose political agency and loyalty to the insulted Queen are emphasized. Rather than being a political actor, Caroline is depicted as one in need of support and defence.³

A striking aspect of these pamphlets is their simplification of language. The rhythmic, verse form which can be recited and quoted with ease inspired by Cruikshank and Hone's successful pamphlet on Peterloo: *The Political House that Jack Built* (1819) is often used. The tune and rhythm of *Sing a*

³ Anon, *The Queen that Jack Found* (London: John Fairburn, 1820), non-numbered page.

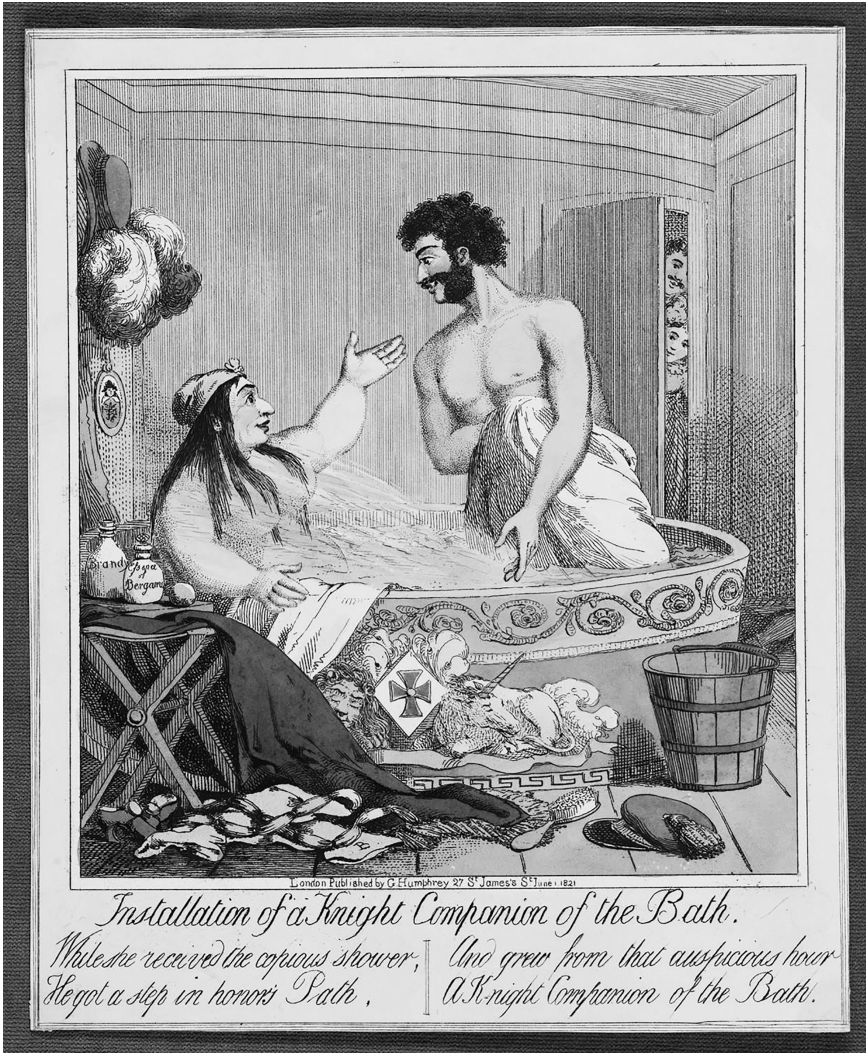


Fig. 1: Installation of a Knight Companion of the Bath. Creator: Theodore Lane. Contributor: Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Library. Identifier: 821.06.01.05 <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/bibid/14028816>.

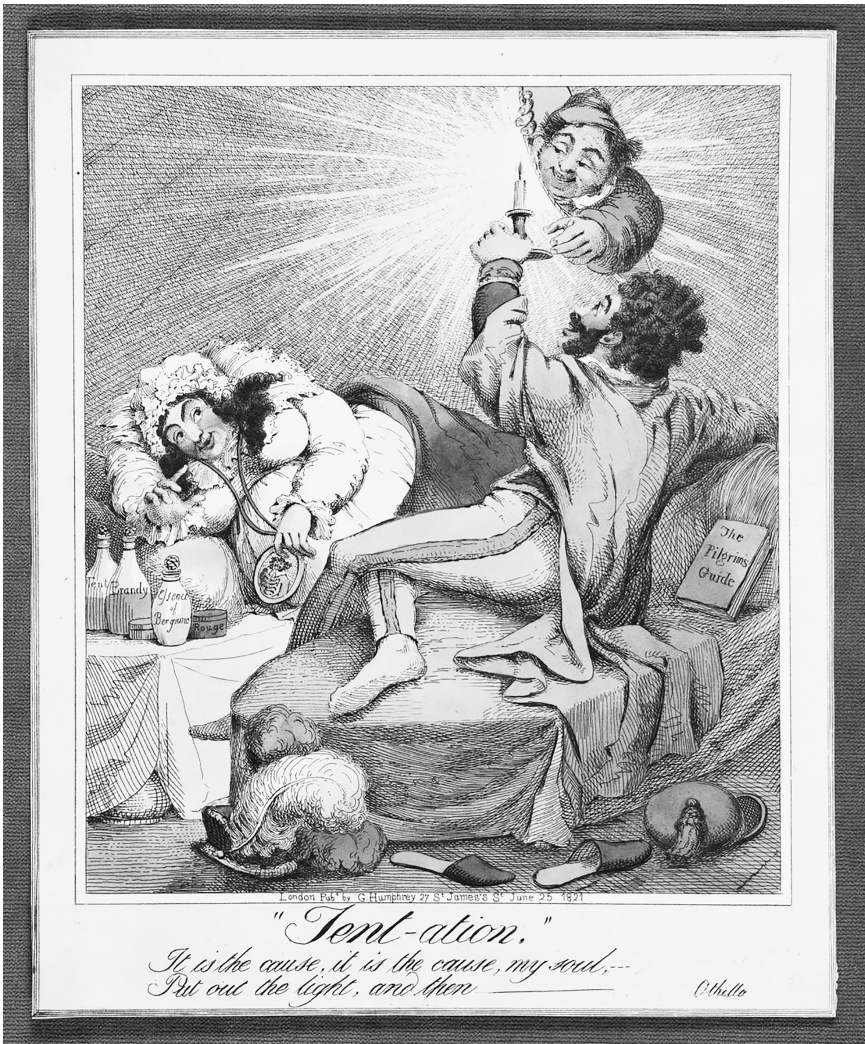


Fig. 2: "Tent-ation". Creator: Theodore Lane. Contributor: Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Library. Identifier: 821.06.25.01 <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/bibid/14028703>.

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Song of Sixpence is used to structure the satire in *The Green Bag*: “*A Dainty Dish to Set before a King; a Ballad of the Nineteenth Century*.”

Despite the sophisticated combination of the playful and accessible with the political in these pamphlets, the Queen’s own voice, motivation, and deeds are somewhat occluded by their form. Indeed Caroline’s lack of agency and the appropriation of her voice are recurrent themes in the print culture that surrounded her. *The Queen’s reply to the King’s Letter*, printed for J. Johnston in 1821, repeatedly points to the Queen’s lack of action:

“It was never my wish to give to the domestic differences between myself and the King a political aspect.”⁴

“If Radical Reformers choose to address me, I cannot refuse to receive such a testimony of their affection.”⁵

“I had no more to do with creating the internal troubles of Great Britain than the babe unborn.”⁶

It is fitting then that we learn in the concluding observations to this pamphlet that it was not written by Caroline at all, despite bearing her name, but by a male author who states that he makes no apology for assuming the Queen’s name and speaking in her person. Furthermore, he states that he has been advised that as Milton escaped a prosecution for taking the words of the almighty, then he: “cannot be censured for making her Majesty deliver what are known to be her real sentiments.”⁷

A somewhat ambiguous pamphlet – *The Queen in the Moon*, published by Grove and Company in 1820 – also assumes the voice of the Queen, which condemns the Cato Street Conspiracy, a radical plot against Lord Liverpool and his ministers. It is a text that distances the Queen from the plot but also implicitly connects dissent against the establishment often voiced by her supporters and a more extreme radicalism.⁸ It seems that the pamphlet does the very thing that it critiques, appropriating the Queen’s voice to make political comment.

⁴ Anon, *Letter from the Queen in reply to the One from the King* (London: J. Johnston, 1821), 7-8.

⁵ *Id.* at 11.

⁶ *Id.* at 12.

⁷ *Id.* at 42-43.

⁸ Anon, *The Queen in the Moon* (London: Grove & Co., 1820). For reference to the Cato Street Conspiracy, see pages 9-11.

Caroline's death in July 1821 consolidates the idea of her absent presence. Conjecture and tales of intrigue are perpetuated in such pamphlet titles as *Death-Bed Confessions of the Late Countess of Guernsey to Lady Anne H****. In this pamphlet, subtitled "Developing a series of mysterious transactions connected with the most illustrious personages in the kingdom," Caroline is presented primarily as a victim of intrigue rather than an individual who sought to exercise control over her own destiny.⁹ The actions around her are clandestine and can never fully be known. In *Last Moments of Caroline Queen of England: A Vision*, published by J. Johnston, her ghost appears before the King and is described in the language of Gothic fiction:

The royal sleeper shudd'ring gaz'd and fain
Would seek to shun the sight, but seeks in vain.
For in that form, tho fled its light of life,
Too well he recognised an injured wife.
What, tho' no royal robes by her are borne,
No crown of state her pallid brows adorn,
No sceptre decorate her stiffened hand,
Death yet has left that look of high command.¹⁰

The Queen as a phantom vision certainly overturns the insistence on the Queen as a woman of flesh and blood but it also adds to the sense of her being a projection and one who is ventriloquized rather than an autonomous subject.

The print culture of late Georgian London is a rich archive for historians of gossip and celebrity. In this culture of reputation and rumour, we may justifiably be sceptical about recovering authentic voices in the archive. However, the trial has something of a privileged status. Even in the post-modern era of "fake news," it is a space dedicated to getting as close to *the truth* as is possible. The trials of William Hone are perhaps so ultimately satisfying because the defence rested on reason, logic, evidence, and the indisputable steadiness of his argument. The layers of uncertainty around Queen Caroline's private actions and many appropriations of her voice distance us from a personal narrative that remains deeply political, as it

⁹ Anon, *Death-bed confessions of the Countess of Guernsey to Lady Anne H****** (London: Fairburn, circa 1821). See in particular pages 46-47.

¹⁰ Anon, *The Last Moments of Caroline, Queen of England to which is added, The Broken Heart! A Poem* (London: J Johnston, circa 1821), 8.

concerns a woman's choices surrounding her own body and conduct. However, it is worth concluding that this is not only a gendered narrative but one of social status. A private person whose life would have attracted little scrutiny in normal circumstances, Bartolomeo Pergami was also subject to objectification, stereotyping, and media speculation on his motives. The name Pergami and title given to him by Caroline have fueled speculation surrounding his conduct and relationship with her. The British Museum's collection contains a fascinating pamphlet, *Memoir of Baron Pergami*, published by Cowie on 3rd October 1820. According to the publisher, the text was written by Pergami himself. It is striking that this pamphlet is not illustrated amid the outpouring of caricature and representations. However, it does contain an interesting visual detail: a facsimile of his signature.¹¹ For all of the appropriations, doubts surrounding even his name and title, caricatures, and accusations surrounding his body, the detail of Pergami's indexical trace retains a privileged status as an attempt to signpost an authentic voice.

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¹¹ Pergami, *Memoir of Baron Pergami, Chamberlain Knight of Malta, Knight of the Holy Sepulchre & c, Written by himself. To which is pre-fixed A Fac-Simile of Pergami's handwriting*. Facsimile, Published by Cowie, 1820. The British Museum.