

The Divorce Trial of Queen Caroline: Contemporary Responses and Social Attitudes

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“Carolina Regina in spite of you all.”¹
--Queen Caroline of England, 1820

The divorce case of King George IV and Queen Caroline in 1820 remains one of the most dramatic and scandalous sagas of English history. The squabbles of the king and his consort were, like the rest of their lives, quite public, culminating in a sort of mock-trial of Queen Caroline in Parliament. The situation--an unpopular monarch trying to divest himself of his unwanted spouse--and the reaction it elicited among the upper classes do much to illuminate the social realities of early nineteenth-century England. Although feminism had its earliest stirrings in the previous century, the attitudes of the public toward Caroline, even those of her supporters, were still colored by restrictive ideals of womanhood--those of wife and mother. The rumblings of the disenfranchised masses who rallied around Caroline struck a chord within the privileged classes' latent fear of revolution. Hatred of foreigners also figured prominently into the proceedings, as a majority of the witnesses called to testify against Caroline were Italian. All these factors influenced the outcome of the trial and its surrounding publicity.

In several ways, George IV's marital conflicts could be considered an extension of his conflicts with his father. Born the first of fifteen children and heir to the throne of King George III and Queen Charlotte of England in 1761, the young Prince of Wales was brought up with the strictest of discipline. One of his brothers was even allegedly beaten for having asthma attacks.² In an understandable reaction to such a stifling environment, the naturally vivacious Prince of Wales rebelled, becoming known as “headstrong with his tutors and disrespectful to the King.”³

Eventually, as the prince grew older, the headstrong attitude and disrespect towards the King escalated to profligacy. Once George emerged from beneath his father's overbearing thumb he became quite wild, having numerous love affairs and gambling and drinking liberally.⁴ All in all, he behaved in every way he knew his father, an advocate of austere and moral living, would detest.⁵ His tutor once said rather astutely of the young prince, “He will either be the most polished gentleman or the most accomplished blackguard in Europe. Possibly both.”⁶ George was both charming and wild, a dandy and a reprobate, but his larger rebellions were still to come.

In direct opposition to his father, the prince began to associate actively with and support the Whigs in parliament. At this point, between the two developing political parties in parliament, the Tories generally stood in support of the crown and the status quo, while the Whigs tended to be more interested in reform, often at the expense of the crown.⁷ Therefore, the Prince of Wales' association with Whigs was a rebellion against his father. Of course, his political friendships were not made purely out of spite. George made influential friends who were able to support his personal financial and political interests in Parliament. At a time in which the monarch, in spite of wielding limited political authority, was becoming increasingly subordinate to the growing power of Parliament, George was able to circumvent much of his father's authority over him by appealing to

these friends. "He used the Whigs for his purposes in the question of the Regency, and in order to extort money from the nation . . . but he, once he was Regent in 1812 . . . , flung them aside as no longer useful and made the Tory government uphold the two things now to his interest to preserve--the status quo and the power of the crown."⁸ Several of these friends were able to persuade Parliament to pay off George's extensive debts, as well as granting him the Regency upon his father's final lapse into insanity in 1812, which enabled the Prince of Wales to act as monarch in his father's stead until his father's death in 1820, when he succeeded the throne.⁹

Much more to his father's dismay than even such unsavory political activity was the Prince of Wales' infatuation with a young widow of impeccable virtue. Mrs. Maria Fitzherbert, though well-born, was far beneath the touch of royalty. More appalling than this and even more unsuitable, however, was her Catholicism. According to the Royal Marriage Act, the heir to the throne could not marry without the assent of the King, and in any case, the Act of Settlement of 1701 forbade marriage of a monarch to a Catholic, which would have excluded George from the line of succession.¹⁰ Only Maria's conscience prevented her becoming the prince's mistress. The longer she resisted the more obsessed he became, and in 1785 he faked a suicide in order to elicit a promise of marriage from her.¹¹ They were married in secret by an Anglican minister recently released from Fleet Prison, and while the marriage was certainly illegal, it was very real in the religious sense.¹²

Though for the first year or so of marriage the couple remained content, the high cost of George's extravagant lifestyle began to take its toll. Money problems soon drove George to Parliament. He persuaded his friend, the unknowing Charles James Fox, a leading Whig and supporter of the Prince, to deny in the House of Commons the existence of the marriage so that George might gain an increase in allowance.¹³ Mrs. Fitzherbert was understandably hurt by this episode, but it was George's taking Lady Sally Jersey as his mistress that permanently blighted their relationship.

Lady Jersey, as his mistress and in the interest of further estranging him from Mrs. Fitzherbert, used her influence over George to persuade him to a political marriage that brought him the money to pay off his again considerable debts.¹⁴ As a married man, George would receive a vast increase in allowance. In 1795, an appropriate political match was engineered so that the Prince of Wales could sire the next heir to the throne. As the Hanoverian dynasty originated in Germany--George III was actually the first royal Hanoverian to be born in England--it was natural that a German princess should be selected.¹⁵ The situation was lampooned in James Gillray's "The Lover's Dream," which shows George dreaming happily of Caroline, on the right descending like an angel from heaven, while his father on the left holds a bag labelled £150,000, and Mrs. Fitzherbert slinks away.¹⁶

Caroline of Brunswick, the prince's first cousin born in 1768, experienced an upbringing equally as strict as his.¹⁷ Caroline's mother, the older sister of George III, disapproved of the immorality of German court life and thus severely restricted Caroline's upbringing.¹⁸ "At thirteen years old she had a governess who would not allow her to go to the window; she was seldom or never permitted to dine at table, or even come downstairs when there was any company."¹⁹ Unlike the Prince of Wales, however, Caroline's education was lacking in all areas except music.²⁰ Caroline soon let her rebellious nature free, and

By her twenties she had a reputation as something of a flirt and was notorious for her unbridled and sometimes indecent conversation in public company Whether because of this reputation or not, by the age of twenty-six she was still unmarried, nor was she even attached to any suitor. Her person was not particularly attractive. It was said that neither she nor her underclothes were often washed.²¹

At best, Caroline's behavior at her first meeting with the Prince of Wales can be described as silly and imprudent--hinting at the connection between the prince and his current mistress Lady Jersey. That however, paled in comparison to George's horrendous behavior on their wedding night.²² After becoming quite drunk, George simply passed out on the floor where Caroline left him. He could not resist hating his father's choice for his bride.

In spite of George's glaring neglect throughout the honeymoon, ²³ he and Caroline managed to produce a daughter nine months after their wedding.²⁴ Princess Charlotte, born in 1796 and named after George's mother, became a source of further contention between her parents. George was determined that Caroline should have little or nothing to do with Charlotte's upbringing, and left her under the care of his mother until her marriage to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg in 1816, severely restricting Caroline's access to her own daughter.²⁵

Caroline ultimately separated from George in 1797 to set up her own household at Blackheath,²⁶ where she stayed until she departed for the continent in 1814 in exchange for a £15,000 increase in allowance.²⁷ Throughout their prolonged separation, George continually looked for proof of her almost certain sexual promiscuity, most notably in the "Delicate Investigation" of 1806-7 into the rumors that Caroline had given birth to a bastard son.²⁸ Unfortunately for him, the allegations were false, and any evidence of Caroline's adultery proved inconclusive.²⁹ Still, this episode of "spying" on Caroline would figure prominently into the rhetoric of the future divorce hearing.

Princess Charlotte's death in childbirth in 1817 was difficult for Caroline, as increased pressure to produce a royal heir made it difficult for all the royal family, but the real problems did not start until George III's death in 1820.³⁰ With George III's death came the real possibility that Caroline would return to England to claim her rights as queen consort.³¹ Since an ecclesiastical divorce would leave George open to the scandal of his secret marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert, his only option was to obtain a divorce through a private bill in parliament.³² In a moment of drollery Caroline herself once said that she "did commit adultery once, but it was with the husband of Mrs. Fitzherbert."³³

Upon Caroline's return to England, in spite of a bribe of £50,000 to stay away, she found herself overwhelmed with popular support. As Charles Greville, clerk to the Privy Council, recorded in his diary, "Carriages, carts, and horsemen followed, preceded, and surrounded her coach the whole way. She was everywhere received with the greatest enthusiasm. Women waved pocket handkerchiefs, and men shouted whenever she passed ."³⁴ This incredible support in large part reflected the everincreasing unpopularity of George IV. Caroline's cause was taken up by anyone opposed to the crown in general, to George in particular, and even by women's rights advocates.

The Bill of Pains and Penalties was first read in the House of Lords on July 5, 1820. It was "An act to deprive her Majesty Queen Caroline Amelia Elizabeth, of Title, Prerogatives, Rights, Privileges and Exemptions of Queen Consort of this Realm, and to

dissolve the Marriage between his Majesty and the said Caroline Amelia Elizabeth,” and was based on a statute of Edward II, which read “If any man shall violate the wife of our eldest son, he shall be deemed guilty of treason; and if she consent to that violation, she shall be deemed guilty of treason also.”³⁵ The actual charges leveled against Caroline were vague, that “a most unbecoming and disgusting intimacy had commenced between her Royal Highness and the said Bartolomo Pergami, otherwise Bartolomo Bergami,” Caroline’s Italian servant.³⁶ It was debated whether she could be tried under the statute of Edward II as her alleged lover was a foreigner and could not be considered to have committed treason against a state to whom he owed no allegiance, and she could hardly be convicted of colluding in an act that was not a crime in the first place.³⁷ After the first reading, the bill was put on hold until August 17, when it was read for a second time. It was after the second reading that testimony for both sides was heard.³⁸ “The debate on this bill constituted ‘The Trial of Queen Caroline.’”³⁹ The bill would need to pass the House of Lords before moving on to the House of Commons, which it would also have to pass if Caroline were to be divorced.

Caroline’s choice of counsel was inevitably the source of much debate when “the Queen finally chose Mr. Brougham and Mr. Denman,”⁴⁰ both members of the House of Commons. “Her Majesty’s legal advisers, even though members of the other House, should be allowed to be heard and to conduct her defence at the bar; although members of the House of Commons are not usually admitted as counsel for or against any legislative proceeding. However, the whole proceeding was anomalous, and the counsel on both sides were members of Parliament.”⁴¹

Denman’s strategy was based on an attempt to “prove that he thought her a most injured innocent.”⁴² Whether he actually believed his arguments is not so clear. According to Lady Cowper (later Viscountess Palmerston), a fashionable aristocrat and wife of Lord Cowper, “Denman has either done so on principle or has really been bamboozled by the Queen, for he has made everybody think that he is perfectly convinced of her entire innocence . . . but the strength and cleverness of his Speeches are amazingly praised and I do not think it likely therefore that he should be such a dupe.”⁴³ She later refers to him as being “‘quite a fool’ on the subject of the Queen, and that Caroline had ‘made him in love with her.’”⁴⁴

Brougham, an “ambitious and none too scrupulous Whig lawyer,”⁴⁵ having no illusions about the guilt of Caroline, pursued a decidedly different strategy. Princess Dorothea Lieven, wife of the Russian ambassador to England, even overheard him remark, “I can believe in any folly on the part of that woman. We know quite well she is capable of it.”⁴⁶ Brougham, called the “King of Parliament” by Princess Lieven, attempted to win his point by provoking a quarrel between the Houses.⁴⁷ According to Mrs. Arbuthnot, wife of Secretary to the Treasury Charles Arbuthnot, “Nothing ever equalled the impertinence and insolent defiance with which Brougham, in the whole of the trial, has treated the House of Lords.”⁴⁸ Princess Lieven also observed that “He never opens his mouth without insulting the peers: he plagues them; he is as impertinent as he possibly can be.”⁴⁹ His antics were so well renowned that Princess Lieven wrote to the Austrian Chancellor Prince Metternich, “I don’t remember if I told you what Brougham said to me one day. He was asking me what people on the Continent thought of events in England. I replied: ‘Don’t tell me you don’t know.’ ‘Quite true,’ he said, ‘they are laughing at me. ‘Exactly.’”⁵⁰ Brougham’s reasoning was that “The peers have the right to send an

insolent counsel to the Tower; but in this case counsel is a member of Parliament and the House of Commons would start a quarrel with the Lords; and a Parliamentary quarrel would end in dissolution. That means that the Bill would be dropped; for if there were an election the new House would be radical.”⁵¹

The proceedings also split Parliament along predictable party lines in what Princess Lieven referred to as “a battle of wits that is interesting to watch.” She further observed that “They are no more concerned with the Queen now than with me.”⁵² The Tories were in favor of George and the divorce, including legendary military hero the Duke of Wellington, who, when demanded by a mob to swear loyalty to the queen, declared, “Well, gentlemen, since you will have it so, God save the Queen--and may all your wives be like her.”⁵³ The Whigs, of course, were in favor of the Queen.

The Radicals, a third and minority political faction, also strongly supported the Queen. Radical pamphlets like “The Queen’s Matrimonial Ladder,” by William Hone, satirized the situation and lent further popular support to the Queen,⁵⁴ while radical journals, such as *The Black Dwarf* and *The Political Register*, also wrote in her favor. Other publications supported her as well. Surprisingly for a traditionally conservative paper, *The Times* staunchly defended her throughout her ordeal, also increasing publicity and public fervor:

Addresses from what may be called all the good sense and sterling integrity of the country are pouring in every day with as much vivacity as they did immediately after the arrival of the undaunted heroine in England Who then can deny--who can have the impudence to deny--in the face of these facts, that she now stands as free and unsullied in the opinion of the people of England, as she did on the day of her first entrance among us to receive a husband’s sacred vows that he would love, honour and cherish her? Are we not right, then, in advocating such a cause?⁵⁵

Such rousing passages were common in the Queen’s defense. Even more vehement are passages from *The Black Dwarf*:

The object to be conquered is a DEFENCELESS WOMAN. . . and, in the conflict of differing opinions, unable to choose for herself, what course is the most proper to pursue? . . . Can it be supposed ONE so defenceless, so persecuted, so hated, so calumniated, and so insulted, with an innocence unsullied as the earliest snow-drop, CAN conquer a legion of enemies, a systematic influence organized against her, and all the interested feelings which must be embattled against her! . . . a marriage which robbed her of her natural protectors, and gave her only persecutors in exchange. . . . Abandoned, desolate, as she is, she may be incapable of judging what measures it would be best to adopt: --but innocent as we are convinced she must be, let her, at all events, persist in demanding the acknowledgment of her innocence, or the proof of contrary.⁵⁶

It is notable that while *The Black Dwarf* was a most staunch defender of Caroline, the defense in no way implied that she had rights of her own. She is repeatedly referred to as a “defenceless woman,”⁵⁷ as though devoid of the capability of taking care of herself without the guidance of men. She is also referred to as “the mother of Charlotte,”⁵⁸ as well as a wife, the socially acceptable roles for women to fill.

The Caroline affair was also notable in the way it brought the issue of women's rights, even if only temporarily, to the limelight.⁵⁹ Many women, especially working class women in northern industrial towns, sympathized with Caroline's situation as a symbol of their own plight.⁶⁰ A few women in the eighteenth century, such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, began developing ideas about equal rights among the sexes, and as English Radicalism began to grow, so too did nascent feminism.⁶¹

Yet in spite of the growing interest in equality between the sexes, the rhetoric surrounding Caroline's defense still reflected the entrenched feminine gender roles of wife and mother. Some, as artist Benjamin Robert Haydon expressed in his diary, felt that women who supported the queen did so out of self-interest. "The women who defend the Queen most strenuously are those who having been guilty of similar vices, are afraid of similar discovery."⁶² Mrs. Arbuthnot also slyly suggested that "if the Whig Lords do not consider the disgusting details they have heard proof, the Whig ladies may in future consider themselves very secure against divorce."⁶⁴ The entire situation highlighted women's lack of legal, political, and social rights in a society controlled by men.⁶⁴ Interestingly, however, the social mores of the day did not entirely forbid the Queen's taking a lover. According to Lady Cowper, "one may look upon her case as one of no particular horror, and it merely remains with her having taken a Courier for her Lover, which Lover, if he had been a gentleman, she had, in my opinion, a good right to have, without anybody objecting."⁶⁵ In fact, the allegations that George Canning, one of the king's own ministers, had been involved in an affair with Caroline were less scandalous than the thought that she would consort with the hired help.⁶⁶ In the days when marriages were arranged on the basis of wealth and position, and prior to the repressive morality of the Victorian era, it was accepted that women as well as men might seek their pleasures elsewhere.

While Caroline's cause was seized and supported by all sorts of revolutionary new thinkers, her case also gained strength from a traditional English prejudice--distrust of foreigners.⁶⁷ The key witnesses in the prosecution of Caroline were her Italian servants.⁶⁸ Caroline and her advisors were well aware of the disadvantages of having only foreign witnesses, and "wish[ed] it to appear that while they call foreigners, her witnesses are respectable English."⁶⁹ Although she was born a German, Caroline herself was, much to her advantage, not considered to be foreign.

The testimony ultimately proved inconclusive. The star witness in the case against Caroline was an Italian servant, Theodore Majocci. "Though the foundation of his story is evidently quite true. . . [he] has managed to act and to answer so that I should not be surprized if he was prosecuted for perjury."⁷⁰ This suspicion of perjury was highly detrimental to the case against Caroline, as "doubting the credibility of any witness, tends to throw doubt also upon others."⁷¹ Lady Cowper was skeptical of nearly all the testimony given at the trial, referring to the Crown's witnesses as liars, as well as declaring, "I believe most of the Queen's witnesses are more or less perjured."⁷² Majocci was discredited in the eyes of the public and cartoons of him viciously caricatured Italians.

Of course, not every scandalous witness was foreign. One of the most controversial was Lady Charlotte Lindsay, a former companion to Caroline in Italy, who was called in the Queen's defense.⁷³ "She has satisfied nobody. The anti-Queens believe she told very

great lies, and the Queen's friends think she did not do it boldly enough."⁷⁴ Lady Cowper also found the testimony itself distasteful, including evidence given by a chambermaid as to the state of Caroline's sheets, and that "two witnesses on oath were ready to prove they had seen her dance naked before an open window, and many other things of the sort."⁷⁵ Though initially against Caroline, she eventually felt swayed enough to say, "I am all for the Bill's being thrown out. . . . She is a coarse low-minded woman, I have no doubt, but it is hard on her to have such disgusting details invented about her, and they really must have done so in many instances."⁷⁶ The evidence also rested on allegations that Caroline rested her hand on Pergamil's genitals and that he attended her while she bathed .

There were also allegations of bribery on the side of the government. Lady Cowper speculated, "How Govern[men]t have got the witnesses to come over, I don't know, but I suppose by the power of money, and when this comes out it will still further invalidate their testimony."⁷⁷

In spite of the scandal and surrounding sensationalism, the daily proceedings themselves quickly palled for participants and observers alike. In a letter to Prince Metternich, Princess Lieven expounded upon Caroline's antics during the dull proceedings:

Do you know, mon Prince, what the Queen does in Parliament? You will never guess. She plays--at backgammon. Since she announced at the start that she would be at the House of Lords every day in order to confound the witnesses by her presence, she does not like to go back on her word. So she goes; sometime she goes into the hearing, sometimes not; generally, she stays in the next room and plays with Alderman Wood.⁷⁸

According to Lady Cowper, as Caroline grew bored with the lengthy legal discourse she chose which days to attend at all on the basis of the masses of commoners who daily formed a mob outside of Parliament. "I believe she knew Saturday was a bad Mob day and did not like to see herself ill-attended, so she has saved herself for Monday."⁷⁹

Throughout the proceedings, the masses remained unwaveringly devoted to Caroline. As Lady Cowper pointed out, the very name of the bill helped turn the public against it. "A Bill of Pains and Penalties is an awkward name, it sounds to the ignorant as if she was going to be fried or tortured in some way."⁸⁰ Caroline seemed to the public an innocent victimized by the state, ill-used and abandoned by her husband. This image was especially exploited by radicals who temporarily adopted her cause and used her as an anti-monarchical symbol in their politics. Alderman Wood and William Cobbett were two radicals who directly advised the Queen during the parliamentary proceedings.⁸¹ Lady Cowper asserted:

I really believe the Bill will never pass the H[ouse] of Commons, if it does the House of Lords . . . the feeling of the people is almost everywhere in favour of the Queen, not merely the rabble, but the respectable middle ranks...They hate the King, disapprove of his moral conduct and think all foreigners are liars and villains The Queen has a strange luck in her favour; the worse she behaves, the more it redounds to her credit.⁸²

In 1820 the House of Commons was still dominated by landowners, but while the majority of Englishman in pre-Reform England had no voting rights and therefore no

direct political power, the overwhelming popular support of the Queen did weigh with the members of both Houses. This influence manifested itself mainly as a fear of riots and possibly revolution, a particularly sensitive concern in the decades after the French Revolution. “Lord Archibald says on his conscience he believes the Queen guilty, but that he should still vote for her acquittal, because he thinks the K[ing] has no right to a divorce or to embroil us in a Civil War for a thing which signifies so little, and this I daresay, is the feeling of many other members of the House.”⁸³ The predominant attitude by the end of the proceedings was that in spite of Caroline’s almost certain guilt, the divorce bill should be thrown out. Princess Lieven called the trial an “idiotic affair,”⁸⁴ and in his *Further Memoirs of the Whig Party*, Lord Holland referred to it as “a farce, and a sorry, disgusting, and dangerous one,”⁸⁵ and Sir Thomas Lawrence called it a “daring Farce” in a letter to Joseph Farington.⁸⁶ As Mrs. Arbuthnot recorded in her journal:

Lady Bessboro . . . told me that very few of the papers doubted the least about the Queen’s guilt; in fact, most of them thought it clearly established, but she said the only means for us to have an unanimous vote would be to have first a vote as to whether the charges were proved, and then the vote upon passing the Bill, for she was quite sure that all the Whig Party were so violent against the principle of the Bill that they would vote against it, whether the charges were proved or not.⁸⁷

The clergy in particular felt the Queen’s infidelity had been firmly proved but found they could not in good conscience vote for the bill for other reasons. The Archbishop of York told Princess Lieven that none of the “ecclesiastical members of the House would vote for the Bill; that they could not do so without dishonouring their calling; and that, on this point, their party was absolutely firm . . . no ecclesiastical court could grant a divorce in the present circumstances of the King and the Queen respectively.”⁸⁸

Others felt the Queen was guilty, but that the case presented in parliament was too weak to grant the divorce. Princess Lieven quotes Lord Grey as saying, “This enquiry can convince no-one of the crime imputed on the Queen. We are sworn on our honour to judge that woman according to the evidence; we have to put aside our prejudices and any private opinions we may have. It is our duty to give judgment according to whatever conviction we may have arrived at from the evidence. There is no choice; nothing has been proved.”⁸⁹

In fact, many defended the Queen not according to her supposed virtue, but rather by claiming her behavior a justifiable reaction to her treatment from George One cartoon shows the kettle calling the pot black. In the letters of Sarah Spencer, Lady Lytton, she states that “the barbarous ill-usage from [Caroline’s] natural protector gives a strong bias in her favor.”⁹⁰ Even *The Black Dwarf*, which belligerently refused to acknowledge the possibility of Caroline’s guilt queried, “If the wife had erred, the first question asked is, How did her husband treat her?”⁹¹

Caroline was described by Princess Lieven as “quite mad, and what surprises me is that they don’t question the witnesses about that, or at least ask her doctor. If they pronounced her mad they would avoid all this scandal and be nearer the truth besides.”⁹² However, Princess Lieven also described Caroline on separate occasions as intelligent and brazen.⁹³ Lady Cowper in a similarly contradictory manner described Caroline as impudent, droll, “a coarse low-minded woman,” and mad.⁹⁴ Joseph Farington wrote to

Sir Thomas Lawrence that Caroline “was a roving, careless, and I believe sensual wanderer, and I am confirmed in this opinion by her conduct since she returned to England.”⁹⁵ Whatever her true character, Caroline frequently despised society’s conventions, and her behavior certainly did not fall within the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for a lady. “Caroline was criticized by those of her station for precisely what made her so popular--her unique amalgam of royal aplomb and easy familiarity.”⁹⁶

When the House of Lords voted against a third reading of the Bill of Pains and Penalties by a narrow margin in November of 1820, the bill was subsequently dropped. Reactions to this development were mixed.⁹⁷ The mobs, of course, were overjoyed. “The relinquishment of the bill was hailed almost instantaneously in the purlieus and adjoining streets with loud shouts of triumph.”⁹⁸ In the House of Lords,

The Duke of Montrose alone ventured to raise his voice against an ignominious withdrawal of so grave and, as he thought, so well substantiated a charge. He acted honestly, no doubt. But as he had been by no means a pattern of purity in his youth, he could gain no credit for virtuous abhorrence of female frailty; and having been celebrated in verse and prose as a specimen of that brood which cackles around the Capitol, he must have hissed at the sorry catastrophe of the drama, more from aristocratical disdain of the low character of the paramour than from puritanical horror at the heinousness of the offence.⁹⁹

While the Queen’s “trial” ended in her triumph, her glory was short-lived. King George IV, as was his prerogative, barred Queen Caroline from his coronation. She attempted to gain entrance anyway, making quite a spectacle of herself. The event was recorded by Henry Brougham in a letter to Thomas Creevey, “The refusal was peremptory at all the doors of the Abbey when she tried, and one was banged in her face.”¹⁰⁰

In spite of Caroline’s bidding an acquaintance during the trial to, “Tell the King I am very well, and that I shall live some years to plague him,”¹⁰¹ her final run-in with her husband proved to be too much even for her. Less than a year after the commencement of the divorce proceedings, Queen Caroline fell ill and died on August 8, 1821. “She died in peace with her enemies,” stated Viscount Hood in a letter to Henry Brougham, “I never beheld a firmer mind, or any one with less feelings at the thought of dying.”¹⁰²

The struggles between King George IV and his wife Queen Caroline are fascinating as a clash between two independent, strong-willed royals, but they are also important in illustrating the times in which they lived. The inability of George to divorce his wife without the consent of Parliament points dramatically to the shift in power from King to Parliament since the days of Henry VIII. The development of a two-party system in Parliament was strongly and quite obviously a shaping factor, but the reactions of contemporary observers to the episode also help to portray many of the subtler issues that determined the outcome of the trial. Class consciousness, fear of popular uprisings, hatred of foreigners, and dislike of the king all played roles in the proceedings, and although the groundwork of very early feminism had been laid the attitudes about Caroline as a woman were still very much shaped by traditional ideas about appropriate gender roles.

Notes

- 1The Private Letters of Princess Lieven to Prince Metternich: 1820-1826, ed. by Peter Quennel, (London: John Murray, 1937), p. 73.
- 2Shane Leslie, George IV, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1926), p. 19.
- 3Ibid., p. 19.
- 4Anita Leslie, Mrs. Fitzherbert, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), pp.30-1.
- 5Plantagenet Somerset Fry, The Kings and Queens of England and Scotland, (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1990), p.169.
- 6Anita Leslie, p. 30.
- 7Michael Bentley, Politics Without Democracy: 1815-1914, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.8-9.
- 8F.J. Foakes, Social Life in England: 1750-1850, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916) pp. 185-6.
- 9Ibid., pp. 185-6
- 10 E.A. Smith, A Queen on Trial: The Affair of Queen Caroline, (Dover: Alan Sutton, 1993), p. 2.
- 11 Anita Leslie, pp. 35-6.
- 12 Smith, A Queen on Trial, p. 2.
- 13 Anita Leslie, p.72.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 92-3
- 15 Fry, p. 156.
- 16 Flora Fraser, The Unruly Queen: The Life of Queen Caroline, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) pp.57-8.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 9, 19-20.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
- 20 Ibid., p. 21.
- 21 Smith, A Queen on Trial, p. 1.
- 22 Ibid., p. 7.
- 23 Ibid., p. 7.
- 24 Fraser, p. 75.
- 25 Ibid., p. 228.
- 26 Smith, A Queen on Trial, p. 8.
- 27 Smith, George IV, p. 150.
- 28 E.A. Smith, George IV, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 155.
- 29 Smith, A Queen on Trial, p. 9.
- 30 Norman Gash, Aristocracy and People: Britain, 1815-1865, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 107.
- 31 Ibid., p. 108.
- 32 Ibid., p. 107.
- 33 The Letters of Lady Palmerston, ed. by Tresham Lever, (London:

