

Mary Toft's Rabbit Tale

Originally broadcast in April 2011 and aired again by BBC Radio 4 this November, *Mary Toft's Rabbit Tale* is a radio drama retelling the story of its titular fraudster's brief notoriety. With a high-profile cast – including singer Will Young as Toft's husband and Rupert Graves as man-midwife, John Howard – the play explores a number of issues related to the alleged rabbit births of 1726 and their impact on public discourse of the time. Colin Bytheway's script exposes both the arrogance and the competitiveness of the eighteenth-century medical establishment, while also speculating as to the sense of confinement and limited opportunity which might have led Mary Toft to perpetrate the hoax in the first place. The play charts an admirably clear course through the Surrey of Toft's time, beginning in her home at Godalming and emphasising her sheer sense of remoteness not only from London but even from Howard's base in Guildford. Toft's celebrity increases as she gets closer to the capital and the intrigued King George I; closer also to the unravelling of her deception and the embarrassment of those physicians who had believed her monstrous births to be scientifically possible. While the play has interesting things to say about eighteenth-century public spheres, one senses that it is as much concerned with offering a more universal and perennially-appropriate parable on the dangers of fame. This is a natural interpretive step for such a radio drama to take, though it might disappoint those looking for a more faithful historical re-enactment.

The play's most striking embellishment of its source material stems from its introduction of an affair between Toft and Howard, the ambition of the latter and the affection of the former conspiring to lure them both to London. Though I am not an expert on the circumstances of the case, I have been hard-pressed to find much evidence for any such romantic liaison between Toft and her obstetrician. That said, Toft's early confessions certainly seem to have indicated Howard's complicity in the fraud and the scenario is at least plausible, not least because the illusion would have been very difficult for Toft to sustain without any assistance whatsoever. Moreover, on a dramatic level, this addition to the plot is effective in making Toft more than a bizarre and selfish caricature. There are times when she strikes a repellent figure, but she is also a victim, of the man who claims to love her and of society as a whole. The play's concern with her sexual desires is consistent with the way that the story was explained and reported on in eighteenth-century sources: whether we look to royal physician Nathaniel St André's ideas of maternal impression or to the various lewd speculations of pamphlets inspired by the scandal, it is clear that Toft's capacity for imagination and sexual agency were pivotal to the case's notoriety. She is voiced engagingly here by Anna Madeley, who finds a good balance between the absurdity of the character's situation and the ordinariness of her longing.

Complementing this ordinariness, and standing in contrast to the villainous Howard, is Will Young's cuckolded Joshua Toft. The historical facts actually suggest that he was in on the hoax – he is said to have been found bringing rabbits to his wife, raw materials for the fraud. Here, however, he is simply naïve, a representative of rustic simplicity who is there to forgive his wife at the end of the play and offer her hope after the miseries of Bridewell. This is rather convenient, and I have some qualms about the way that the play embraces this prospect of re-imposed patriarchal order in its final moments. We are clearly meant to side with Joshua and to see the chastening of his wife as a good thing. The play ends with her happily informing him that she is pregnant again, expecting a human baby this time. The play would have us overlook the intriguing fact that she would again be imprisoned in 1740, for more mundane, less attention-grabbing crimes. It also doesn't do much to inform us of the saga's

wider impact on politics and culture of the time. Though the script rather sensationally sets up Toft's confession so as to be delivered in front of the monarch himself, there is a misleading sense at the end of the production that the case is closed, that the issues and anxieties (political as well as social and philosophical) raised by the rabbit births can be safely forgotten.

In spite of these reservations, however, the play does offer much valuable exploration of eighteenth-century life and culture. I was especially impressed by the script's use of prayer to inform us of its characters' inner lives. It did more than pay lip-service to the pervasive religiosity of the period. It also led to some interesting consideration of the importance of meaning for these characters and their society. A running gag of the play focuses on Joshua's fear of the swinging shop signs that dominate London's streets. Such signs of modern trade and public commerce are usefully, but subtly, contrasted with the private signs and wonders which St André looks for and with the intimidating symbolic potential of the hoax itself. In this aspect of the play at least, there is no easy resolution offered, simply a proliferation of signs and concomitant frauds as the eighteenth century births new modes of public life.