

## Sketches of Married Life: Caricaturing the Queen Caroline Affair

by Emily Brand

*"Harris, I am not well; pray get me a glass of brandy."*

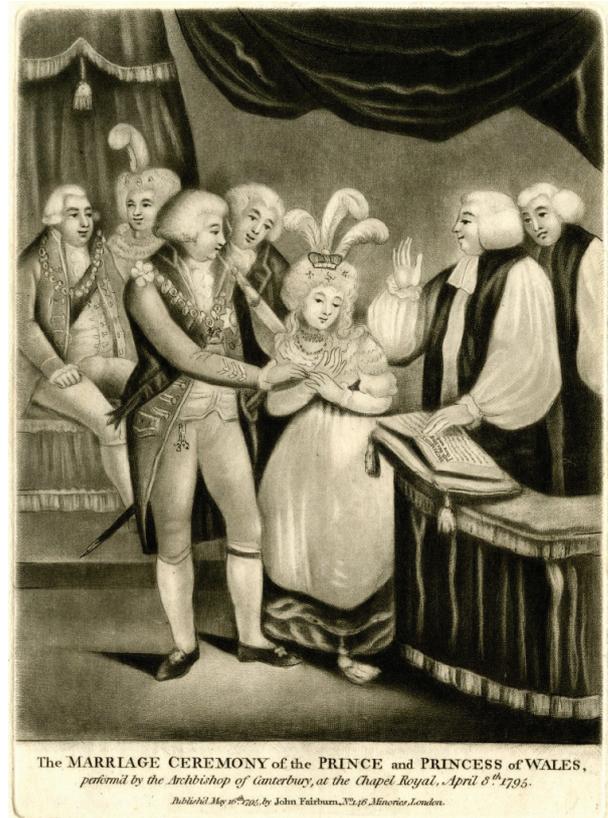
It was perhaps an ill omen that George, Prince of Wales, whispered this request upon laying eyes on his future bride, the "bouncing, romping Princess" Caroline of Brunswick. Reluctantly complying with a match orchestrated by his father, he only overcame his reservations when promised that his enormous debts would be cleared. Caroline appeared equally unimpressed by this first meeting, feeling a little deceived by the portrait she had been sent.

Nevertheless, the marriage took place at St James' Palace on the 8th of April 1795. The extent of the prince's dismay is illustrated by Lord Melbourne's observation that he reeled into the chapel "quite drunk". Stumbling up the aisle with the support of the Dukes of Bedford and Roxborough, he barely stifled his sobs when nobody objected to the proceedings. Precisely nine months later, Caroline bore their only child, Charlotte. Having abandoned the marital bed as soon as possible, he made little effort to conceal his infidelities and they soon gave up any pretence of matrimonial harmony. Unsatisfied with procuring separate living arrangements, George constantly harangued his wife for her promiscuity - even suspecting her of delivering a bastard child - until she resolved to quit the country in 1814.

No doubt, the long-suffering George III had hoped that the union would deter his son from further licentious behaviour. The notorious financial and amorous adventures of his youth had provided inexhaustible material for the blossoming world of satirical prints, whose unforgiving caricatures delighted a growing audience. To the king's disappointment, the prince did nothing to soften his profligate reputation, and Caroline's own exploits inspired little popular affection for a woman "utterly destitute of female delicacy." Suffering continuously at the hands of leading caricaturists including James Gillray and the Cruickshanks, the decline of their relationship was followed from domestic strain to estrangement, and outright public scandal.

Pronounced king in January 1820, George immediately renewed accusations of his wife's "scandalous and adulterous intercourse", this time with her Italian servant Bartholemew Bergami (a man reputedly boasting "magnificent mustachios" that could reach from Milan to London). Refusing an offer of £50,000 to remain abroad, she indignantly marched back to claim her throne - unaware that her husband had been compiling evidence against her for almost two years. The ensuing 'trial', by which the king hoped to finally secure a divorce, captivated the country. Inspiring eloquent addresses of support, but also street-ballads, crude poems, pamphlets and even a cardboard toy, it "let loose for a time, every tongue and pen in England". Perhaps the most damning were those of the caricaturists.

They were certainly prolific, churning out hundreds of images in one year and supposedly making one print-seller's fortune. As



*A somewhat idealised version of the royal marriage ceremony*

events unfolded, Caroline's cause gained popular support not only from "the mob" but also "people of all ranks, the middle classes, and the Troops too". The domestic spat was transformed into a struggle of national importance, and the king's own efforts to further degrade his wife in print seemed to fall flat. The surviving prints hint at the reasons why she suddenly enjoyed an outpouring of public favour.

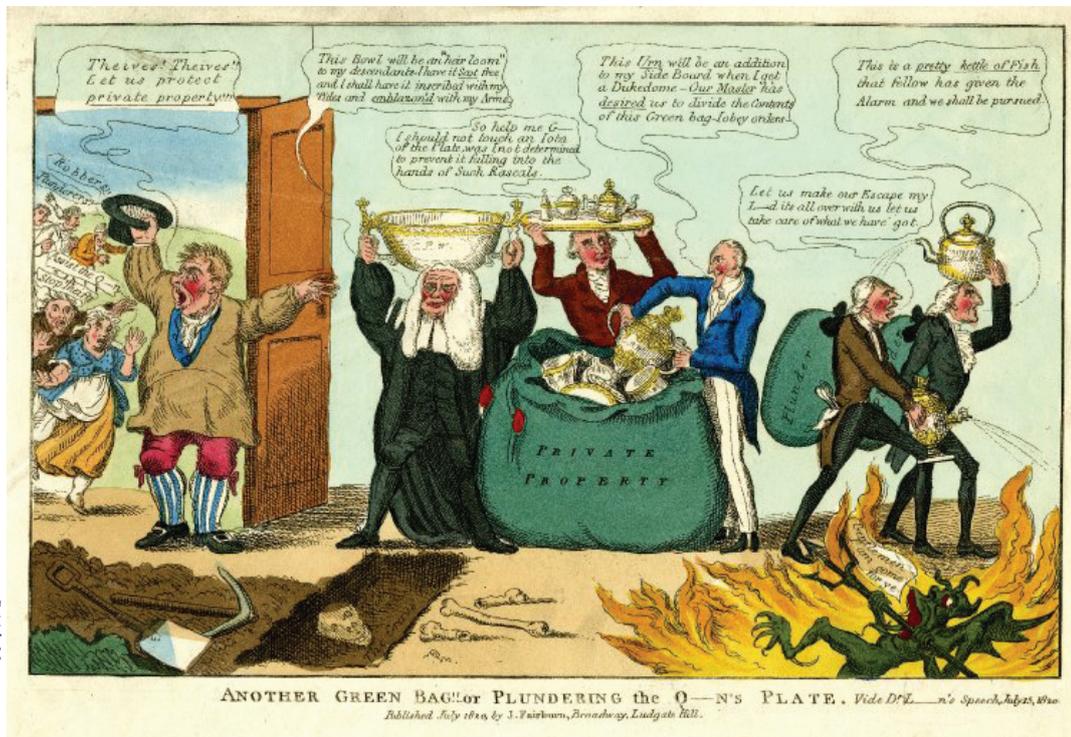
Many caricatures simply poked fun at the king, portraying the familiar obese, aging libertine with one hand clutching a bottle of curacao and the other making free with one of his buxom mistresses. Bawdy images such as William Heath's *The Unexpected Visit*, in which Caroline catches her husband enjoying the embraces of another woman, highlighted the hypocrisy of George's denunciation of his wife on moral grounds.

Others more actively fostered support by espousing the virtues of the queen.

As early as 1796, Caroline was styled as a figure of injured femininity, and the public cried their intentions to "nobly avenge her wrongs." In particular, her ill treatment at the hands of her husband (notably a forcible exclusion from her daughter's upbringing) earned her sympathy from women of all ranks.

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## Sketches of Married Life (cont.)



British Museum

Anon, *Another Green Bag! or Plundering the Queen's Plate* (15 July 1820)

Some highlighted that the investigations into her behaviour in Italy amounted to conspiracy. Reflecting Caroline's own diatribe against George's ministers as "spies, Bacchanalian tale-bearers, and foul conspirators", prints such as *Another Green Bag!!* depicted them plundering her private property.

condemn its queens. The anonymous *The Abyssinian Monster!* shows the queen's brilliant defence lawyers Brougham and Denman expertly tying up a floundering, fat whale with George's face. Lying defenceless on shore, he is shot at by nearby vessel, the Royal Caroline.

The most emotive device focused on her role as bereaved mother of Princess Charlotte, whose tragic death in 1817 was universally lamented. An *Appeal to Britons*, published under the pseudonym 'Argus', placed the "lost Princess" at its centre, begging the nation to defend her mother "for my sake". Appealing to the nation's chivalric spirit, she is cast as a victim of masculine power and appears uncharacteristically demure, with the British lion and female figure of Justice leaping to her defence. Less idealistic prints offered a more balanced assessment. Heath's *Which is the Dirtiest?* portrays the couple hurling filth at each other, fuelled by accusations



British Museum

'Argus', *An appeal to Britons* (23 Aug 1820)

of adultery. While the queen's ammunition proves the most effective, clearly neither party can boast any high ground.

The trial itself was repeatedly presented as a complete farce, and the notorious Green Bag of evidence gathered against Caroline was either filled with hot air, or lies and treachery. The poverty-stricken "rabble" of witnesses were unreliable, recognised by their utterances of "non mi ricordo" ("I don't remember"). As the case progressed, it became obvious that the prosecution was collapsing. Satirists occasionally alluded to the marital machinations of Henry VIII, if only to sharpen the contrasts - without public support the Georgian monarchy could not so easily

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## Sketches of Married Life (cont.)

The salacious images which unflinchingly critiqued the “queen’s business” presented an explosive recipe of sex and power which was guaranteed to appeal to Georgian humour. Although masking the serious behind the silly, the prints had a strong political charge, sparking a nationwide obsession with the ungentlemanly conduct of the king. The malleable representations encouraged women, radical reformers and the Whig opposition to unite beneath the banner of the queen, whatever their wider intentions. Indeed, the

fact that popular affection for Caroline was almost extinguished by the time of her husband’s coronation in July 1821 suggests that political opportunism did have a role to play. This episode, however important in popular politics, perhaps sounded the death knell for bawdy graphic satire - George’s subsequent censorship crusade, successes in social reform and growing evangelism paved the way for a distinctly less burlesque Victorian sense of humour.

### About Emily Brand

*Emily Brand is a writer and researcher, specialising in the social history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She blogs about the satirical prints of the Georgian era at [www.theartistsprogress.blogspot.com](http://www.theartistsprogress.blogspot.com).*

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