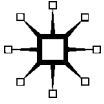


THE NARRATIVES OF CAROLINE
NORTON

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Randall Craig

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THE NARRATIVES OF CAROLINE NORTON

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FOR JANE
A RING OF WORDS
WELL WORN, WELL, WORN WELL

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FOREWORD

THE CASSANDRA DILEMMA

*Have I missed the mark, or, like true archer, do I strike my quarry? Or am I prophet of lies, a babbler from door to door?*¹

Aeschylus, Agamemnon

Nineteenth-century writings by and about Caroline Norton demonstrate a recurring concern with society, law, and politics—all filtered through the lens of gender. Narratives about these interests and from this perspective constitute the subject and establish the organizing principle of this study. Whether as silver fork author, legal reformer, or political hostess, Norton was defined—and often confined—by gender, and doubly so. Her celebrated beauty and expressive demeanor on the one hand, and her status as female scion of a literary family, the Sheridans, on the other, contributed to a persona never entirely free of the aura of theatricality, therefore, never without the connotation of meretriciousness. As Nina Auerbach has observed, “Reverent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self.”² During her lifetime, Norton was associated with numerous female archetypes, suggesting not only protean performativity on her part but also an ongoing effort by others to interpret and symbolically to control this provocative public figure.

Norton herself occasionally turned to iconic women to represent the conflict between private expectation and public constraint experienced by many nineteenth-century women. As a writer, she identified with Sappho, for whom the sorrows of private life and love outweighed the fame garnered through poetry. As a victim of inequitable marriage laws, she invoked the example of Hagar, although others insinuated that her circumstances were closer to those of Mary Magdalene. Because a lifelong interest in politics was frustrated by exclusion from public office, she turned to the example of Aspasia—as

George Meredith would to that of Egeria—to lament the limited civic role open to women. Through each of these associations runs a common theme of one woman's effort to speak truthfully about the condition of women, with the result of being discounted, if not decried, and ultimately disbelieved. For this reason, Cassandra, a figure blessed with foresight but cursed with incredibility, perhaps best represents Norton's maddening circumstances. Although an audience entrenched in convention, fortified by conservatism, and reinforced by complacency was often impervious to her barbed narratives, contemporary readers recognize the voice of someone quite other than "a prophet of lies, a babbler from door to door" in her tales of women in society and her pamphlets about women and law.

Beyond the fate of disbelief, Norton is linked to Cassandra by the themes of beauty and sexuality, politics and power. When Benjamin Robert Haydon asked her to sit for a painting of Cassandra in 1833, noting her "Sybil eyes lustrous and shining," he could not have foreseen the ironic aptness of the model to the subject.³ While her Sybilline countenance and Grecian beauty were often remarked, it was not until 1836 and the prime minister's trial for adultery that Norton became an infamous public figure, whose subsequent analyses of English law would be dismissed as the hysterical jeremiads of a "she-devil."⁴ By following pictorial convention and depicting Cassandra as a madwoman—signified by frenetic gestures and swirling lines—Haydon unwittingly predicted, albeit hyperbolically, Norton's tempestuous future. She herself offered a more prosaic—though hardly a less pessimistic—assessment of her fate, commenting to Mary Shelley that both possessed "a *sauvagerie*, a feeling of not being able to amalgamate with other and new associates."⁵

Exceptional as her experience was in so many ways, Norton insisted upon the ordinariness of her situation. She could laugh at the inherent tendency of mythological comparisons to aggrandize. For example, when writing to cancel a session with Haydon because "my face is swelled, & my eyes are so red that the Spirit of Prophecy would be ashamed to look out of them," she refers not to wild-eyed insanity but to the effects of the common cold.⁶ The prosaic is not inevitably fatal to the prophetic, but Norton often felt that the voice of the suffering wife and mother was more suasive than that of the allegorical effigies she herself encouraged. When asked on another occasion to sit for a portrait, she urged the artist to remember "the fatal truth that my face is not so regular as the artists *expect* who have casually seen me—and that I am anxious to meet some painter who will be matter of

fact enough, and sufficiently resigned to the will of Heaven, to copy what they see.”⁷ A tension between the allegorical and the realistic, the heroic and the ordinary, is a common theme in the narratives of Caroline Norton.

The beauty that led to numerous requests for portraits was an equivocal blessing for the author. Pulchritude and poetry, combined with a famous family name, might seem a foolproof formula for success in the fashionable literary world; however, early reviewers, while acknowledging the power of Norton’s emerging poetic voice, muffled its impact through a variety of contradictory discursive stratagems, including superimposing the image of a Siren upon the Sibyl—a preoccupation with the author’s beauty that implicitly demeaned her work. The introduction to this study, “‘The Caudine Forks’ and the Optics of Authorship,” considers these efforts and concludes with a brief analysis of “crossways,” the trope arrived at by George Meredith to express the antinomies of Norton’s character and career.

Some aspects of that career are not considered here, for example, her fame as a composer of popular songs. Similarly, no attempt is made to deal comprehensively with her poetry and fiction; rather, the book is divided into sections (each consisting of two chapters) dedicated to authorship, law, and politics. Chapter 1 analyzes Norton’s post-Regency writing, which manifests opposed impulses of satire and sentiment and expresses ambivalent feelings toward fashionable society. From *The Dandies’ Rout* (1820), written at age 11—to *Love in ‘the World’*, begun before her marriage in 1827 but never published—to her first novel, *The Wife and Woman’s Reward* (1835), her subject matter, themes, and style anticipate those of Thackeray, who freely drew upon her example in his own silver fork fiction, *Vanity Fair*. Chapter 2 argues that Norton’s late narratives present familiar themes in a mode more consistent with the sensationalism of the sixties than the sentimentality of the thirties. The continuity of topoi throughout her career is documented by reading *Lost and Saved* (1863) in relation to her first long poem, “The Sorrows of Rosalie” (1829). To the preoccupations of a lifetime, the final narratives add sensational subplots as well as sexual and racial content that reflect the social tensions emerging in mid-Victorian England.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus from literature to law and the tenor from melodrama to comedy. The criminal conversation trial of Lord Melbourne, Norton’s alleged paramour, elicited considerable courtroom comedy. This humor was a significant factor in securing a verdict for the defendant—indirectly, therefore, for Norton as well—but it

invoked stereotypical narratives of gender that did little to remove the aura of sexual license surrounding her and women in general. *Norton v. Melbourne* inspired both farcical imitations (*The Pickwick Papers* and *Trial by Jury*) that reinforced and satiric redactions (*The Newcomes* and *Diana of the Crossways*) that critiqued these stereotypes. Though widely divergent, these adaptations provide an additional perspective upon the social and sexual narratives to which Norton was subjected throughout her life. Chapter 4 concerns the serious rather than the humorous side of the law. An unhappy marriage and the protracted legal battles over children and money led Norton to a realistic portrayal of domestic and legal violence in *Stuart of Dunleath* (1851). This novel, like those by Thackeray and Meredith based on the Nortons' history, depicts the unfortunate consequences of marrying spousal discord to legal action.

Part III turns to the question of women in politics and to Norton's critique of marriage law. Chapter 5 examines the role of the political hostess. The Sheridan family legend—notably the personal and political flamboyance of her grandfather—and increasing literary prominence prepared Norton for the role of salonnière and established her as a rival to silver fork authors and reputed bluestockings such as Lady Morgan, Lady Blessington, and Letitia Landon. Although scandal ended her public affiliation with Melbourne, continued literary success and public attention made Norton's invitations attractive to writers and rising politicians alike, notably Sidney Herbert. This relationship inspired several fictional parallels, including Lady Laura Kennedy in Trollope's *Phineas Finn*, Lady Berengaria Montfort in Disraeli's *Endymion*, and Meredith's eponymous Diana. Chapter 6 shifts to Norton's campaigns for reform of child custody and married women's property laws. Although her status as a blue was debated in her day, she proved a worthy successor to Mary Wollstonecraft, whose unfinished novel *Maria* coincidentally anticipated the opinions and experiences of Norton herself. Unlike her forebear, however, Norton did not endorse sexual equality, preferring to enlist conservative social narratives about saintly mothers and dependent wives in order to secure concrete advances in laws pertaining to married women.

The "Afterword" returns to the figure of the author and to a final instantiation of Meredith's trope of the writer at the crossroads. The focus here, as throughout, is neither upon the spectral private self underlying the spectacular and shifting public images, nor upon the welter of contradictory images of Norton found in Victorian diaries, periodicals, and fiction. These protean personae function as mirrors

rather than lamps, and it is precisely this mirroring—the process, not the subject, of signification—that accounts for the title, *The Narratives of Caroline Norton*. The question explored here is not “Who was Caroline Norton?” but “What do the versions of her story say about the crossroads at which women of the period were poised?”

ABBREVIATIONS

“AM”	“A Mother”
BH	<i>Bleak House</i>
CI	<i>The Child of the Islands: A Poem</i>
D	<i>The Dream and Other Poems</i>
DC	<i>Diana of the Crossways</i>
DD	<i>Daniel Deronda</i>
DR	<i>The Dandies’ Rout</i>
E	<i>Endymion</i>
ELW	<i>English Laws for Women</i>
FDS	<i>Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-Book</i>
“I”	“The Invalid”
K	<i>The Keepsake</i>
KB	<i>Kate Bouverie and Other Tales and Sketches in Prose and Verse</i>
L	<i>Letters, etc. third and fourth correspondence with summary of facts</i>
LCN	<i>The Letters of Caroline Norton to Lord Melbourne</i>
LLG	<i>The Lady of La Garaye</i>
LM	<i>Letters to the Mob</i>
LQ	<i>A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill</i>
LS	<i>Lost and Saved</i>
LW	<i>Love in “the World”</i>
M	<i>Maria</i>
MF	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>
N	<i>The Newcomes</i>
“OLF”	“One of Our Legal Fictions”
OSD	<i>Old Sir Douglas</i>
P	<i>The Princess</i>
PF	<i>Phineas Finn</i>
PL	<i>A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill</i>
PM	<i>The Prime Minister</i>

<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Phineas Redux</i>
<i>SD</i>	<i>Stuart of Dunleath</i>
<i>SMC</i>	<i>The Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of "Custody of Infants," Considered</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>The Sorrows of Rosalie, a Tale with Other Poems</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>Taxation. By an Irresponsible Taxpayer</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trial by Jury</i>
"TT"	"Leaves of a Life; or, the Templar's Tale"
<i>UO</i>	<i>The Undying One and Other Poems</i>
<i>VF</i>	<i>Vanity Fair</i>
<i>VFF</i>	<i>A Voice from the Factories</i>
<i>WWR</i>	<i>The Wife and Woman's Reward</i>