

## ***The Offspring of Fancy*, the author identified**

**By Julian Crowe**

*The Offspring of Fancy*, by 'A Lady', was published in 1778 by Bew of Paternoster Row. It is an epistolary novel in two volumes, telling several interlinked stories. The main correspondents are two sisters, Charlotte Bellas rustic and conventionally virtuous, and Marianne Clement metropolitan, impulsive, intelligent and emotional. Their letters tell of their own marriages and family life, and the dramas of their friends, in particular Charlotte's neighbours, the Masons. The second half of the novel concentrates on the tribulations of Marianne's husband's niece, Amelia. The episodes are from the common stock of marital misunderstanding, jealousy, parental tyranny, forced and imprudent marriages, elopements, duels and mysterious identities. The writing is clear and flowing, and the characters of the various letter-writers are well differentiated. None of the story-lines is worked out in great detail or at length, and there is no sense of resolution at the end. The novel concludes abruptly with Amelia safe in a German convent, and Marianne reflecting on the tumults affecting the wider family of the nation whose American branch was in revolt against its kind father the King.

Mary Ann Canning was a struggling Irish actress in London. She had, at the outset, some powerful friends and was given a helping hand by Garrick himself, who took her as his leading lady in a production of *Jane Shore* at Drury Lane in 1773. The reviews were lukewarm, but Garrick persevered with her, and the leading actor Samuel Reddish undertook to coach her. The fact was that Mary Ann had taken to the stage only as a last resort to earn a living after being left a penniless widow with two young sons. She was a beautiful and intelligent woman, but whether or not she had sufficient talent ever to have made a living on the London stage is not clear. She was not brilliant enough to counteract the scandals that grew up around her association with Reddish, a notorious womaniser. Garrick, for one reason or another, did not renew her contract. Under Reddish's protection she found work in the west country, and Sheridan, when he took over from Garrick, was persuaded to give her another chance at Drury Lane, offering her the second female role in a translation of Voltaire's *Semiramis*. This was early in 1777, by which time she was living with Reddish as his wife. She had lost her two Canning sons (one was dead and the other, George the future statesman, had been taken over by her husband's family), and had two children by Reddish. On the first night of *Semiramis* she was determinedly hissed by an organized clique. Despite support from the other actors and the play's translator, Sheridan could not or would not keep her on, and the part was taken over by the prompter's daughter, leading Mary Ann to suspect that the prompter had been in a plot against her. The shock of this event, and the death of her young baby shortly afterwards, led Mary Ann to abandon for the moment her theatrical ambitions. Her health was badly affected and she looked around for another way of earning her living. This was how she came to try her hand at writing a novel. Between March 1777 when her baby died, and May when she accompanied Reddish to Ireland, a period of five weeks, she completed the letters which made up two little volumes.

This account of events is contained in Mary Ann's memoirs, written in a long (60,000 words) letter to her son George at a crisis in their relationship which arose in 1803, a quarter of a century later.<sup>1</sup> Although it is written with a purpose and contains much special pleading, her life-story given in the letter generally appears to be accurate wherever it can be compared with independent evidence. She doesn't mention the title of her novel. When she set out for Ireland she left the work in the hands of Nichols, publisher of the parliamentary debates, and Bew of Paternoster Row, who had agreed between them to print 750 copies. While they were in Cork Reddish fell out with the printer of his play-bills, and Mary Ann went to smooth the matter over. She must have struck a rapport with the printer, William Flynn, who was also a book-seller and publisher of the Cork newspaper, *The*

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<sup>1</sup> George Canning Family Papers, in the Harewood Family and Estate Archive, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds.

*Hibernian Chronicle*, and an important figure in Cork society. Mary Ann had a knack of hitting it off with intelligent and enterprising men, usually to her disadvantage, but in this case it did her good. Flyn agreed to take fifty copies of her novel, which she accordingly despatched to him from London the following year. His payment of £7.10.0 arrived in the autumn, at a time when her fortunes had declined to a new low point. Reddish, never a stable character, had gone quite mad and lost new his job at Covent Garden, so he, Mary Ann and their three surviving children had no means of support.

A search of library catalogues turns up one title that fits the known facts about Mary Ann's novel, the date, publisher and form. This is *The Offspring of Fancy*, of which two copies at least have survived, one in the library of Rice University, Houston, and the other at the Chawton House Library, University of Southampton. That this is the only candidate would not in itself be strong evidence, since there is no reason to assume that any copies of Mary Ann's work must have survived. There are in the plot of *The Offspring of Fancy* no events which are so close to the known facts of Mary Ann's life that they compel us to identify her as the author. Opinions expressed by the letter writers, and even some turns of phrase, echo some to be found in Mary Ann's memoir, but again these are not so unusual as to be conclusive. In writing about her novel Mary Ann twice uses the word *fancy* which could be a hint which she expected her son to recognise, but equally it could be an insignificant coincidence.

It is Flyn who provides the most telling evidence. He used his newspaper to advertise his other business interests, such as his lottery agency and his stock of the latest books. Week after week the same titles appear, with every so often a newcomer to the list. Novels are in a minority amongst his titles. Clearly, if he had fifty copies of a new novel by an anonymous lady to sell he would need to advertise them quite vigorously, and sure enough on 5 October 1778 he announced, in a separate notice apart from his routine list, 'Just imported and now selling for the author ... a few sets of the London edition of a new Novel in letters called *The Offspring of Fancy*, written by an Irish lady'. Coincidences are always possible, but this announcement makes it all but certain that Mary Ann's novel was indeed *The Offspring of Fancy*.

This means that we can look in the novel not for evidence of authorship but for reflections and echoes of Mary Ann's ideas and the events of her life. The first point to make is that the novel is further removed from a literal chronicle of her life than one might have expected. In her 1803 letter she emerges as intelligent and literate, but not, perhaps, as highly self-critical or self-aware; not, therefore, a writer likely to place great artistic distance between herself and her material. My initial hypothesis when trying to discover her novel was that it would probably be a thinly disguised account of her own sufferings and the injustices perpetrated against her by the Canning family after her husband's death. During his lifetime her husband had contemplated publishing their love-letters and other documents to draw attention to his mistreatment at the hands of his father, Stratford Canning of Garvagh and Abbey Street, Dublin. Before she went on the stage Mary Ann too had considered authorship as a tactic against the tyrannical and eccentric Stratford. What we actually find in *The Offspring of Fancy* is something more inventive than a naïve fictionalisation of Mary Ann's own life, although there are many places where we can point to incidents in her life as prototypes of incidents in the novel, and in general the novel affords insights into her view of herself and her predicament.

The principal letter writer is Marianne Clement, and she contains many elements of Mary Ann's character. Marianne is emotional and impulsive, tolerant, charitable, articulate and intelligent. Her more rigidly virtuous sister warns her against the moral laxity of some of her London companions, notably Mrs Belmour who is openly disdainful of her husband but is pleasant and amusing company. Marianne says Mrs Belmour shows her largeness of soul by being 'above the little pruderies of narrow minds', but later on she qualifies this by the observation that Mrs Belmour's written language is stilted: 'perfectly grammatical, provokingly correct—and—that's all'. What Marianne finds most disturbing about her elegant friend is her indifference to her children. Marianne (like Mary Ann) is an enthusiastic breast-feeder, and believes in inoculation. There are

touching letters between Mary Ann and her first husband's sister Mollie Barnard concerning the bond of love between mother and child and the pain and guilt arising from infant death, and these ideas are echoed by Marianne in the novel. Marianne's sense of superiority to conventions and her devotion to home and children are alike the result of her belief in Nature as the guide to life and duty. The claims of Nature feature strongly in the dispute with her son which was the occasion for Mary Ann's letter of 1803.

One of the characters, Sophia Mason, draws the following comparison between Marianne Clement and her sister Charlotte Bellas:

Mrs. Clement is lively, to a degree of giddiness, that, to a superficial observer, would imply a total unconcern for the whole human race, nay, even for herself, and her estimation in the world; yet is her large heart, and bestowing hand, the fountain of happiness to all who fall within her knowledge; capable of quick and strong impressions, she always makes her judgement wait upon her feelings—or, in other words, her heart dictates, and her head must acquiesce, or labour in vain.—... Mrs. Bellas is an excellent wife upon the principles of duty, to a worthy man indeed, who merits all her attention; but she would be as good a wife to a man less deserving, from sentiment alone;—Mrs. Clement is a good wife to the man of her choice; but had she married a man to whom she did not look up with a consciousness of his superior sense and continued desert, her feelings are so incapable of disguise, that the sense of duty would often sleep, whilst her quick apprehension of injury, and her conscious merit of better treatment, would shew itself in spite of all the Schools for Wives that poets fancy and hypocrites admire.

Whether or not Mary Ann was consciously drawing a picture of herself here, it is certainly borne out by the facts of her life. Some of the points in Sophia's account of Marianne are clearly idealisations, and we might question whether Mary Ann always lived up to them, whether she was always the fountain of happiness for all, but the point about Marianne's attitude to her husband is certainly true, prophetically true of Mary Ann. Mary Ann had three partners, George Canning senior, Samuel Reddish and Richard Hunn, very different men but all in their way highly unsatisfactory. Of these the first two, for all their faults, were men she could look up to, Canning a poet and martyr to probity, Reddish a talented and popular acting star. Towards them she was loyal and, so far as one can tell, loving. Richard Hunn, whom she was to meet and marry in Plymouth, would turn out contemptible, and she hated him.

One thing that Marianne says about herself is almost certainly a deliberate bit of self-portraiture by Mary Ann:

For my own part—(one cannot forget self in any thing) I always premise to my correspondents a happy ignorance of grammatical rules; nor do I know (exactly) the difference between a comma and semicolon.—I have a redundancy of ideas, and a tolerable ear; a wish to be entertained myself, and to entertain my friends:—add to these, a love of the goose-quill; and my whole stock of literary accomplishments pass in review before you.

This gives a very good idea of the style not only of Marianne's letters in the novel, but of Mary Ann's own letters. In her letter of 1803 there are commas and semi-colons, and full-stops as well, but her favourite punctuation mark is the dash of different lengths. She rattles on with a redundancy of ideas, and she certainly loves the goose-quill. There is a portrait in oils of Mary Ann in Leeds, and it shows her at her desk, quill in hand. Nonetheless, she is a clever enough writer to produce a more restrained and disciplined style for other characters in the novel. She refers in her letter to discussions she had with a friend over the production of the novel, so it is possible that this friend, whoever she was, helped her to produce letters in a more formal style than her own.

A final point about Marianne Clement as a self-portrait of the author is her surname. Mary Ann's first husband George was a disappointed man, frustrated by his father's animosity and by his own obstinacy. He was often gloomy and always reserved and distant. He was in his thirties at the time

of his marriage, when Mary Ann was only eighteen (or twenty-one – she didn't know her date of birth). Mary Ann says she loved and respected him, but admits to finding him difficult to live with. Her married life was enlivened by the presence of George's younger brother Stratford, known in the family as Stratty. She found she could talk freely with Stratty. On George's death Stratty supported her both emotionally and financially. The relationship between them was intimate enough to arouse the jealousy of Stratty's intended wife, Mehitabel, known as Hetty. After a visit to London from which her friends expected her to return to Dublin a married woman, Hetty put it about that Stratty no doubt would marry her when his sister (meaning Mary Ann) gave him leave. When Stratty was trying to help Mary Ann to a respectable living as a milliner, it was Hetty who prevented it (prudently as it turned out) and so pushed Mary Ann onto the stage. The first consequence of going on the stage was a rift between Stratty and Mary Ann, which culminated in 1776 or 1777 in Stratty taking over the care of young George, and forbidding any contact between mother and son. Mary Ann undoubtedly felt great affection for Stratty, and a corresponding sense of betrayal. In the novel, Mr Clement is a man of business (as Stratty was) and he is generous, honourable, lighthearted, sociable, in contrast to the upright but often gloomy and self-absorbed Mr Bellas, recalling the contrast between Stratty and his elder brother. It is tempting to see the marriage of the Clements as a picture of what might have been if Mary Ann could have married Stratty; and this temptation is the stronger because Stratty's house and place of business were in St Clement's Lane.

The novel, like so many, is about marriages, prudent and imprudent, successful and unsuccessful. It shows girls at the dangerous age when a wrong decision can lead to disaster, either a loss of reputation or entrapment in a loveless marriage. It shows love matches, trick marriages, arranged marriages and forced marriages, and none of these can be guaranteed to lead to success. As believers in Nature, neither Mary Ann nor Marianne would sanction a marriage without love, and that must mean a free choice, but the fact remains that marriages freely entered into as love matches are as likely to be disastrous as any other kind. The heart is the only guide, but it is a deeply flawed and fallible guide. This ambivalent attitude to the heart as guide is present when Mary Ann looks back on her own first marriage. She turned down several advantageous offers because her heart was not engaged. She and George met in Islington Spa and fell immediately and violently in love. Mary Ann is emphatic on this point. She loved George and she went on adoring him until she was torn away from his death bed and his putrefying body. Given what we know of her strong-mindedness, there can have been no question of her guardians (her grandfather and uncle Melchior and Gustavus Guy-Dickens) forbidding or preventing the marriage. Yet she seems, looking back from 1803, to blame them for taking no steps to investigate George's suitability as a husband. Looking back, Mary Ann could see that men of the world such as Melchior and Gustavus should have had their suspicions aroused by George's odd behaviour at the time – he several times postponed the marriage, and for several months went into hiding, forbidding Mary Ann to visit him and insisting on communicating only by letter. He refuses to give his reason, leaving us to speculate – was he hiding from creditors or getting over a dose of the pox? Either reason would tend to make him undesirable as a husband. What seems to be the case is that the Guy-Dickens family were keen to get Mary Ann off their hands, and when George came along they were only too pleased to hand her over to him. Mary Ann at eighteen, unstoppable in her determination to marry, exemplifies what Marianne says in the novel about girls at the dangerous age needing a loving and wise parent to guard them.

Although *The Offspring of Fancy* is not in a straightforward sense the story of Mary Ann's life, it has many points of contact with her rackets and precarious career, a few of which we have considered here. It is perhaps this that generates a liveliness and bite which one would not necessarily expect from the stock situations and characters portrayed in the novel.