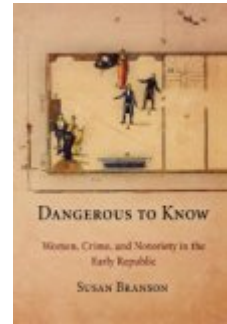


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Branson. *Dangerous to Know: Women, Crime, and Notoriety in the Early Republic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xi + 182 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4088-7.

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## The Dangerous Ann Carson

*Dangerous to Know* provides a window into the little-known world of the ingenious, talented, and daring women who hovered between the middling and lower classes in the tumultuous decades of the early nineteenth century. These women manipulated gender roles to serve their own economic, personal, and even political needs. The central figure of the story is Ann Carson, an entrepreneur, bigamist, and counterfeiter made famous by the 1822 publication of her memoir, *The History of the Celebrated Mrs. Ann Carson* (1822) and her later biography, *The Memoirs of the Celebrated and Beautiful Mrs. Ann Carson* (1838). Carson's dramatic tale of love, loss, neglect, resourcefulness, turmoil, revenge, and deceit captivated readers of the burgeoning sensationalist press of the early republic. The fact that a woman starred in this sordid tale was a novelty and likely a significant reason for the success of the publication—and her resultant notoriety.

Branson argues that both Carson and her ghostwriter Mary Clarke deftly navigated the social expectations for their sex, capitalizing on their unique positions as women who were doing things that women weren't supposed to do. Economic interests chiefly motivated both women. Carson's own life was marked by a dramatic fall in class privilege and material wealth when her father's illness cost him his job—and her father's conviction that women not work for income cost her family their safety net. When married and with children of her own, Carson set up a business selling china and other tableware to supplement the income provided by her husband, a sea cap-

tain. This phase of Carson's life is not that remarkable and readers of Karen Wulf's *Not All Wives* (2005) will find many similarities between Carson and the women of colonial Philadelphia who took in borders, set up shop, and hawked their wares in the streets to support themselves and their families.

The turning point in Carson's life occurred when her husband, Captain Carson, long missing and thought to be dead, returned home to find Ann with another man, Richard Smith. This occurred after Ann suffered years of neglect at the hands of the captain and resolved to support herself and their children. The series of events that followed basically undid Ann—and made her life story grist for the nineteenth-century equivalent of tabloids. Undergraduates will be equally captivated by the story that Branson presents in a very readable, engaging way. The most captivating part of Ann's life will only be briefly summarized here, as the book provides elaborate, play-by-play detail. Smith murders Captain Carson and is found guilty. Ann is imprisoned as an accessory but found innocent and released. Ann plots to kidnap the governor of Pennsylvania to negotiate a pardon for her lover Smith but fails. He is executed. She is released. Enter Mary Clarke—another exceptional woman of the period. Similarly resourceful as a single mother, Mary Clarke set out to publish, edit, and write the only magazine for women in 1814, called *Intellectual Regale*, or *Ladies Tea Tray*. Carson convinced Clarke to serve as the ghostwriter of her memoir. Together, Carson and Clarke

consciously engaged their audiences' expectations of appropriate behavior for women. Clarke did this in pleading for subscribers to her magazine, "A Mother will brave death for the support of her children, and she has five who look up to her for support and protection: and by patronizing this work each subscriber will contribute their mite towards assisting her with her family" (p. 13). In Carson's 1822 memoir, she repeatedly invoked the concept of female respectability and pleaded for understanding when economic necessity forced her to act at odds with the prevailing social norms of her desired class. Herein lies a key distinction between Clarke and Carson. Clarke used her vulnerability to appeal to the potential subscribers to her magazine—invoking not only the dependence of her children on her, but her own dependence on subscribers. Clarke was actually an independent craftswoman but played into notions of female dependency to create a subscriber base for herself.

Carson's frustration with and challenge of gender roles was always bound by the social norms of her class superiors—those of the middle and upper classes. Branson writes, "Carson clung to the class identity with which she started out in life—the middle class" (p. 78). She inherited this concept from her father and was never able to shake it. If we take Carson at her word—something that Branson does more often than she should—then we can easily see her life and work as transgressive of gender roles, as she is always explaining and apologizing for her need to be self-supporting and independent, something that Clarke never does.

But if we contextualize Carson's life and work more carefully in relation to what we know about early Philadelphia, then her story is less one of gender transgression than one of class aspiration. Carson wants to be more than she is and to have more than she has. This is evidence by her actions and by her presentation of herself in the memoir. While she may not have been as badly off as countless members of lower sort scrambling to make it in America's first city, she still scrambled. It is undeniable that Carson did things which few other women did, chiefly among these, working within a major counterfeiting ring and publishing her memoirs—both endeavors to improve her class standing. Women of lower classes commonly broke the law to stay afloat, predominantly by

stealing, receiving, possessing, and selling stolen goods. These women would not be perceived as challenging gender roles, which raises the question of the basis for an interpretation of Carson as doing so.

The question of race is one that constantly lurks beneath the text of this book. Occasional references to race, such as Ann Carson's own racist attitudes or the fact that women in Philadelphia's prison during this period were predominantly African America, only highlight its glaring absence as a category of analysis. There are many ways to incorporate race into this discussion. Most significantly, I wonder how whiteness shaped Carson's and Clarke's sense of themselves as female artists and entrepreneurs, as well as their ability to navigate Philadelphia's social, criminal, and literary spheres.

The subtitle is a bit misleading, as there is little in the book about women's crime in the early republic beyond the exploits of Carson herself. As the most notorious, prolific, and accomplished female criminal of the period, however, Carson's case merits the kind of close study provided here. There are few archival resources from the perspective of female criminals or inmates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, despite the fact that women constituted upwards of 25 percent of those imprisoned in Philadelphia during this period. In this respect, Branson's line-by-line unpacking of Carson's two narratives is a long-awaited gift to those of us committed to study of the popular topic of crime and punishment from an unpopular perspective—that of the criminals themselves. The downside of overreliance on the Carson narratives is that the voice of the master manipulator of the nineteenth century sometimes stands as fact, begging a more critical engagement by Branson herself.

*Dangerous To Know* is an important read for three reasons. First, the story is captivating, illuminating, and easy to read for undergraduates. Second, Branson ties this exciting story to the larger historical developments of the period. Third, in the classic spirit of women's history, the book introduces readers to two quite distinct, ordinary women who creatively and skillfully navigated their social and economic worlds in quite extraordinary ways.

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