

HOGARTH'S RABBIT WOMAN

The Weekly Journal of 19 November 1726 read: From Guilford comes a strange but well-attested Piece of News. That a poor Woman who lives at Godalmin [sic], near that Town, was about a Month past delivered by Mr John Howard, an Eminent Surgeon and Man-Midwife, of a creature resembling a Rabbit but whose Heart and Lungs grew without its Belly, about 14 Days since she was delivered by the same Person, of a perfect Rabbit: and in a few Days after of 4 more; and on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the 4th, 5th, and 6th instant, of one in each day: in all nine, they died all in bringing into the World. The woman hath made Oath, that two months ago, being working in a Field with other Women, they put up a Rabbit, who running from them, they pursued it, but to no Purpose: This created in her such a Longing to it, that she (being with Child) was taken ill and miscarried, and from that Time she hath not been able to avoid thinking of Rabbits. This print by Hogarth was published on 12 December 1726, a few days after Mary Toft's full confession of fraud. Strangely enough, it is not Mary Toft but rather the doctors who are chastised in this composition, a mock heroic type of a bedside drama. It is said that a group of surgeons commissioned this print in order to expose the failings of the doctors so carefully identified at the bottom. After the circulation of this print, it took some time for the physicians identified here to repair their reputation.

Description

On Mary Toft see the Dictionary of national biography. She lived at Godalming (Godliman) near Guildford, Surrey. She claimed to have given birth to rabbits after having had a dream about rabbits while

pregnant (in accordance with the idea of the influence of maternal imagination). She later stated the births were a hoax, suggested and activated by another woman

In the present print Mary Toft is marked F and described in the lettering as "The lady in the straw". On the left is Mary Toft's husband Joshua, marked E and described in the lettering as "The rabbit getter", and a woman marked G and described in the lettering as "The nurse or rabbit dresser": she is identified by Todd as Margaret Toft, the sister of Joshua Toft and his partner in the fraud. Right foreground, the three visitors from London. The man-midwife feeling but not looking under her garment, marked B, says "It pouts it swells it spreads it comes"; in the lettering, he is described as "An occult philosopher searching into the depth of things". Todd identifies this figure as a hybrid of two people. In saying "It pouts it swells it spreads it comes", the man is Sir Richard Manningham FRS, who suspected fraud but was misinterpreted at one point as suggesting that Toft was about to give birth to a rabbit. However the lettering "An occult philosopher searching into the depth of things" identifies him as Samuel Molyneux FRS (1689-1728), astronomer and politician, who was one of the courtiers sent by King George I to Surrey to examine Mary Toft. Right of him, a man marked C and described in the lettering as "The sooterkin doctor astonish'd", and saying "A Sooterkin" is John Maubray, author of a treatise on the sooterkin (a kind of animated afterbirth believed to exist in the Netherlands), and one of four doctors who attended Toft in London on 4 December 1726. Further to right, marked A and described in the lettering as "The dancing master or præternatural anatomist", is Nathanael St André, a Swiss dilettante, dancing-master, amateur surgeon, and courtier, who promoted the genuineness of the rabbit-births: he says "A great birth". At the door on the right, marked D and described in the lettering as "The Guildford rabbit man midwife", is John Howard, a local surgeon and man-midwife from Guildford: he is rejecting the offer of a rabbit from a villager and saying "It's too big", implying complicity with Toft

A parody of the Adoration of the Magi, which, in addition, uses the topical scandal of the Mary Toft case to satirise Enthusiasm (religious fanaticism): the three "wise men" exclaim ecstatically at

the phenomenon in front of them. Because Hogarth wished to satirise the credulousness of the Enthusiasts, he does not differentiate the visitors as between those who accepted Toft's claims (such as St André) and those who doubted them (such as Manningham, Cyriacus Ahlers and James Douglas): they are all portrayed as accepting. The virtuoso-astronomer (such as Molyneux) "had become the stock representative of the Enthusiast", explicitly so in the character of Sidrophel in Samuel Butler's poem *Hudibras* (Todd, op. cit. and Paulson, 2003, loc. cit.)