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Abstract

This paper re-examines the portrayal of George IV of England in contemporary sources and modern scholarship by looking at his relationship with his secret first wife, Maria Fitzherbert, and her adopted daughter, Minney. It argues for a reinterpretation of the one-sided portrayal of George as a licentious, selfish person.

George and Maria: A Reinterpretation of King George IV and the Queen Caroline Affair By Eric Roberts

This paper re-examines the portrayal of George IV of England in contemporary sources and modern scholarship by looking at his relationship with his secret first wife, Maria Fitzherbert, and her adopted daughter, Mimsey. It argues for a reinterpretation of the one-sided portrayal of George as a licentious, selfish person.

Two years ago, I read a book. Usually this would not be a notable occurrence, but the book was different. It was entitled *The Secret Wife of King George IV* and it was a fictionalized account of the illegal, illicit, and secret marriage between King George IV of England and Maria Fitzherbert, a Roman Catholic twice-widowed woman six years his elder. It was engrossing, captivating, and, of course, distorted. The facts of the story are simple. The two first met in early 1784 while attending the opera. A little less than two years later, the couple defied the law and married in a private ceremony in Maria's house. The semi-secret relationship was a happy one for three years, until politics intervened, in the form of George's failed attempt to become Regent, and the couple separated due to George's resulting drinking, gambling, and womanizing. In 1795, he married for duty, while still married for love, and less than a year later, George began what would be come a four-year long re-wooing of Maria. The two reunited in mid-1800 and remained happily together for 11 years, until politics, this time in the form of a successful appointment to the Regent, and Maria's pride drove them apart for good.⁷⁹

However, the majority of recent non-biographical scholarship relating to the reign of George IV focuses primarily on the Queen Caroline Affair, which painted an unflattering picture of George as a weak, corrupt, immoral cuckold. Thus, it is only through this narrow focus that George has been judged as a husband and man. Somewhere between the lovelorn and the heartless depictions lies reality. During my quest to reconcile these two vastly different perceptions, I discovered that, despite negative modern portrayals of the Queen Caroline Affair by feminist scholars, my initial romantic conception of George was not false.

The relationship between George and Caroline was troubled from the beginning. Caroline was "imported" from Brunswick to England in 1795 as a way for George to fulfill his gambling debts.⁸⁰ George disliked the ill-mannered and ill-bred Caroline instantly. Rumor had it that "the morning that dawned on the consummation [of the marriage] witnessed its virtual dissolution," and after the Princess Charlotte's birth nine months later "the royal couple very soon ... gave up all pretense of a life together."⁸¹ In 1814, after 18 years of estrangement, George and his ministers finally persuaded Caroline to leave England in return for receiving £35,000 per annum for as long as she remained aboard, where she spent most of her time with her Italian lover. She returned to England in 1820 upon the death of George III in order to

⁷⁹ All factual information included above from Alan Palmer "Wife to the Prince of Wales," *British History Illustrated* 2 (1975): 48-57. The couple finally split after Maria was, for propriety's sake, forced to sit at a different table than George at a dinner party, because she was not of the peerage. For her account of this event, see Maria Fitzherbert "Mrs Fitzherbert to the Prince of Wales: June 7, 1811," *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* ed. Shane Leslie (London; Hollis & Carter, 1944) 2:138-139.

⁸⁰ Anna Clark "Queen Caroline and the Sexual Politics of Popular Culture in London, 1820," *Representations* 31 (Summer 1990): 49. George married under the impression that it was the only way that Parliament would forgive his extensive gambling debts and as a way to please his father.

⁸¹ Thomas W. Laqueur "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV," *The Journal of Modern History* 54 no. 3 (Sept. 1982) 418.

assume her place as Queen Consort. According to Tamara L. Hunt, "the idea of sharing his throne with this woman was completely unacceptable" to George. Therefore, he set about divorcing Caroline, not crowing her.⁸² The resulting uproar from the press and populace, among whom Caroline was extremely popular, become known as the Queen Caroline Affair.

By looking only at this one specific incident, contemporary scholarship has produced a very biased view of George. Scholars have primarily focused on the radical and plebian reaction to the affair and rarely questioned or critiqued the caricatured view of either George or Caroline that the affair created. According to Thomas W. Laqueur, George was portrayed at best as a "bumbling cuckold" and at worst as the "voluptuary he *undoubtedly* was."⁸³ Additionally, Marilyn Morris describes contemporary political cartoons in which George is depicted as being a "brutish husband" by the press. But neither Laqueur nor Morris move beyond this view to question its validity.⁸⁴ It is one thing to present the caricature drawn in contemporary newspapers; it is quite another to claim its truth, as both implicitly do. As a result, scholars rarely mention George outside this portrayal by the plebian and radical dissidents in the popular press.⁸⁵ By limiting their focus to only popular depictions of George, contemporary scholars only see what the papers printed, never bothering to even ask whether or not it is accurate.⁸⁶

In addition to prejudiced contemporary evidence, modern scholars present a slanted portrayal of George through their word choices. Anna Clark claims that while Caroline lived for years in "exile" and spent her time "traveling with a handsome Italian valet," George "caroused" back in England.⁸⁷ She conveniently forgets to mention that Caroline left voluntarily in exchange for money and that the "handsome Italian valet" she traveled with was also her lover. Likewise, Hunt claims that Caroline's time in Italy was characterized by "indiscreet behavior" while George's was characterized by "blatant immorality."⁸⁸ Furthermore, Laqueur posits that the uproar of the public was caused because "they hated the immorality of the king."⁸⁹ All three of these claims are well founded and documented, but their word choice displays their bias against George. "Traveling" and "indecent," and "caroused" and "blatant immortality" say the same thing, respectively. But the former are relatively tame, while the latter are loaded with negative connotations. The result is a biased, prejudiced, and slanted portrayal of George.

Perhaps a better technique for studying George and his relations with women would be to include an analysis of his prior secret marriage to Maria Fitzherbert in December 1785. Examining their letters shows a very different George: one who is passionate and devoted. Throughout his lengthy letter to Maria in November, 1785, a month before the couple finally married, George repeatedly calls her "*my dearest & only below'd Maria,*" "*my beloved wife,*" and

⁸² Tamara L. Hunt "Morality and Monarchy in the Queen Caroline Affair," *Albion* 23 no. 4 (1991): 700.

⁸³ Laqueur, "Politics as Art," 49; *Ibid.*, 50 (emphasis added)

⁸⁴ Marilyn Morris "The Royal Family and Family Values in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Family History* 21 (Oct. 1996):9 *OCLC Wilson Select Plus* (24 March, 2004).

⁸⁵ For example, Dror Wharman spends one paragraph depicting George, while devoting nearly ten pages to analyzing popular middle class opinions about the Affair. Dror Wharman "'Middle-Class' Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class, and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria," *The Journal of British Studies* 32 no. 4 (Oct. 1993): 399-409

⁸⁶ For more information on the relationship between the press, the public, and those in power, Anna Clark and Thomas Laqueur are the Affair's primary scholars.

⁸⁷ Clark "Sexual Politics," 47

⁸⁸ Hunt "Morality and Monarchy," 700.

⁸⁹ Laqueur "Politics as Art," 444.

entreats her to “become mine.”⁹⁰ The letter is filled with flowery declarations of love, and he signs the letter “unalterably thine.”⁹¹ The very fact that he wrote an incredibly long letter to her in this a manner with the sole intent of proving his worth and sincere desire to marry her speaks to his sentiment.

Additionally, the verbalized desire for marriage itself argues for George’s deep affection for Maria. Not only was it illegal for any member of the royal family under the age of 25 to marry without permission (George was 21 at the time), but also a “Papist” could not inherit the crown. Therefore, Maria could never become Queen Consort, so George could never become King. Perhaps his language is too grandiose to be completely believed because the style of writing at this time certainly lends itself to flattery and embellishment. Perhaps George was really just a young man who wanted that which he could not have; perhaps he really was the voluptuary the press characterized him to be. These are all logical, reasonable interpretations of the letters as written. Certainly his behavior after the Regency Crisis in the winter of 1788-1789 could be taken as support for this view.

After George was prevented from becoming regent, he began to drink heavily and his gambling debts mounted. To top it all off, he took Lady Jersey as his mistress. Fed up, Maria left him. Soon afterward, George’s debts grew so great that he was basically forced to wed Caroline in 1795. Two years and one child later, George had had enough of Caroline. He had done his duty to king and country by producing an heir, Charlotte, and now he wanted to return to the woman he loved. Four days after the birth of his daughter, George drew up his Last Will and Testament, in which he wrote of “my Maria Fitzherbert who is my wife in the eyes of God, and who is and ever will be such in mine,” and asked that upon his death “the picture of my beloved wife, my Maria Fitzherbert, may be interred with me.”⁹²

George spent four years following Charlotte’s birth trying to prove his devotion to Maria. He sent her trinkets and long, pathetic love letters. By 1799, George had grown desperate and the letter composed 11-12 June of that year shows this distinctly. Where the previous letter to Maria was passionate yet logical, this letter is pure emotion pored out onto the page. In the letter’s body, George begs Maria to:

REITERATE YOUR PROMISE OR RECOLLECT YOU SIGN YOURSELF
MY DOOM. OH, GOD! OH, GOD! WHO HAS SEEN THE AGONY OF MY
SOUL & KNOWEST THE PURITY OF MY INTENTIONS, HAVE MERCY,
HAVE MERCY ON ME: TURN ONCE MORE I CONJURE THEE, THE
HEART OF MY MARIA, TO ME, FOR WHOM I HAVE LIVED & FOR
WHOM I WILL DIE.⁹³

Later in the same letter, George claimed that “*The wretched experiences of the last five years have MADE LIFE ONLY DESIREABLE IN ONE SHAME TO ME, & THAT IS IN YOU.*”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ George IV “Letter 148: The Prince of Wales to Mrs. Fitzherbert, 3 Nov. 1785” *The Correspondence of George, Prince of Wales, 1770-1812* ed. A. Aspinall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 1:189; *Ibid.*, 1:197; *Ibid.*, 1:196.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:201

⁹² George IV in Alan Palmer “Wife to the Prince of Wales,” *British History Illustrated* 2 (1975): 55. Indeed, when George died on June 26, 1830, he was buried with a miniature of Maria around his neck, as requested. Caroline was also mentioned in the will: “To her who is called the Princess of Wales I leave one shilling” *Ibid.*

⁹³ George IV “Letter 1454: The Prince of Wales to Mrs. Fitzherbert, Windsor Castle, 11-12 June, 1799” *The Correspondence of George, Prince of Wales, 1770-1812* ed. A. Aspinall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 4:48.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:49.

The entire letter continues in this manner. Even in his more rational moments, George is clearly overcome by powerful devotion, desire, and love for Maria. In December, shortly before Maria relented and returned to George, he wrote "[H]ow I have lov'd & ador'd you, God only knows, & how I do now he also knows & you even cannot pretend to be ignorant of or to disbelieve," and he signed the letter "your own, own, own George P."⁹⁵ Of course, it could be argued that George was wooing Maria, not out of love, but out of lust. However, the length of time it took for Maria to relent and return to George seems to preclude this cynical view from holding much merit.⁹⁶ George's dedication in this endeavor speaks to his character and provides a counter-example to Laqueur's claim that he was undoubtedly a voluptuary.

Furthermore, the combination of the fact that George's devotion continued over an extended period of time, and that his passion and longing for Maria grew so intense that his mother Queen Charlotte, "the most morally astute of mothers," personally intervened to ask Maria to reconcile with George, proves that his feelings were genuine.⁹⁷ George's words are backed up by his own actions and those of the people surrounding him. Because of this, it is not bold to assume that George's feelings are genuine.

Another aspect of George's character that too often gets lost in the modern social histories of the Queen Caroline Affair is George's role as a father. When George is depicted as a father in both the modern scholarship and in the contemporary press, it is an incredibly negative description. George is often seen as a powerful male in an oppressive patriarchal society who cruelly and intentionally mistreated Caroline as both his wife and as a mother.⁹⁸ It is quite possible that the reason George's role as a father is often ignored is because Charlotte died at a young age. But George had been unofficially a father ever since 1798 when Maria acted as Mary "Minney" Dawson-Damer's (née Seymour) guardian. Maria later adopted Minney in 1804 after a lengthy court battle, with the help of George's testimony. From the very beginning and until his death, George was involved in Minney's life, from funding her education, hardly an anti-feminist act, to supporting her marriage to George Dawson-Damer.⁹⁹ From examining the letters exchanged between Minney and George, one sees their patriarchal tenderness. Several of their letters remain, each filled with filial and paternal love. As a child, Minney addressed her letters to "My dear Prinny" and as she grew older, her letters contained expressions of sincere attachment, once writing "May I venture, before I conclude, to say that Your Majesty's little god-daughter is as You Majesty's kind feelings for me could lead you to wish."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ George IV "Letter 1510: The Prince of Wales to Mrs. Fitzherbert, Carlton House, 11 Dec. 1799" *The Correspondence of George, Prince of Wales 1770-1812* ed. A. Aspinall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 4:100; *Ibid.*, 4:101

⁹⁶ It is interesting to note, however, the parallels between George IV's intense, prolonged courtship of Maria with Henry VIII's courtship of Anne Boleyn. Both wrote letters filled with almost juvenile, pathetic declarations of true love and broke laws to marry their love only to have the relationships come to a messy end (literally, in Anne and Henry's case). This parallel provides an interesting argument against the reality of George's feeling. However, such a topic would be, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹⁷ Palmer "Wife to the Prince," 55.

⁹⁸ This stems primary from George's adulterous tendencies and the fact that George did not inform Caroline of Charlotte's death until after the services. To the best of my knowledge, no adequate explanation for this has been offered.

⁹⁹ George IV "The Prince of Wales to Mrs Fitzherbert: December 19, 1809" *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* ed. Shane Leslie (London: Hollis & Cater, 1944) 2:135; Mary Dawson-Damer "Minney Dawson-Damer to George the Fourth, 13 July, 1835" *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* ed. Shane Leslie (London: Hollis & Carter, 1944) 2:174-175.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Dawson-Damer "Minney Seymour to the Prince Regent: Brighton, (November 25, 1812)" *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* ed. Shane Leslie (London: Hollis & Carter, 1944) 2:139; Mary Dawson-Damer, "Minney

George was equally touching in his letters, as one birthday letter to Minney attests. Although his mother had died recently, George wrote to Minney “to assure [her] that notwithstanding [Queen Charlotte’s death] I not only never can forget but that I do greet with emotions of pleasure and delight that are not to be expressed the anniversary of the day that gave you Birth.”¹⁰¹ Minney and George were truly father and daughter, not by blood, but by love. The tenderness and care that he shows for his daughter is moving and paints a different picture of George than the one modern, feminist scholarship seems content to accept.

Taken together, the letters written between Maria and George, and Minney and George present compelling evidence against the depiction of George by both contemporary press and modern scholarship as an immoral, corrupt, and weak cuckold. Instead, the George that emerges from the letters is a passionate man who cares deeply for the women he considers his wife and child, even if the law might not. George also develops as a representative of reverse-feminist criticism. The letters allow for the image of a child controlled by his father, who was forced to marry for duty and money and not for love. If he were a woman, this aspect of George would be studied, not the Queen Caroline Affair.

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¹⁰¹ George IV “The Prince Regent to Minney Seymour, November 22, 1818” *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* ed. Shane Leslie (London: Hollis & Carter, 1944) 2:158.

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